

PUBLIC LIVES

Old Buildings? He Loves Them and Their Values

By **CHRIS HEDGES**

IT is late afternoon in Greenwich Village, with gray storm clouds lowering over Manhattan and the tolling of the Jefferson Market clock heard through the open windows. On afternoons like this, when the sun is enveloped in haze and the city is caught in a reverent Sunday hush before evening, Paul Gunther likes to look at the federal-style facades of the brownstones along 10th Street, where he lives, finding comfort in their form. He leans out the window and points to the columns, the brick facades and the volutes, the ornamental scrolls that curl under the eaves of the houses.

"They have no structural utility," he said, "but see how they soften the roof line."

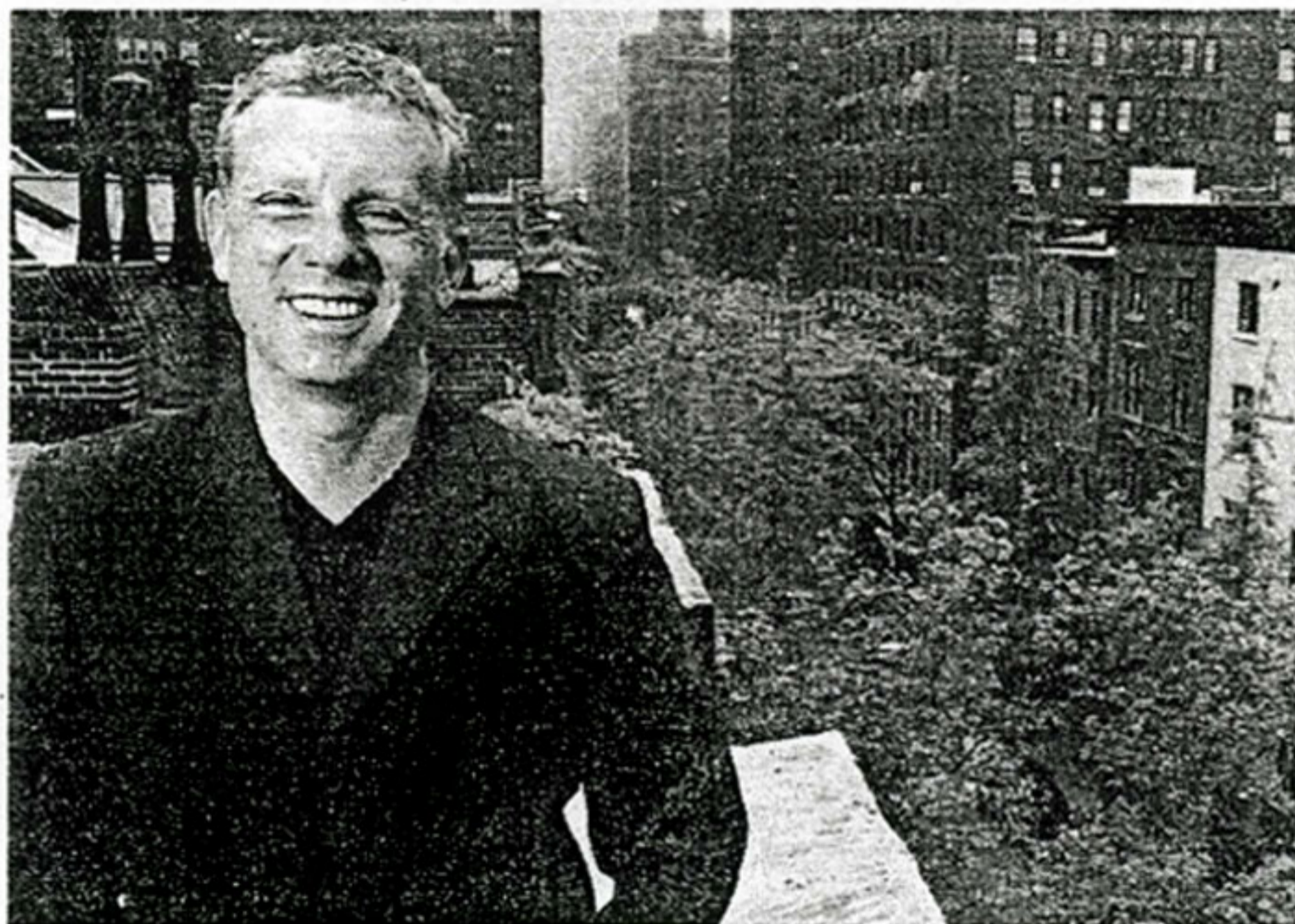
Mr. Gunther, 46, is the new president of the Institute of Classical Architecture and Classical America, two eccentric and dusty professional organizations that merged last year. It is his goal to elevate the institute into a front-line force, one that will make the case for classical discipline in architecture.

"Classical architecture is an important design tradition that has been dropped by the academy with the rise of modernism," he said on Sunday, in an interview the day before he stepped into his new job. "It is not taught in many architecture schools. It is a void we have stepped into. Imagine going to a music conservatory and never learning classical music, yet this has happened in architectural education."

The institute is now occupying temporary headquarters on Fifth Avenue until it can construct its own building or find one to buy, no doubt of classical design. Mr. Gunther said he planned to seek full academic accreditation for the courses the institute teaches and especially to open up many of the programs and activities to the general public, including lectures and walking tours.

"What is built is safer than it used to be," he said, "but what is at a risk is the continuity of knowledge, the instruction, the design vocabulary and the underlying values. This is what we will work to promote."

Mr. Gunther said he spent hours looking at the world around him. He revisits sites in the city,



Vincent Laforet/The New York Times

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PAUL GUNTHER

always finding new things, seeing the obscure touches labored over by architects and lost to those who rush past. In this he seeks the harmony and scale that ultimately connect us to one another and our environment. All this is captured, he said, in classical form and shape, and is often destroyed in the black glass and concrete of modernism.

The practice of looking was instilled in him at an early age, but not from looking at buildings.

HE says his powers of close observation are the result of a childhood spent bird watching with his parents. His father, a physicist, and his mother, who was an elected official in the town of Penfield, N.Y., outside Rochester, where he grew up, dragged him and his sister into the woods to record bird sightings. His parents, now retired, just returned from a bird-watching trip in the Everglades.

"You are endlessly staring when you are bird watching," he said, "and when you learn to watch birds closely you begin to watch the world closely. You learn to appreciate details and environment. I am a lazy bird watcher; this comes from having

parents who are so good. I could always ask them what bird it was rather than look it up in the guide. I never had to study the books. But as I get older, I begin to go home, to go back to it. I want to go to Costa Rica and maybe Manu in the Amazon. In Manu, one person spotted 1,100 birds in one day."

Mr. Gunther, who studied art history at Yale, is not an architect, but he has spent much of his professional life working for organizations that have fought to preserve the city's landmarks, including the effort to save and refurbish Grand Central Terminal. He most recently spent eight years at the New-York Historical Society, helping to resuscitate the museum after it had closed its doors to the public, and has also worked at the Municipal Art Society and the Department of Cultural Affairs in New York.

He mourns the loss of Pennsylvania Station, "the city's classical masterpiece," and shudders at the cold, raw line of glass and steel buildings that run along Sixth Avenue and the "anonymous towers along Third Avenue." Not surprisingly, he loves the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which he calls "grand and welcoming," and the New York Public Library, which he can describe right down to the details on the lampposts.

"If you look at Fifth Avenue you can see similar limestone buildings, and this is a classical value," he said, "but in the last 20 years this has been disturbed by black glass towers that break this line."

Still, he was noncommittal whenever the conversation turned to the design chosen for the site of the World Trade Center.

In a follow-up telephone call, he said he had "no problem" with Daniel Libeskind's building. He added that he was hoping the memorial would be "influenced by classical design and the values it represents."

For Mr. Gunther, classical architecture is about "the continuity of knowledge" and "integrating us with our environment."

"There are a set of values that inform classical architecture and the allied arts," he said. "These include the human form, the human body, the human scale. It is about rationality and proportion."