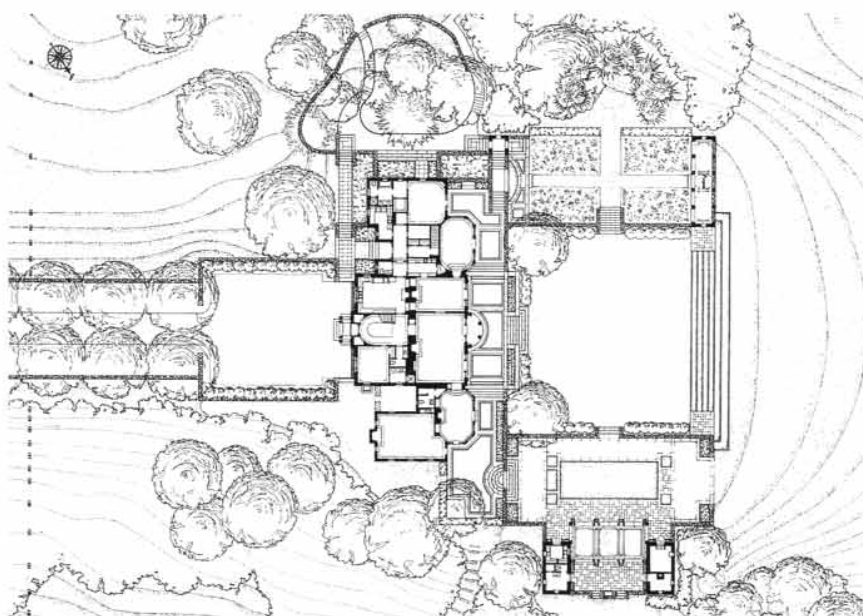


## The Reticent Revolutionaries

Classical architects are instructing and organizing, but so quietly you might not even notice.

by Philip Langdon



One of the projects featured in the inaugural issue of *The Classicist* is architect Mark Ferguson's and landscape designer Deborah Nevins's creation of a fitting landscape, including a walled motor court, for a country house in Connecticut.

If Classicism is a movement that aims to reshape American architecture, it is the most reticent movement I've ever seen.

On the last weekend of October, 250 architects, landscape architects, and interior designers gathered in New York for the second annual conference on Classical design, sponsored principally by *Traditional Building* magazine and the Institute for the Study of Classical Architecture. Clem Labine, *Traditional Building's* publisher, opened the impeccably organized event by looking out from the podium of the Neoclassical Tishman Auditorium at New York University and proclaiming, "Today's program is quite revolutionary." By that, he meant that the Classicism presented by more than a dozen speakers would come across not as the stuff of museum exhibitions and art history courses but as a practical living tradition. Those who assembled at NYU and later in the Institute's 19th-Century loft building in Tribeca heard Classicism propounded as an approach that the makers of buildings and landscapes can readily employ today – even if they do risk being looked on as anachronisms by many of their colleagues.

Certainly Classicism is experiencing one of its periodic renewals. This is evident in expanding organizational activity. Under the direction of Donald M. Rattner, the Institute,

founded in 1991, has given intensive six-week summer courses, has organized classes during the academic year on proportion, traditional wash rendering, and the elements of Classical architecture, and has sponsored a variety of other programs. On the weekend of the conference, the Institute published the thoughtfully written first issue of its annual journal *The Classicist* (available for \$19.50 from the Institute, 111 Franklin St., New York, N.Y. 10013). In Philadelphia, Henry Hope Reed's longtime organization, Classical America, has been displaying increasing energy. And Labine's magazine about products for traditional building has recently been joined on the newsstands by Hearst's *Classic Home*, a co-sponsor with the American Society of Interior Designers and the New York chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects. All in all, Classicism is displaying growing vitality at both the popular and the professional level.

### Searching for a Guide

Yet many of Classicism's proponents remain exceedingly low-keyed in their efforts to spread the word. That became evident during a workshop conducted by Steve Bass, a New York architect who teaches at the Institute. Bass received his own architectural training at a Modernist school – Pratt Institute in the

1960s, a place where Bauhaus-oriented faculty members steered clear of promulgating rules for the creation of beautiful buildings. At Pratt, "beauty simply could not be discussed," Bass recalled. "I did receive some lessons about how to achieve a striking effect," he acknowledged, but "I didn't know why they worked. I had to discover it each time."

In searching for a reliable way of producing pleasing buildings and achieving an architecture that would not look outdated with the passage of time, Bass eventually arrived at the study of Classical geometry and proportions. One factor that convinced him of Classicism's value was his observation that during the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, huge numbers of competent to beautiful buildings were erected; that was a period in which, he pointed out, "Neoclassicism was strong."

In his workshop, Bass confidently laid out methods of Classical geometry and proportions, drawing on Pythagoras, Plato, Ptolemy, and other ancients. But he cautioned student-practitioners against advocating Classicism among those who have shown no proclivity toward it. The difficulty, he said, is that Classicism is "a subtle doctrine" based on order and unity, a form of design in which "one element must be above another element. You try to translate that socially and it won't fly." In these

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times, he observed, the implications of Classical thinking tend to be met with hostility. "If you go around showing these to people," he warned, "you'll be called a fascist, an elitist."

#### Weeding Out Errors

Rattner, too, refrained from delivering any messianic message about pushing Classicism into public prominence. He devoted his lecture less to bringing more designers into the Classicist fold than to weeding out pseudo-Classicism. He showed a lobby with moldings piled absurdly high ("You do not get more Classical by using more moldings," he admonished), columns in the wrong locations, downlights inserted in the base of an entablature, where they made the structure look insubstantial – examples of a general ignorance of how traditional load-bearing Classical architecture was put together. Considering how much hollow imitation of historical architecture flourishes in American building, it's easy to understand why the Institute's director would focus on the problems of poorly handled Classicism rather than on Classicism's potential. Nonetheless, to anyone familiar with the fervor of a design movement such as the New Urbanism of Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Peter Calthorpe, the conference of Classicists seemed remarkably lacking in zeal.

Perhaps the lack of excitement should be expected in an architectural discipline that inclines, as one of the essayists in *The Classicist* suggested, toward "decorum, endurance, order, clarity, serenity, simplicity and the dissimulation of effort." These qualities do not mesh easily with the zest and impatience required for a popular movement. An even more important reason for the low-keyed atmosphere may be the fact that the biggest continuing market for Classical design is in the high-end residential field, where passionate missionary work is unnecessary. Affluent homeowners know what they like; they don't have to be proselytized to choose traditional design.

Conference-goers seemed to get what they wanted from the proceedings. A designer from Charlotte, North Carolina, Charles Furman McLarty, told me he had signed up for the conference because he designs traditionally styled 5,000-foot spec houses, which sell for \$500,000 to \$800,000. He wanted to learn more about sources of ideas for such work, going beyond the limited number of antecedents that spec builders in the Charlotte area use again and again. A landscape architect from Yarmouth, Maine, David Melchert, expressed interest in the "procession of movement" that New York architect Robert A.M. Stern – hero of the conference – presented as a key feature of Classical houses and gardens. Melchert said his clients, building 12,000-square-foot houses, consider some aspects of Classicism "too formal, but they like the logic of it, the order of it."

Conference-goers may have learned more about philosophy than they had expected. Bass, in his remarkable three-hour workshop dealing with "harmonic numbers" and other ancient teachings about proportion, made an intriguing, if difficult to summarize, case that Classical proportions are meant to convey more than beauty; they are directed toward unity, toward stimulating "the soul to remember that it is in unity."

Such unusual reflections, linking building to the human condition, made a rewarding conference. But not a conference that is likely to put Classicism on the front burner of American architecture. Even the staunchest advocates of the Classical approach admitted their status as a small minority among professional designers. "Don't get too complacent," warned Stern, surveying the not terribly large auditorium at NYU. "This is all the Classicists there are, in this room – orphans of the storm." □