



# *at home with the past*

allan greenberg  
makes the familiar  
fresh again.

by s. claire conroy

America's foremost Classicist doesn't exactly look the part. Allan Greenberg doesn't wear bow ties and vests with dangling watch fobs. There's not a monocle in sight. Au contraire, his attire is distinctly minimalist—a freeform black jacket, collarless dark gray T-shirt, and roomy black slacks. He looks like he could break into a mime act at any moment, or spout philosophy over a carafe of Côte du Rhône at a French café. The outfit is a big clue to

Greenberg's sensibility. At 64 years old, the South African-born architect was raised on Modernism and even has loved and practiced it for a time. But he has come to embrace Classicism for a wealth of reasons, most of which have nothing to do with fashion or style.

For Greenberg, Classicism is simply the richest, most articulate architectural language available today. It is architecture's Esperanto, able to communicate among a great

Allan Greenberg's first big house commission, "Farmhouse in Connecticut," drew inspiration from George Washington's Mt. Vernon. His design for a garden bench evokes Edwin Lutyens, one of his favorite architects.

Photos: Mark Robert Halper (left), © Peter Moiss-Esto





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Photos: © Peter Mauss/Esto



As with Mt. Vernon, open hyphens connect two dependencies to the Farmhouse in Connecticut's main building. Timeless materials distinguish the home's bathrooms (left). Befitting a country dwelling, the Farmhouse's entry hall (opposite) is richly but somewhat less formally detailed than Greenberg's other houses. Painted-wood moldings and simply-turned stair rails and posts contribute an understated elegance.

many cultures and across a great number of stylistic periods. "The problem with Modern buildings is they don't fit their environment," he says. They don't "talk" to the buildings around them; their solipsism makes them bad neighbors, bad stewards of the sites they occupy.

Greenberg has seen the worst Bauhaus had to offer. Johannesburg, where he grew up and went to school, had all the architectural charm of Houston, he quips. The city has had great cycles of "building up and taking down," and the binges and purges have obliterated the variety and character it once had.

He studied architecture at the University of Witwatersrand, where the curriculum at the time was divided into two years of training in Classical architecture and two years in Modernism. His education was rigorous in the European way—many hours of learning by rote to draw every proportion and detail of the buildings he studied. He became intimately acquainted with the strengths and weaknesses of the world's "great buildings." And committing so many structures to memory provided him with a tremendous database from which to draw for his own work.

It was at Witwatersrand that he learned to love Corbu. Here was a Modernist Greenberg could respect and admire, one whose forward-thinking architecture considered carefully what came before it. "More important than style is quality," Greenberg explains. "Le Corbusier understood all the architecture of the past. He took the new and fit it in. It's very hard to do, and

he did it very well."

So taken was he with Le Corbusier's work, he set out to apprentice with him after architecture school. Unfortunately, only an unpaid position was available and Greenberg couldn't afford to take it. Instead, he went to work for architects Jorn Utzon in Denmark, where he labored on the Sydney Opera House, and Viljo Revell in Finland. In Scandinavia, he watched the same process that so horrified him in South Africa—old buildings coming down, new undistinguished buildings going up. "I saw the sophistication of Scandinavia being compromised," he says.

Determined not to go back to South Africa, whose political situation in 1961 he found "reprehensible," Greenberg emigrated to the United States. He sought and secured in 1965 a Master's Degree in Architecture at Yale University on scholarship. He trained with Robert A.M. Stern, among other luminaries. At Yale he also began to teach and to research, write, and publish scholarly essays, monographs, and the like on architecture and architects. "As an architect, I'm compelled to study all of architecture," he says. "It's so hard to master; you have to love it. There's so much to learn—mathematics is important, epidemiology, law, sociology—I see it all through the prism of architecture."

### the great divide

South Africa and Scandinavia weren't the only cultures erasing their past. After graduating from Yale, Greenberg spent two years in

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the City of New Haven's Redevelopment Agency, watching the same wave of destruction slapping down old buildings indiscriminately. What took their place was not the masterwork of Mies Van der Rohe, but the "banal commercial buildings" of lesser emulators and admirers. And was there, perhaps, something a little naive in America's embrace of Modernism on its own shores?

"There's this fixation on European architecture. But the social situation is so different over there," Greenberg says. "Not long ago they had Hitler. Europe's take on the past is very different. People here believe Modernism is evolution. But Europe's Modernism is after 1950. The world is very jealous of the way we could look at the past. It is a great divide."

Europe's espousal of Modernism was as much a move away from something as a reaching for something. Classical architecture bore the taint of Adolph Hitler and Albert Speer, exploiters of its evocative power. It became the architecture of domination, fear, nationalism run amok. Coming home to Bauhaus, which Hitler had shut down, must have seemed an affirming act. Modernism promised a new beginning, a new order. It was an International style that would reunite instead of divide (it was chosen for the United Nations building in New York). What a relief to leave the past behind.

Plus, there were just so many interesting things to do with reinforced concrete, steel, and glass. With new technology comes the desire to explore its possibilities. Walter



Photos: Tim Buchman

Gropius and Ludwig Mies Van der Rohe had just begun to do so before their school, The Bauhaus, was closed. They came to the United States instead and found a welcoming audience among American architects. By the '60s, Modernism had seized the architecture schools; it was even beginning to do so in South Africa as Greenberg was finishing his studies there. The students who followed him at the University of Witwatersrand no longer had two years immersion in architectural history.

Although he loved Le Corbusier, Greenberg also liked Edward Lutyens. And as he witnessed more and more charming old buildings falling to the wrecking ball, he started to study Lutyens more closely. (In 1969 he published a paper through the Yale Press on the architect's houses.) Then he began to look around at the houses in Connecticut's countryside. "There was much Colonial Revival influence in Connecticut. Wonderful clapboard buildings, salt boxes. I loved the ad hoc lean-tos," he recalls. "It was such a soft, gentle kind of architecture."



A two-story domed ballroom enlivens the garden facade of Huckleberry house (top), a project Greenberg designed initially in the early '80s and added to in 1990. A head-on view of the front elevation (above) shows its broad symmetry; the flanking loggia and sunroom balance each other with a yin-yang openness and closure.

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*—allan greenberg*

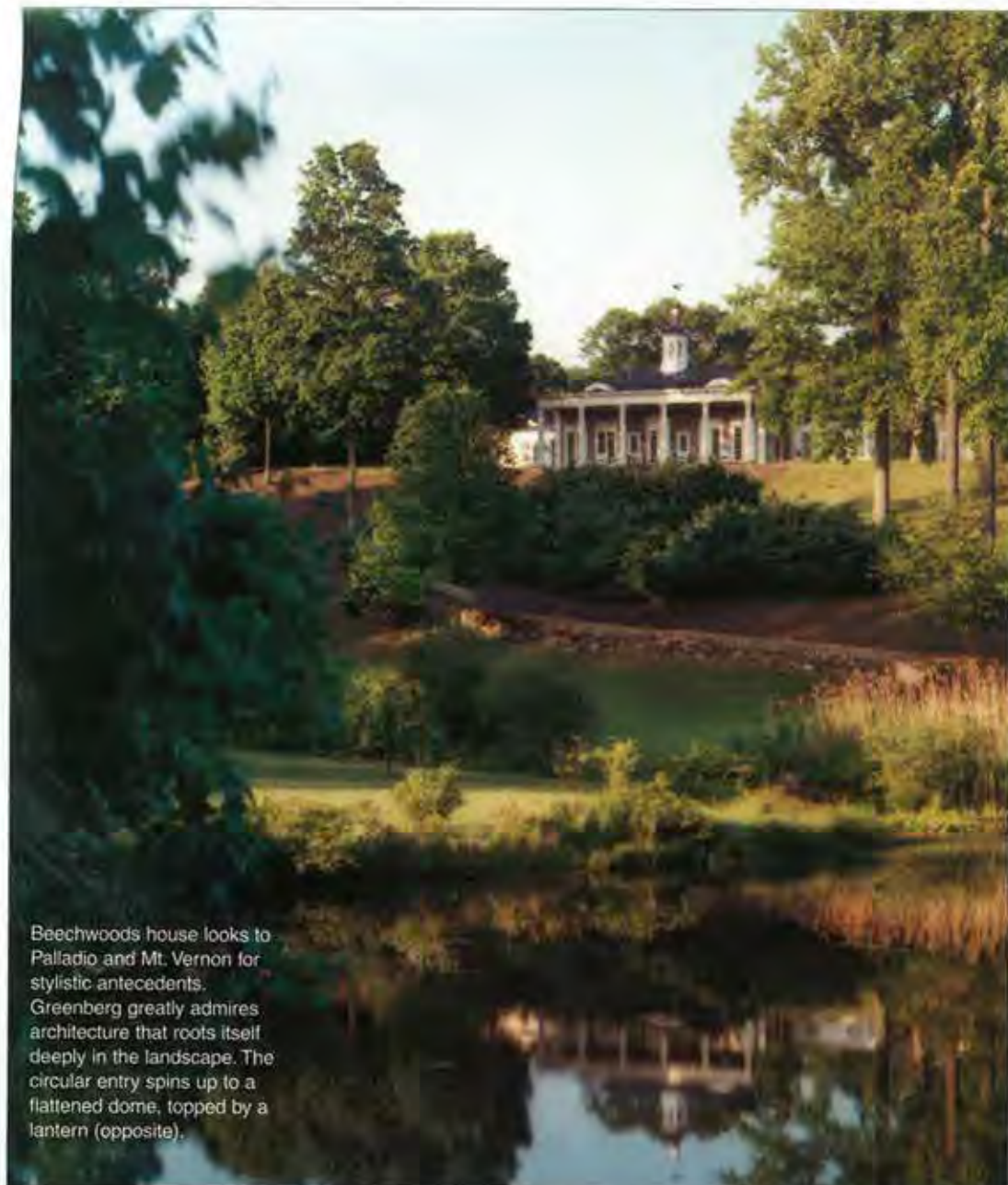


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And so goes Greenberg's evolution toward a more humanistic architectural language. He wasn't interested in building machines for living that dictate how they shall be used and occupied. Instead he wanted to build human-centered structures that serve us and emerge from our beliefs and needs. He was concerned that the wholesale dismissal of Classicism meant the baby was tossed out with the bathwater. There is, he believes, no more democratic architecture and none that relates better to the human body, mind, and soul. After all, the column, with its capital, shaft, and base, is designed after the human figure.

"Classical architecture has remained viable—and classical buildings endure for centuries—because it is not a style; it is a comprehensive language of architectural form with a grammar and vocabulary to articulate form and meaning," he writes in the introduction to his monograph, published by Academy Group Ltd.

"That its birth coincided with the birth of the ideal of democratic government in Athens nearly 3,000 years ago is no accident; there is a fundamental, consanguine relationship between the ideals of classical architecture and democracy. ... And while governments may use any architecture for noble or ignoble purposes, I maintain that classical architecture is still the most potent, the most appropriate, and the most noble language to express the relationship of the individual to the community in a republican democratic society."



Beechwoods house looks to Palladio and Mt. Vernon for stylistic antecedents. Greenberg greatly admires architecture that roots itself deeply in the landscape. The circular entry spins up to a flattened dome, topped by a lantern (opposite).

Photos: Tim Buchman

### greenberg variations

Greenberg's work as architectural consultant to Connecticut's chief justice from 1967 to 1979 deepened his knowledge and fervor for Classical architecture in the public sector. And it led him to study not only America's early institutional buildings, but its early houses as well. Ultimately, it guided him to Thomas Jefferson and George Washington. "I'm an immigrant here, and I have a real passion and love for this country," he says. "I became fascinated with your

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Photos: Tim Buchman

An Atlantic coast residence shows the softer side of Greenberg's Traditionalism. Interiors are even more casual and welcoming.

history; so many founding fathers were interested in architecture."

Greenberg opened his own firm in 1972, designing court houses and, eventually, adding residential work to the mix. His first house job was an addition to a 17th century house in Connecticut. He added a family room and kitchen, and he raised half of the attic for a studio.

Next came a 20,000-square-foot, new-from-the-ground-up house in Connecticut. Called the "Farmhouse in Connecticut," it isn't nearly as humble as it sounds. The first of Greenberg's variations on a theme—in this case, George Washington's Mount Vernon—it launched his career as a master designer of large residential houses and their accompanying outbuildings.

The Connecticut "farm" is a horse farm; and the house, by most people's standards, is quite grand. Similarly, Mt. Vernon, notwithstanding its illustrious pedigree, was a farmhouse, and George Washington was a farmer. Like Mt. Vernon, Greenberg clad the exterior of the Connecticut house in wood, hewn and painted to look like

stone. Washington may have done so to save money while still making his house appear grand; Greenberg uses the trick to make the grand house seem less formal.

Many other similarities exist between the houses, and even more were planned but not executed. A la Mt. Vernon, Greenberg's house creates an entry court with the main building and two dependencies connected by open hyphens. And his rear elevation also has an open, columned porch—although no majestic view of the Potomac River. But an early plan for a lantern was snuffed. And, most interestingly, it appears Greenberg fixed the asymmetries that abound in Washington's version. (It's so difficult for an architect not to straighten everything out.) Later, as he researched Washington and Mt. Vernon for his book, *George Washington, Architect* (published in 1999 by Andreas Papadakis Publisher, an imprint of New Architecture Group Ltd.) he began to view those asymmetries as purposeful and cunning. It was, he thinks, Washington's attempt to make his big house seem less formal and intimidating.

### CAD is in the details

Although Greenberg designed another riff on Mt. Vernon in 1989 (and in this case, he got to cap it with the lantern), he insists he has no desire to copy what's come before him. That is not what his practice of Classicism is all about. "I like to go back to the past, but I don't want to replicate the past." As he told writer Arthur Lubow for an article in *Departures* magazine,

*"I'm in Connecticut here, and I have a great passion and love for this country."*

—alan greenberg

The rear elevation of Conyers Farm uses durable, natural materials to set a solid tone: New York fieldstone, limestone, mahogany siding, cedar shingles, and slate roof tiles should stand the test of time. The entry hall (opposite, top) finds a similar grace in substance.



Designed to capture natural light at sunrise and sunset during Finland's winter solstice, this Helsinki residence (also pictured, opposite) takes its cues from the area's stylistic traditions.



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Photos: Courtesy Allan Greenberg Architects

"The goal is to stand on the shoulders of all the architects of the past and see further."

Where Greenberg is solidly grounded in the present—and perhaps even perched on the cutting edge—is in the means he uses to design and build his wonderfully detailed creations. He is all about CAD. And drywall. And steel framing. He sees no reason at all to replicate the ways in which Classical details were once drawn and executed: "Drywall is a good material. And three coats of plaster on it is a great finish—or double drywall with a coat of finish. It's very expensive but very nice." He's especially fond of steel framing because it protects his precious details. "It allows the roof, windows, and walls to move independently of each other, so you won't get cracks," he explains. "You can recoup the extra cost of it because you can use the techniques of commercial construction to build it, which is much faster."

At 10,000, 15,000, and 20,000 square feet, his houses are not unlike commercial or institutional projects in their scope and complexity. Particularly challenging is coordinating all the team members, many of them as well-known and established as he. "An architect's job is to design the process so everyone can be heard—to create a milieu where everyone can come and be respected and heard," he says. He works intimately with interior designers and landscape architects to pull the whole vision together. Like George Washington, he believes the house and its landscape are inseparably

important. "I dream of houses with gardens so knitted together they're impossible to photograph," he says. "Like the marriage of house and garden in turn-of-the-century English houses." Because of the caliber of his clients, Greenberg is uniquely poised to accomplish his goal.

His latest and possibly highest profile project to date offers such an opportunity. It's another "farm"—Cantitoe Farm, Martha Stewart's new compound on 153 acres in Bedford, N.Y. "She called me last August, and I started a week later," he says. "She's a very busy person, but very decisive. She sits down and focuses. Everything has been designed down to the last detail." The extensive project will encompass the renovation and new construction of several houses, a stable, a greenhouse, and a number of other outbuildings, including henhouses. "It's a really great project. Martha Stewart is a great woman," he says. "She has this vision of a farm as a work of art."

"Every client has a different dream of a house," he adds. "For some, it's standing at the stove and looking into the family room to see their children. Everybody worries about their uniqueness, but everybody has the same components. You have to get the parts that are the same down and then add the unique inflections. If you let the unique inflections drive the project, then you're in trouble. But within the rubric, there are enormous subtle differences."

For Allan Greenberg, working the rules, and the infinite nuances of interpretation within them, is an endlessly fascinating enterprise. *ra*