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# CLAREMONT

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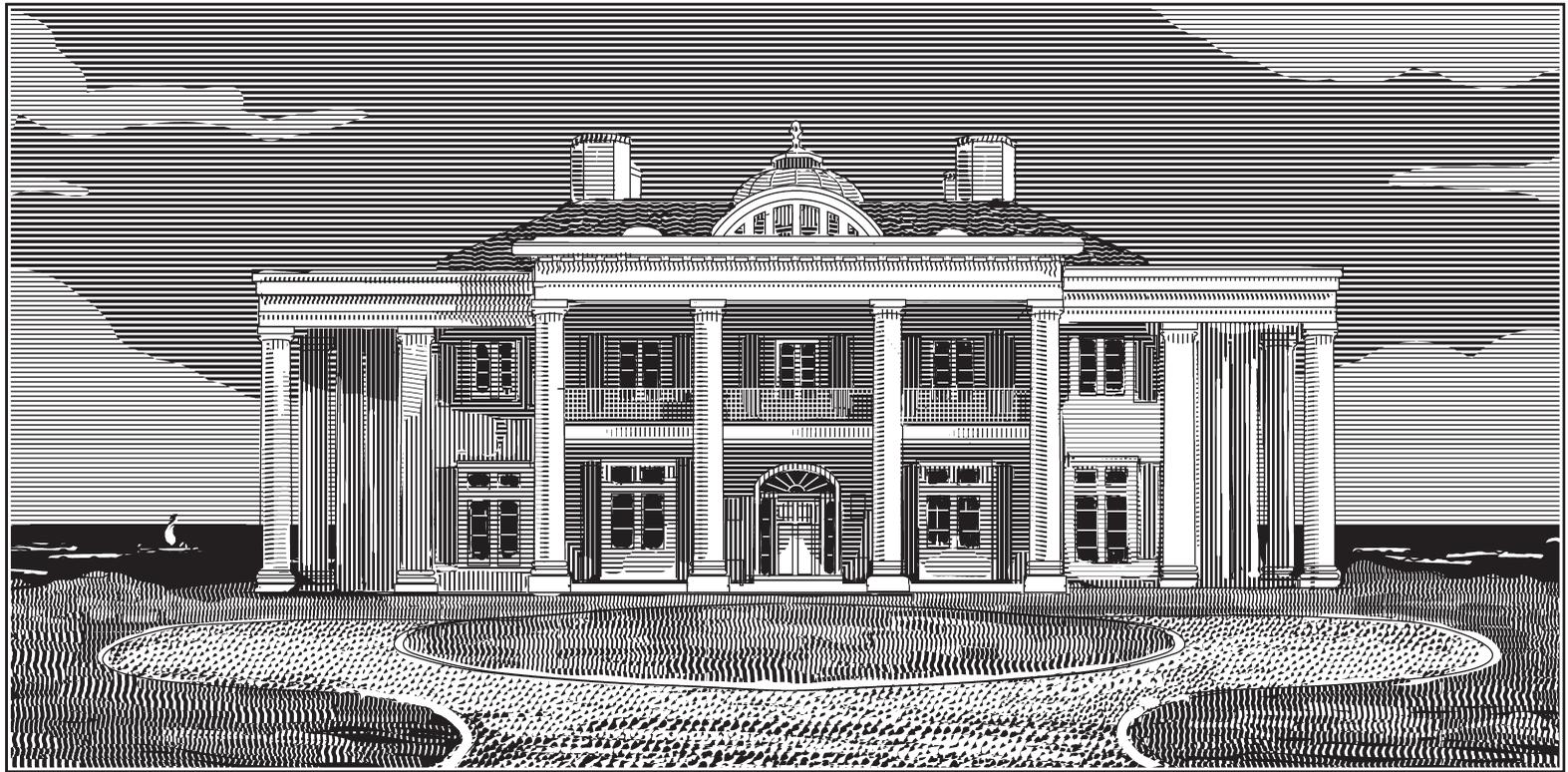
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Book Review by Anthony Paletta

## A LIVING TRADITION

*Allan Greenberg: Classical Architect*, by Allan Greenberg.  
Rizzoli, 304 pages, \$75



*House on the Long Island Sound*

**A**LLAN GREENBERG HAS DONE HEROIC work reviving the tradition of classical architecture, and Rizzoli's new monograph on his body of work, *Allan Greenberg: Classical Architect*, helps us see, sumptuously, how and why.

Greenberg developed a profound appreciation for American structures both physical and constitutional soon after arriving here in 1964 from South Africa. He has written with great discernment about the architectural achievements of George Washington and, in another Rizzoli volume, *Architecture of Democracy* (2006), on the influence of emerging American democratic institutions upon American houses, courthouses, and other public buildings (Hadley Arkes described that book as surpassing Tocqueville in some particulars, in "Building Democracy," *CRB*, Summer 2007). Aside from a slim book in the mid-'90s, there has never been a collection of his own work; that omission is now corrected.

Greenberg is a lucid architect and thinker, and his introduction to this volume (much

of which is adapted from *The Architecture of Democracy*) offers sharp and stirring advocacy for classical architecture and a reminder of his considerable loneliness after his turn to classicism in the modernism-besotted 1960s. His early years weren't especially unusual for a student and practitioner at the time. After studying architecture in South Africa—which he fled in disgust at growing racial tensions—he bounced around Europe for several years, meeting the famed Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier in Paris. Among other projects, he worked (with Jørn Utzon) on the Sydney Opera House, before landing in a Master's Program at the Yale School of Architecture.

An early sense of modernism's failures became evident in a stint with the catastrophically effective New Haven Redevelopment Authority. As he writes in the introduction,

urban renewal in New Haven was a tawdry reflection of Le Corbusier's ideal city, the unrealized *Ville Radieuse*. Although his ideas were compelling for their star-

ting vision and diagrammatic clarity, their influence was an unmitigated disaster for American cities and towns. No longer concerned with the integrity of the street or relationships to adjacent buildings, the modern architect was free to ignore the past and jettison any sense of architecture's relationship to society.

**G**REENBERG WAS SOON HIRED AS a visiting faculty member at the Yale architecture school, where his teaching, in marked contrast to that of others, stressed the continued importance of the past. He writes in his introduction,

In my design studios, I assigned challenging problems involving additions to important old buildings or projects set in historic parts of cities. Because modernistic architects believed that most classical and Gothic buildings were simply copied from the past, I created exercises to show students this was false.



Modernist orthodoxy was so stultifying that Greenberg found a greater spirit of openness and debate about architecture at the Yale Law School than at its School of Architecture.

He soon left Yale to focus on private practice, resolving that a different course was necessary:

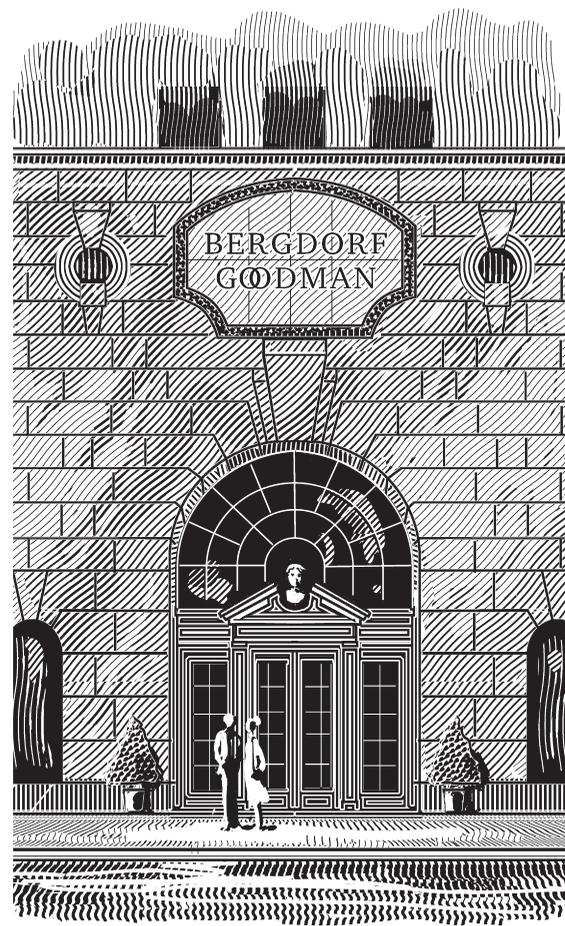
I concluded that, for me at least, modernistic architecture lacked an alternative urban vision. I decided to pursue a career as a classical architect. At the time I thought I would just follow this eccentric direction for my own intellectual pleasure as an avant-garde of one. And for the next decade I was the only young architect in the U.S. with an office devoted to designing classical buildings. As I write in 2013, it is particularly gratifying to watch the development of so many young architects who have decided to follow a similar path.

He proved a pioneer in his turn to classicism, and soon found well-deserved company in his sharp reaction to rote modernism and its depredations upon the physical landscape. But as readers will note in Greenberg's introduction to this volume, however vibrantly classical his work has been, he never rejected modernism *carte blanche*. "If truth be told, contemporary buildings by Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius, and Alvar Alto are almost as different from one another as they are from the works of more traditional architects like Lutyens or John Russell Pope." He has showcased modernism in his works, including Le Corbusier's Carpenter Center at Harvard in *Architecture of Democracy*, praising both its form and its sensitivity to context.

**I**N AN INTERVIEW LAST YEAR WITH THE *Wall Street Journal* he described the Philip Johnson-designed Four Seasons restaurant in Mies's Seagram Building as his "favorite interior in New York." Mies's famous quip defending modernist minimalism, "less is more," is mocked in Robert Venturi's anti-modernist retort, "less is a bore." But Greenberg, speaking about the restaurant interior, engaged in nothing but praise in his wordplay, "Here, less becomes more luxurious and more sensuous, like the Shinto Temple and stone gardens of Japan." Though the palpable influence of modernism is a bit rarer in his own work, he has directly cited Marcel Breuer, Mies, Aalto, and other Ur-modernists as inspiration for particular projects.

Greenberg noted that at Yale he felt "trapped in the middle of a war between modernistic architects and the past"; he rejected the modernist orthodoxy, but not all of its possible tenets. While his product is expressly classical, his thought is quite different from the anti-modernist peers with whom he is often leagued, such as Leon Krier, Aldo Rossi, or Henry Hope Reed, Jr.

Greenberg's catholic enthusiasms seem partly due to his particular interests in classicism; before his explorations of earlier American vernacular architecture, his first object of sustained academic attention was Edwin Lutyens, whose ordered yet fanciful work repre-



Store renovation

sents a thread of idiosyncratic classicism left hanging throughout the years of high modernism until Greenberg determined to pick it up. Greenberg wrote a fascinating 1969 *Perspecta* essay, later expanded into a 2007 volume, *Lutyens and the Modern Movement*, which sought to map the commonalities among Lutyens, Wright, and Le Corbusier, which rest chiefly in their similar attention to a planned dynamic of movement through spaces. Much of his analysis is focused on the purposeful irregularities that characterized Lutyens's work, irregularities that also animate his own work, but with very different results.

Lutyens was interested in movement through a sequence of closed spaces, each separate and distinct. But it was a more complex amalgam than the regular spaces and unbroken axes of the Beaux Arts, or the looser organization and floor spaces of an open plan.

Greenberg continues:

In Lutyens' houses the cross axis, the focal point of an H or square plan, is occupied by a solid and functional mass. The paradox is further developed, for the central mass could disappear on the next floor, and is seldom expressed on the exterior, except by the chimney of a fireplace. By virtue of its location at a crossing, movement and axes are pushed apart, and a meaningful relationship between interior and exterior is made difficult, as no room or group of rooms can extend through the plan. The result is an asymmetrical circulation pattern within a symmetrical form and intricate and circuitous movements in a plan whose elements are symmetrically disposed and axially related.

His enthusiasm for Lutyens's deviations from rigid orders and arrangement reveals the spirit of his own work, in which variety and experiment remain possible within a classical frame. He is interesting not because he is simply replicating the past, but because he is wielding a sophisticated grasp of its traditions. In his essay "Allan Greenberg and the Difficult Whole of Architecture," Notre Dame architect Carroll William Westfall observed that

Greenberg's is an expressive and instructive architecture, producing dynamic effects, but it is not one to be used for training beginners, for the basic rules are pushed so far into the background that beginners might think they had a license to disregard, rather than master them. Beginners need to master Bramante, Palladio, Inigo Jones, Charles McKim, and John Russell Pope before they can move on to Raphael, Michelangelo, Christopher Wren, Stanford White, Edwin Lutyens, and Allan Greenberg.

**W**HICH LEADS US TO GREENBERG'S own nuanced work in the present volume, an ample showcase of traditionalist ranges and styles, livened



A house in coastal South Carolina

throughout by elegant experiment. Here and there you'll find the neo-Georgian, the neo-Palladians, the Byzantine-Romanesque, the Mediterranean, the neo-Greek Revivals, and much else. These are uniformly elegant and lively updatings of traditional forms. An estate in Fairfield County echoes Lutyens's Papillon House, boasting a similar if smaller butterfly design. A residence for Martha Stewart, a renovation of several existing structures, drew evidently on Greenberg's great interest in the integration of functions that characterized early American architecture; practical structures such as stables aren't consigned to remote corners but sit comfortably next to the home. Another home in New England effortlessly transitions through three different styles along its progression in a simulacrum of an estate gradually expanded, from a gambrel-roofed 17th-century home to a late 18th-century main house to an arts-and-crafts-like addition. The interior makes keen use of these possibilities, with the family area located in the latter portion, which harbors the largest vernacular windows.

Simple patterns are repeatedly complicated by elaborate detail. The view from the entrance to a New Jersey neo-Georgian doesn't lead to a clear vista to the rear; instead it's obscured by a winding stair that draws the dynamic of movement sinuously upwards. The stair hall in a Greek Revival plantation-styled house on Long Island already offers

an unobscured view of the two floors above; Greenberg disrupts expectations of the mute monumental with yet another staircase sweeping across the full curve of the wall. He always achieves a visual centeredness, but his efforts to introduce elements of subtle asymmetry into his work prove a continual attraction.

**T**HE STEEL AND GLASS HOUSE IS UNUSUAL in the Greenberg repertoire. Faced with the task of an addition to a rambling Victorian in Connecticut, he suggested that a more contemporary addition would probably be apt. "Yes, let's make it more modern" said the wife. "No, not more modern," countered Greenberg. "More like Mies van der Rohe."

The result is surprisingly elegant balances, with the stark white volume of the addition accentuating rather than competing with the original. As Greenberg quipped in a *Wall Street Journal* piece on the home, "I liken my building to a novel by James Joyce. The house itself is more like one by William Thackeray, George Eliot, or Charles Dickens."

More than two thirds of the volume features houses, which have been the principal product of his work. But his engagements with institutional architecture also display great verve, with the university commissions particularly fascinating. Greenberg writes, in an additional essay in the book, "If the architecture of a university is compared to

an open book, it's often in a language we've forgotten how to read or no longer attempt to understand." This is flagrantly clear from a look not only at ruefully non-contextual contemporary campus additions but at mildly preferable neo-neotraditional elements. Greenberg's work is a rebuke to dozens of cut-rate campus additions, buildings that seem to think that brick, gable roofs, and a dash of stone accents suddenly a neo-Georgian make. In his work on Dupont and Gore Halls at the University of Delaware he wields the overlooked details that lend the Georgian palate its appeal, paying close heed to ornamented cornices, sculptural string courses (the thin bands of brick or stone that run across most Georgian-style buildings), judicious arrangements of gabled windows and chimneys, and the many other small but vital elements often omitted in slapdash contemporary versions.

Greenberg has also contributed tasteful additions in other styles to other campuses: a more austere brick addition to Princeton's Aaron Burr Hall, for example, and a new Humanities building for Rice University designed more simply than its partners around a quadrangle but with numerous subtle stylistic echoes.

**T**HE SELECTION OF PHOTOGRAPHS is excellent, and Greenberg's essays and explanatory texts are uniformly illuminating. The only significant misfortune



of his new book is that, having previously encountered his lengthy, deft accounts of the architecture of others, it's difficult for slight single pages on his own work not to feel a bit wan. Also, given his own lavishly diagrammatic accounts of movement in Lutyens's work, and the clear significance of a similar analysis of progression and movement to his own work, it is unfortunate that we don't get any floorplans here.

This isn't Greenberg's fault; the misfortune is that classical architecture, for all its successful revival, still prospers mainly in a gentry circuit of Rizzoli monographs and *Architectural Digest* and *Town and Country* spreads more likely destined for perusal at the coffee table than close attention in the library. Complaints about marginalization may sound a bit ripe when one enjoys such genteel patrons, but enthusiasm from the wealthy and enthusiasm from architectural tastemakers are still rather different things and traditional architecture is still *déclassé* within much of the architectural world.

Classical architecture is a tradition that has returned to much greater vigor since Greenberg's start. It harbors a variety that is healthful but within which it is possible to discern distinct categories. Consider the winners of Notre Dame's Driehaus Prize for classical architecture, which included Greenberg in 2006. There are paradigmatic formalists like Léon Krier; and at the other end of the spectrum there's Michael Graves, who no doubt wields traditional elements, but in the most cartoonishly ironical fashion possible (this is the man who supported a pediment with the seven dwarves!). This variety is an encouraging sign, but also, I think, a valuable reminder that neoclassicism is never going to be a simple field. Robert A.M. Stern, dean of the Yale School of Architecture and a winner of the Driehaus Prize, has repeatedly argued that "Modernism and Classicism should be able to exist side by side." Paul Goldberger, architectural critic for anywhere that has mattered over the last three decades, and a judge for the Driehaus Prize, has similarly argued against simple binaries. In his book *On the Rise: Architecture and Design in a Post-Modern Age* (1983), he wrote:

The issue is not the moral rightness or wrongness of a particular style, and it never was. The modernists' dogma was as foolish as the antimodernists; each makes claim to a moral superiority that neither history nor common sense can support. It is simply not true, as the antimodernists now tell us, that people

have always preferred classicism, that modernism was a perverse break from a great historical continuum, and that the only priority for us today is to get back on that simple, single track. If only the history of art and the history of culture were so simple.

**T**HIS HISTORY WON'T BE GROWING SIMPLER any time soon. Critics as cold-eyed as Nathan Glazer frankly concluded in *From a Cause to a Style: Modernist Architecture's Encounter with the American City* (2007) that many building traditions are unworkable for contemporary purposes. The rise of modernism was closely tied to the rise of modern office capitalism, which is here to stay, along with its massive, forbidding skyscrapers. In other realms, the immense escalation of labor costs and requirements of modern scale render traditional buildings difficult. Greenberg is an effusive fan of Thomas Jefferson's University of Virginia, and it is a treasure, but most university construction will never again resemble it. As Glazer observed:

Scale is a problem. The most admired composition of buildings and spaces in the United States is the University of Virginia by Thomas Jefferson. Our third president was also a great architect and designer. He had many virtues. No one disputes the elegance and beauty of Jefferson's "academical village," with its two rows of modest structures, facing each other across a beautiful lawn, with one end closed by an exquisite domed building, the Rotunda, originally designed for a library. But no library of any size could now be fitted into it, or into many other domed buildings once built for libraries, whether the Radcliffe Camera at Oxford, the British Museum, or the Library of Congress.

The crucial point gained from a volume like this is not that classicism is unlikely to become a dominant strain in architecture, but that its absence from the realm of new construction was a lamentable, entirely unnecessary trend, which Allan Greenberg has struggled valiantly to reverse. His body of work stands eloquently on its own as a testament to the virtues and vitality of traditional forms, while offering tremendous encouragement to architects still to come.

*Anthony Paletta is a writer living in Brooklyn.*



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