

MASTERS OF THE HOUSE

Allan Greenberg

WASHINGTON, D.C.

Architect Allan Greenberg, pictured here in the treaty room he designed for the State Department in Washington, talks about his pursuit of beauty and authenticity, as well as realizing his clients' dreams of the ideal house



The South African-born architect Allan Greenberg became famous in the 1980s for a residence he designed to resemble Mount Vernon, but with major improvements of proportions and details and a few eccentricities of his own. He has since designed some of this country's most extraordinary houses, most of which have never been published to protect the privacy of high-profile clients.

The author of several books and principal of offices in Washington, D.C., and Greenwich, Connecticut, Greenberg has built cottages, estates, churches, office buildings, retail stores, and civic buildings worldwide.

SA: How would you describe the first house you designed?

AG: The first house I designed was an addition to a 17th-century house

in New England. The new rooms included a family room, porch, and kitchen on the first floor and an expanded attic with a large Palladian window. In designing the addition, I drew from sources in both Colonial and Colonial Revival architecture—in particular, from the great Shingle Style houses of the 1880s and 1890s that grew from these traditions. This process confirmed my young architect's intuition about the

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TOP: Walls of windows meld the openness of modern architecture with classical detailing. RIGHT AND BELOW: For a new house in Alexandria, Virginia, Greenberg honors local historic precedent. LEFT: The mature landscape, studied proportions, and restrained clapboard facade instill this new house with historic dignity.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF ALLEN GREENBERG ARCHITECT

endless adaptability and richness of the classical tradition.

SA: Did you have a design mentor?

AG: Sir Edwin Lutyens and Thomas Jefferson created houses that have inspired me for over three decades. Their architecture teaches a very basic lesson—that the architecture of most wonderful homes is inseparable from the design of their gardens and from their interior décor. House, garden, and interior have to converse with each other, and the more intelli-

gent the conversation, the more magical the house.

My other design mentor was the hero of my student years. I met Le Corbusier himself in Paris in 1959, and he offered me a position in his atelier. I could not afford to accept it because you had to work for a year without pay. Seeing my disappointment, Le Corbusier pulled his trash basket around his chair and set it between us. Peering at me through his spectacles, he said, “Don’t be disappointed. Architecture has no

golden rules. There is nothing I can teach you. It is all hard work. What nobody sees is the size of my waste paper basket.” Indeed, it was large and filled with rejected sketches on tracing paper.

SA: What inspires you?

AG: My passion for architecture is inspired by my clients and their dreams of new homes for their families. Every client has a different dream, and it is only through a process of intense interaction that the

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dreams can be transformed into reality. The client explains the dream to the architect who then filters it through his or her imagination to create designs for a new house. The core of the design process involves client and architect meticulously evaluating, modifying, and honing the design into a home that encompasses the original vision and more.

During this process, the client strives to ensure that the architect understands all the components of the dream (functional and aesthetic), while the architect assists the client in imagining what it is like to live in designs represented by drawings on paper. The goal is NEVER to persuade the client that a design is right and therefore uncover every flaw in order to improve the design.

SA: What is your favorite historic house?

AG: My favorite historic house to live in is the Nathaniel Russell House (1808) in Charleston, SC. It's compact, eloquent, urbane, and timeless.

Lofty rooms with beautiful details and large windows overlook a walled garden. The particular eloquence and easy grace that pervade the house make it easy to imagine the hurly-burly days of family life with small bare feet flying up and down the open stair and numerous dinner parties including family and friends.

My favorite house and garden is unquestionably Mount Vernon. It is the most felicitous integration of house, garden, outbuildings, farm, and farm building in the United States, and it inspired me to write my book, *George Washington, Architect*.

My favorite fantasy home is Sissinghurst, the dreamlike English house and garden created by the poet, Vita Sackville-West, and the diplomat, Harold Nicholson. The house is a converted 16th-century barn, and ever since I first saw it in 1974, I have thought the garden to be the most beautiful place in the world.

SA: What is your favorite room or part of a house?

AG: The family room/kitchen suite is unquestionably the heart of a house. As a parent of six children, I know that this is where most conversations between parents and children take

place. The first consideration in planning these rooms should be to encourage easy interaction within the family and with friends. Other considerations are ultimately secondary. A particularly important feature of many wonderful family room/kitchens are large windows or French doors that open out onto a generous veranda or paved terrace so as to embrace the garden and bring light and views into the house.

SA: What details do architects and/or builders overlook?

AG: Architects and builders often worry too much about expanding size, as well as adding decorative detail and costly materials at the expense of solid construction. Many pricey houses cover over poor construction with flashy shells. A Danish aphorism says that only God and the butcher know what goes into a sausage. This thought applies to the construction of a house because so much of it is invisible behind walls. The sacrifice of time-tested construction techniques for an increase in area is a serious mistake. A well-built house will prove itself over time.

SA: What is the elementary mistake that clients most often make?

AG: A new house is transformed into a home when it is designed around the authentic rhythms of the family's daily life. The house should accommodate the way the family will actually live in the house, so that even after the passage of many years, it will exceed their dreams for their home.

If the design fails to do this, even the most beautiful house will prove to be a disappointment. Too many clients look for an architect who has designed precisely the style of house they think they need. They worry unnecessarily about what the house will look like. A good architect can design in a broad range of styles and character while also addressing the full panoply of a client's concerns.

Clients should strive to find the rare architect whose work and client references testify to his or her ability to listen to the wide variety of requirements and visions that each client brings and to patiently craft



Greenberg's secondary outbuildings are as beautiful as his large houses. Here, a pair of garage doors shows his attention to craft and detail.

houses that respond to these various mandates.

SA: How do you achieve a sense of order and beauty in a house?

AG: Just as the house should be planned around the rhythms of a family's daily life, the house and garden should respect the surrounding architectural tradition and regional environment. These two factors project a profound sense of order. Exotic architecture and plant materials seldom survive the rigors of time and the local climate. A new house should fit into its surroundings so that each appears to have been there for a long time, the one unimaginable without the other. Such architecture will be timeless, looking at ease among the tired blooms of yesterday's latest fads.

SA: What should no Southern home be without?

AG: My first thought is that every Southern home needs a veranda. But there is a much more fundamental quality: It is the easy grace and confident, understated elegance that characterizes the best Southern architecture of the past. This quality is a product of two factors that seem to go hand-in-hand. The first is ease and comfort with tradition; the second is an active spirit of inventiveness. These qualities are exemplified by Southern houses like Monticello, the Hammond-Harwood House in Annapolis, the Swan House in Atlanta, and dozens of other homes.

SA: What will your dream clients ask you to build?

AG: They will ask me to build whatever they need. Each client is different. I strive to find the unique qualities of the client's requirements for a house in order to create the home. Each house I design is part of my vision and dream of architecture. ♦