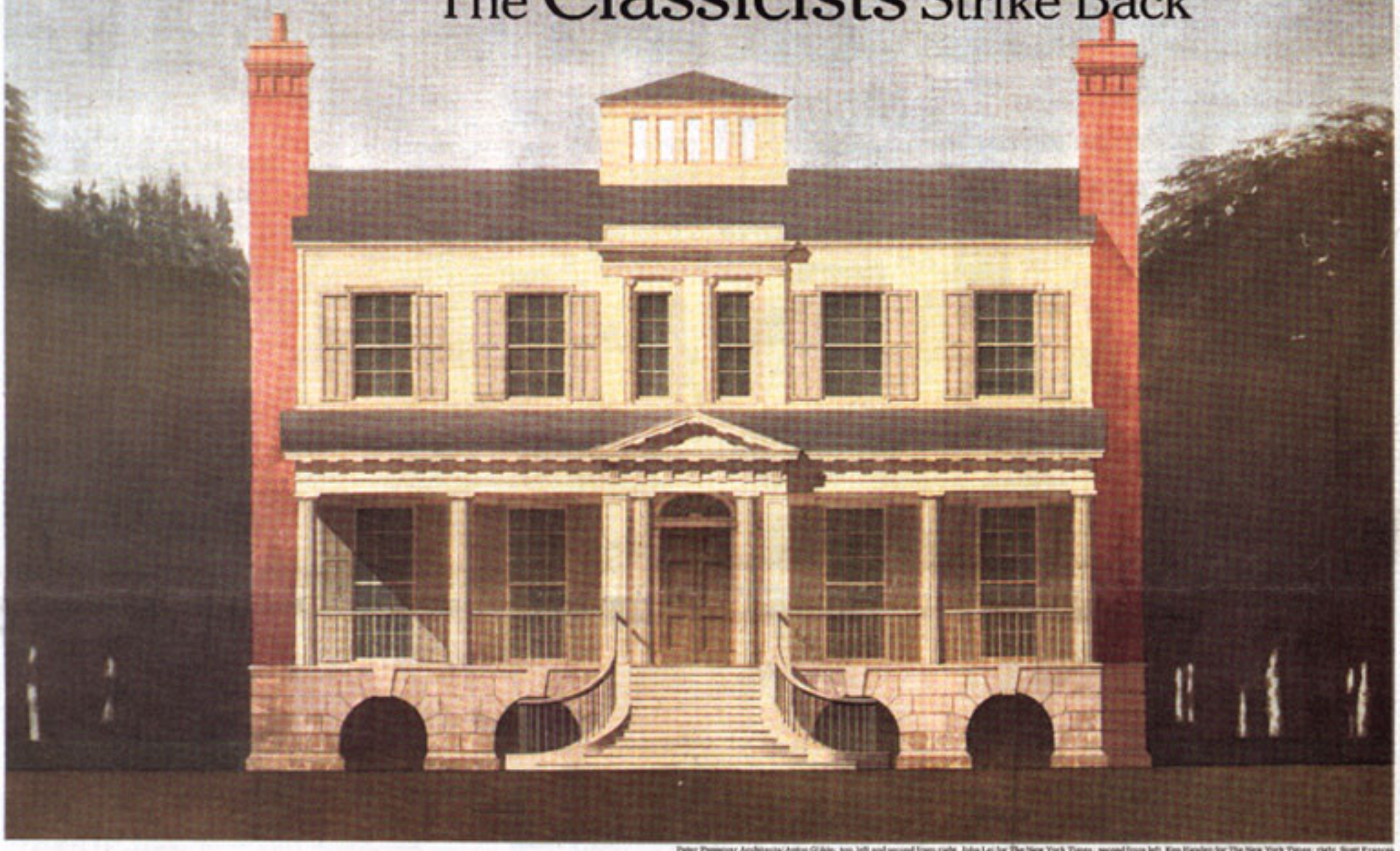
The New York Times




Mid-18th-Century Modern: The Classicists Strike Back



Peter Pennoyer Architects/Anton Grassi, top, left and second from right, John Lei for The New York Times, second from left, Kim Hayden for The New York Times, right, Scott Frances

PILASTER AND PROPORTION Above, a rendering of a house by Peter Pennoyer in the Lowcountry style for the Ford Plantation, a development in Richmond Hill, Ga. Gil Schafer, top left, has Ionic columns in his Manhattan living room. Top middle left, a Corinthian column in Fort Myers, Fla. Top middle right, from left to right, Paul Gunther, Anne Fairfax and Richard Sammons. Top right, a cupola designed by Mr. Pennoyer.

By DAVID COLMAN

THE early 1990's did not seem the moment for a revival in classical architecture. On the contrary, from Manhattan to Berlin, museums, hotels, developers and wealthy individuals were clamoring to sign up Richard Meier, Jean Nouvel and other celebrity modernists, hoping that the style and substance of radical design would lure visitors and buyers in droves.

In many cases that strategy worked. Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, has attracted more than seven million visitors since 1997, and Ian Schrager's boutique hotels changed the industry. So one could understand why the design world might dismiss the earnest and tweedy souls in horn-rimmed glasses who founded the Institute of Classical Architecture in 1992. Who needs Ionic columns when you can have Rem Koolhaas?

What a difference a decade makes. Since 2002 the institute has made sweeping changes to its once-fusty agenda, and the design world is scoffing no longer. The group appointed its first full-time president, Paul Gunther, two years ago; merged with Classical America, another traditional scholarship organization; and has fanned the appetite for traditional architecture. In the last 18 months, its membership has more than doubled, to 1,500, and the group (now called the Institute of Classical Architecture & Classical America) has opened five new regional chapters for a total of seven.

A group finds fresh tastes for ye olde styles.

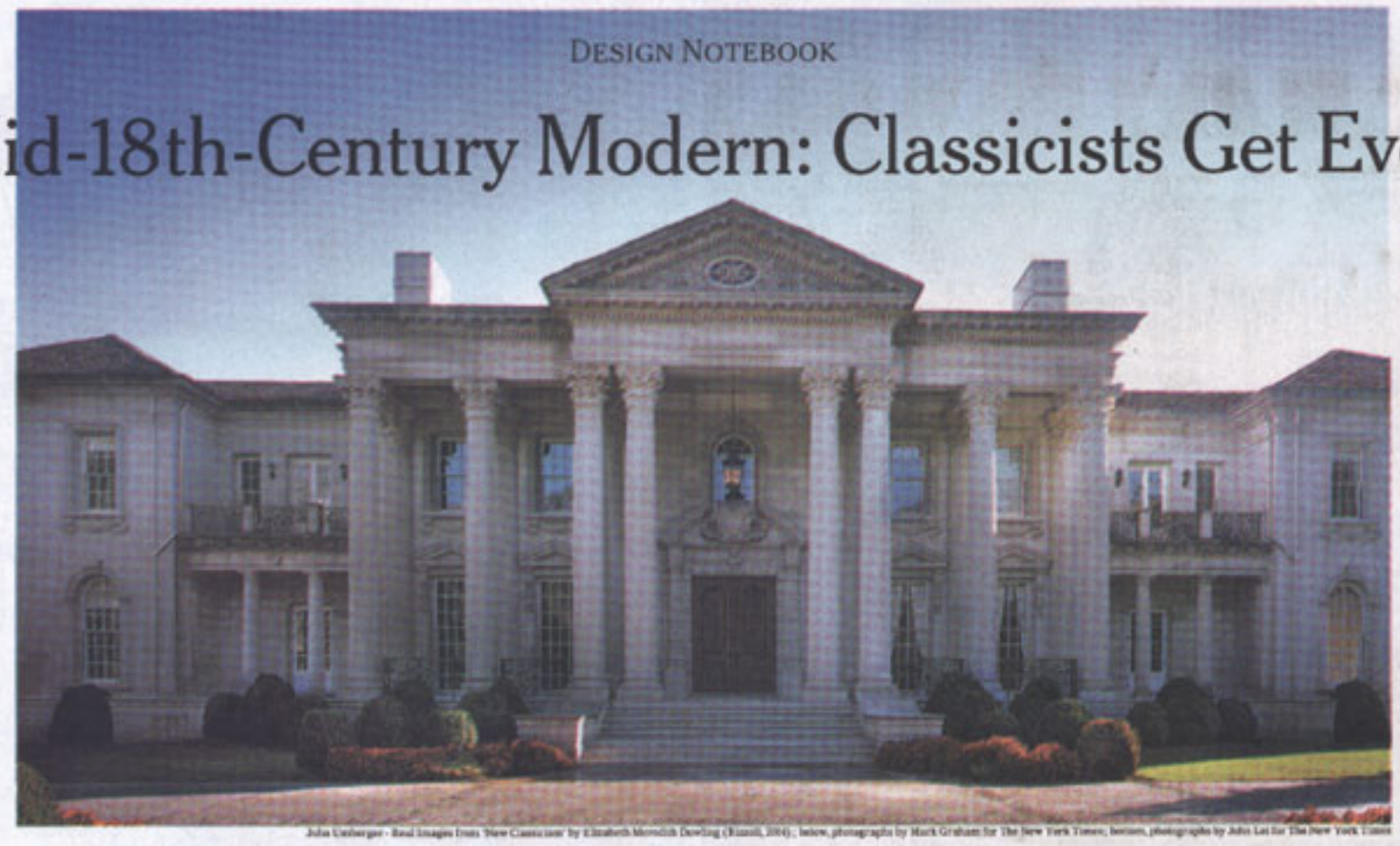
Its program of classes, tours and lectures teaching the concepts and practices of traditional architecture — a curriculum largely vanished from architecture schools — earned last year's largest design grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. Its lectures in New York have drawn speakers like Martha Stewart and crowds as large as 300, even on staid topics like a new translation of Vitruvius.

"Their contribution to the awareness of architecture and design has become enormous in the last few years," said Chase Rynd, the executive director of the National Building Museum in Washington. Even decorators who like their modernism, like Miles Redd and DD Allen, are showing up for the institute's lectures and classes on subjects like ornamental pilastering and theories of proportion. It has started regional programs aimed at developers and builders. While the institute was

Continued on Page 7

DESIGN NOTEBOOK

Mid-18th-Century Modern: Classicists Get Even



John Umberger - Real Images from 'New Classicism' by Elizabeth Meredith Dowling (Rizzoli, 2004); below, photographs by Mark Graham for The New York Times; bottom, photographs by John Lee for The New York Times

Continued From Page 1, This Section

sustained for more than a decade by pure classicists like Gil Schafer III, Anne Fairfax and Richard Sammons, their preaching did not find a great audience. Now the institute, which last year finally found a permanent home in a neo-Classical style 1890 building on West 44th Street, has opened up the discourse to include traditional architectural styles, including Georgian and Greek Revival, Arts and Crafts, Gothic Revival and shingle style.

"They're really expanding the definition of what constitutes classicism," said Bunny Williams, the Manhattan decorator and a fellow on the institute's board. Last year the institute gave its Ross Award for excellence in architecture to Merrill & Pastor, a Florida firm, whose work ranges from classical to early modern.

"The purists on the board are not ascendant," Mr. Gunther said. While he deflects praise to the institute itself, he is responsible for much of its recent success, members say. Mr. Gunther, a socially well-connected former vice president of the New-York Historical Society, has become a kind of Karl Rove for the classicist movement. "He's a huge factor in their success," Ms. Williams said.

Ever on the lookout for ways to expand the institute's scope and prestige, Mr. Gunther last month announced that in partnership with Habitat for Humanity it would design classically styled affordable homes for use in historic neighborhoods across the country. Prototypes will be built in Savannah, Ga.; Norfolk, Va.; and Rochester.

"It was a well-thought-out and practical collaboration," said Jeff Speck, the director of design at the National Endowment for the Arts, which contributed $50,000. "Nothing is more attractive to an N.E.A. panel than seeing artistic means used toward social ends."

Mr. Gunther, for his part, accounts for the institute's popularity as a reassuring counterpoint to today's technological upheaval, and not an anachronistic clash. "All those high-tech guys on the West Coast, they're on the cutting edge of inventing the future," Mr. Gunther said. "But when it comes to home and hearth, they're building traditional houses. There's a marketplace of demand for this out there. So do you just ignore it or try and do something about it and make it better?"

Classicism's most zealous fans maintain that its tenets mark it as the great and timeless architecture of democracy, and they exalt it above all other styles. But even nonzealots have come to see its allure. "I'll have people who have lived in really fabulous modern apartments," Mr. Redd said. "But then they'll move into an apartment or house that has a lot of classical proportions and details, and they'll say, 'Now, I really feel like a grown-up.' "

Jane Rosenthal, Robert De Niro's partner in the TriBeCa Film Center, certainly had enough of contemporary loft living. Last year she and her family left their loft (and its Eames-chair décor) for the Dakota on Central Park West, hiring Peter Pennoyer, one of New York's premier classical architects, for the redo.

"I love the new, but I don't ever like to forget what came before," Ms. Rosenthal said. "There's such a sense of history here, and that inspires you to go forward and push boundaries when you can understand that historical context. So you're not trying to be new just for the sake of being new."

But detractors counter that today's traditionalism is more about class than classicism. Instead of recalling the noble aims of the golden age of Mount Vernon and Monticello, classicism today, they say, seems more likely to recall the glory days of Anglo-American aristocracy, a Ralph Lauren version of architecture. One need only look at the limestone-columned, 28,000-square-foot behemoth built in Atlanta by the architect William H. Harrison to get the point.

It doesn't help that many of the institute's members have a knack for speaking in lofty, unbroken expanses of prose studded with arcane details, and its lectures may be the only Manhattan soirées with more bow ties than Botox.

Yet, traditional styles of house building are on the rise, according to the American Institute of Building Design, an association that represents architects and developers, and there are also new markets for metal- and stoneworking methods and materials once nearly defunct.

In upscale subdivisions across the country, for example, the Palladian window has become a prominent architectural feature, letting plenty of light into double-height living rooms, while still summoning up echoes, however murky, of early-19th-century gentility. But paired with an eyebrow window, an off-kilter gable or two and a rambling ranch floor plan, the traditional look becomes something very different: what might be called neo-hodgepodge.

"We were putting the columns in all goofy," said W. A. Lawrence, the owner of Period Style Homes, a large home-design firm based in Fort Myers, Fla., who has attended courses at the institute in New York and has helped arrange for it to give similar classes in Florida for the state builders association. "We had them drawn wrong, spaced wrong. Once you get it right, it's amazing how much better it looks. It's almost mind-blowing."

After the success in Florida, the institute formulated a separate program of classes for home builders, which began last year with a five weekend course in five cities across the South. The Endowment for the Arts helped pay for the program with a $30,000 grant.

The institute's successes do not rub everyone in design the right way. Some of the debate has, not surprisingly, taken on political overtones. One institute staff member said that shortly after he started working for it, he received a furious note from a friend accusing him of having become a neoconservative stooge. He asked not to be identified so as not to reopen a wound.

The dialogue does not often get that heated, but tensions do simmer. David Dowler, an amiable portfolio manager, hired the Florida-based Merrill & Pastor Architects to build a house for him and his wife, Marsha, in Highland Park, Tex., a 1920's-era subdivision just outside Dallas. The house, finished in 2002, was far from classical, a clean, angular white stucco structure reminiscent of the Arts and Crafts style. But to members of the Dallas Architectural Forum, a loose-knit group of architects and architecture fans, which convenes for functions and lectures, Mr. Dowler said, "I may be a dissident."

Mr. Dowler, who also owns a house in the new urbanist community of Seaside, Fla., added, "It's always modernists who come lecture, and I would like to see more exposure to other styles."

He is not, he said, a fan of many modern houses. "They are much better photographed than lived in," he said. "I get mad at architects who overemphasize how something looks rather than how something works as a home."

But others are quick to point out that nostalgia for 18th-century buildings may have more to do with unspoken nostalgia for the 18th century than for the building. "Reviving the classical forms is not the same thing as reviving the culture," said Terence Riley, the chief curator of architecture and design at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. A 2000 Georgian mansion might be impossible to differentiate from an 1800 one, but the social climates that created the two are two centuries apart.

The institute's brain trust, for its part, argues that traditionalist styles are inherently better models for builders because they do not require a talented, cerebral interpreter, just a good copying machine. "It may be easier for amateurs," Mr. Riley responded. "That said, I don't necessarily buy that argument. Turning a green field into suburban parcels with perfect classical houses, I would argue, doesn't give us anything remotely recognizable within the language of classical architecture."

"The contemporary city is messy," he added, summing up a century of modernist architectural theory. "I don't know if classicism makes a lot of sense, but everyone should study it"

They're going Palladian in the Poconos and Corinthian in Croton.

POST-STODGY A 28,000-square-foot house in Atlanta, top, by William H. Harrison, has limestone columns. An Arts andCrafts style house in Dallas, center, was designed by Merrill & Pastor. The owner, David Dowler, center right, says traditional houses function better than modernist ones. Above, a bedroom in Gil Schafer's Greenwich Village home has moldings and classical renderings. Right, members and staff of the Institute of Classical Architecture & Classical America in their new headquarters.

Metropolitan Museum of Art

A Blast From the Past, Courtesy of the Met

THE Metropolitan Museum of Art has given the Institute of Classical Architecture & Classical America 125 plaster casts of Greek, Roman, medieval and Renaissance statues, friezes, cornices and capitals. They will displayed at the institute's headquarters, 20 West 44th Street, in late March, complete with "a patina of dust," said Anne Walker, an architectural historian who helped choose them. In 1880 the Met "didn't have enough money to buy real works of art," said Elizabeth Milleker, a curator of Greek and Roman art. A panel — including Augustus Saint-Gaudens, Louis C. Tiffany and Stanford White — helped raise money to hire Edward Robinson, a Boston curator, who bought 2,600 plaster casts.

In World War II they went into storage. More recently, the museum started lending and giving them to institutions. (Information is available from Herbert Moskowitz, the Met's chief registrar, 212-650-2152.) The institute display will be open by appointment; (212) 730-9648.

ELAINE LOUIE