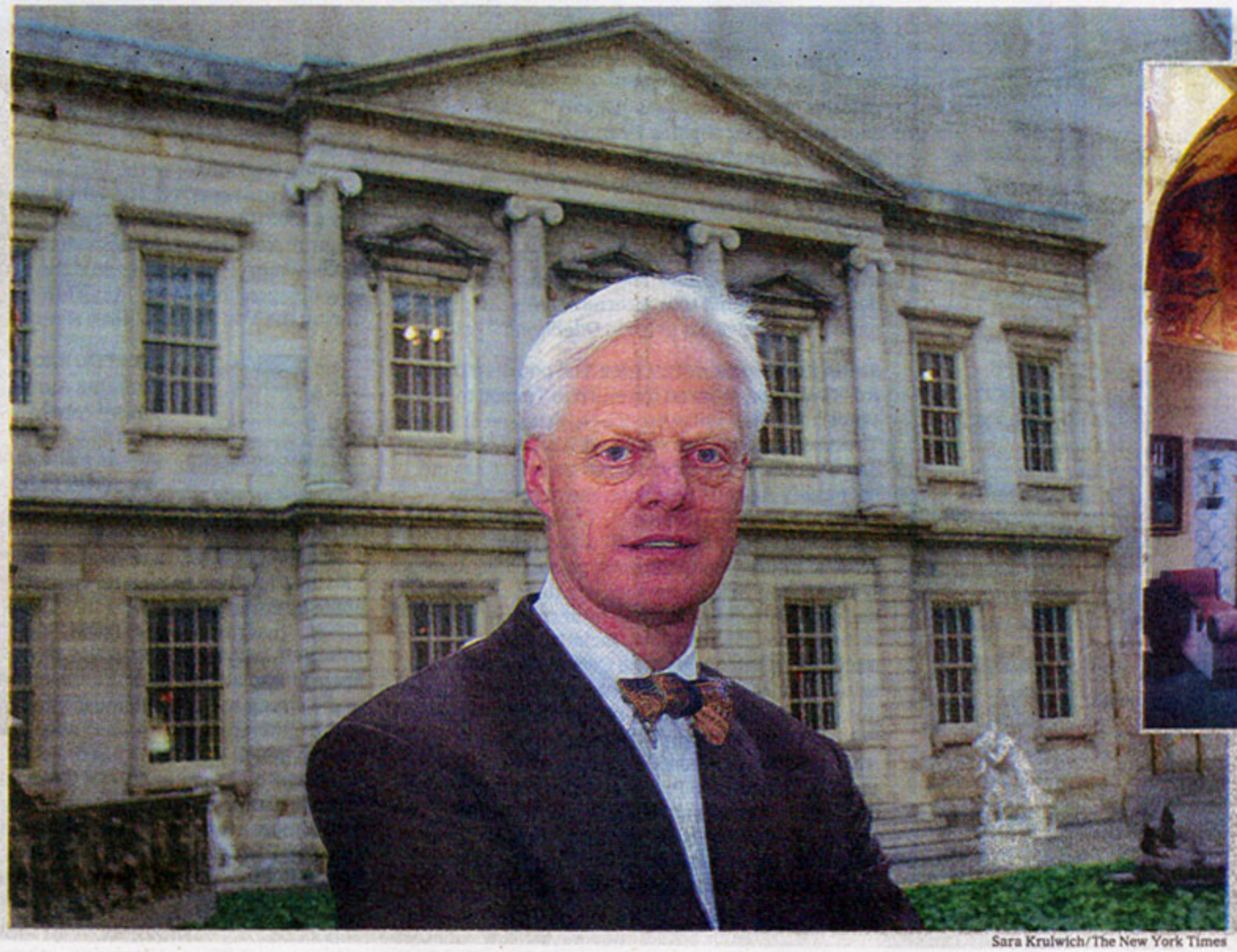


Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Alan McIntyre Smith/Thomas Gordon Smith Architects

Thomas Gordon Smith, left, in front of a neo-Classical facade at the Metropolitan Museum, and an interior, above, of his Vitruvian House in South Bend, Ind.

Giving Neo-Classical a Little More Neo

An Architect Who Quietly Battles Trends Finds That He Nearly Is One

By DEBORAH BALDWIN

When Thomas Gordon Smith comes to New York, it's not to see Times Square or the latest store in SoHo designed by Rem Koolhaas but to revisit a stretch of dingy gray buildings on Lafayette Street in the East Village.

One blustery morning, as others scurried by the pitted facade and warped windowpanes, Mr. Smith, a classical scholar, architect and consultant to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, paused to relish Corinthian columns as far gone as three-week old celery stalks.

He poked his head into the doorway of a building where "Blue Man Group" has been playing for over a decade and admired the worn marble floor. He conjured up the elegant front gardens that made this development, called La Grange Terrace, a destination when it was built in the early 1830's at the city's fashionable northernmost edge.

"Buildings of this caliber are unusual for any time," he said, calling it "a crystallization of classical ideals and proportion" and the young architects who designed it "a fulcrum of modern style at the time."

From Mr. Smith's point of view, the 1830's were modern only yesterday. His mentor is Vitruvius, the Daniel Libeskind of Rome in the first century B.C.

New York could use more of neo-Classicism's "stability, balance and harmony," the mild-mannered Mr. Smith said pointedly over huevos rancheros at the Time Cafe near La Grange in an 1880's building with its own brace of Corinthian columns. Tall and erect with white hair, blue eyes, a silk bow tie and a voice as clear as spring water, Mr. Smith, 55, has a demeanor that does not suggest a celebrity architect.

His specialty is quietly battling trends. While high culture often demands the shock of the new, and mainstream home builders erect endless variations on faux traditional, he builds houses, civic buildings and the occasional monastery with the irony-free rigor of an ancient.

During the 1980's Mr. Smith's designs were so iconoclastic that he had a hard time paying the rent.

Continued on Page 5

Giving the Neo-Classical Just a Little More Neo

Continued From First Arts Page

But today New York is having a mini-Classical revival, thrusting him into the warmth of a small big-city spotlight.

Fans include Peter M. Kenny, a curator of American decorative arts at the Metropolitan Museum, who has hired him to help create a fresh space for early 19th-century furnishings in the American wing, and Stuart P. Feld, owner of Hirschl & Adler Galleries.

"I went to see La Grange Terrace with Thomas and Peter, and it's extraordinary," said Mr. Feld, who said there was a growing market in the New York area for furnishings made from 1815 to 1845. "What I love," he added, "is the surviving Greek Revival houses that sprinkle lower Manhattan. It gives a wonderful sense of what this city was like."

Paul Gunther, president of the New York-based Institute of Classical Architecture and Classical America, is, not surprisingly, a fan, too. "A hero in our midst," he said, introducing Mr. Smith when he lectured on Vitruvius at the new Dahesh Museum of Art on Madison Avenue in January.

A small crowd in the gift shop touched off a run on Mr. Smith's book "Vitruvius on Architecture," a lushly illustrated translation of Vitruvius's advice to young architects, just out from the Monacelli Press.

While classical-style architecture was relegated to many architects' back shelf, designs for civic and ecclesiastical buildings kept Mr. Smith and his three-person firm afloat. He is now working with some French Benedictine monks on a monastery to be built near Tulsa, Okla. Its classical design was modified under gentle pressure from the clients into a building that Mr. Smith gamely describes as more Romanesque.

Mr. Smith was trained as an artist and earned his architecture degree at the University of California, Berkeley. He had a short flirtation with postmodernism but soon dropped it, and in 1989, after a stint at the University of Illinois, became chairman of the University of Notre Dame architecture school. (He stepped down in 1998 but remains a professor there.)

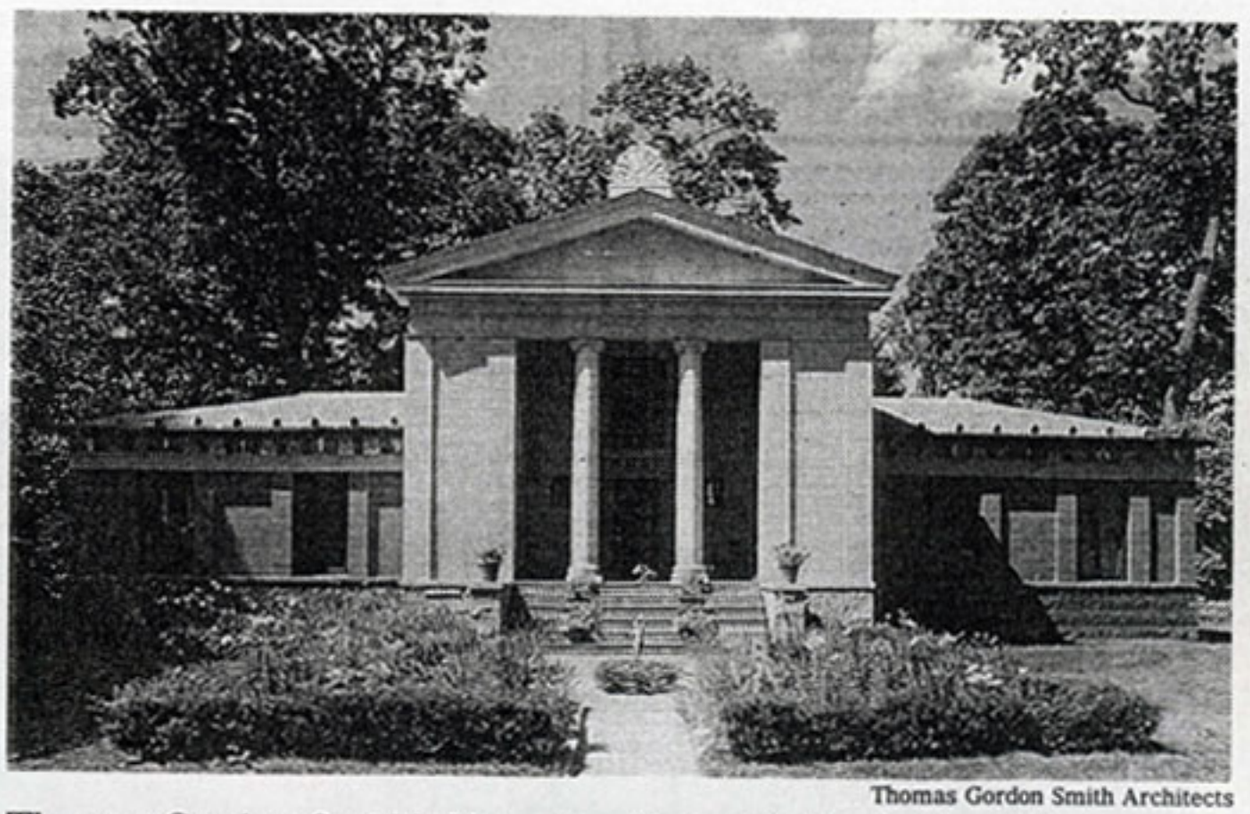
In South Bend, Ind., where he lives with his wife, Marika, and the youngest of their six children, he has built a house with Ionic columns and Doric wings and a vaulted living room, which he painted with murals of bearded men in tunics, top hats and other historical garb. "Architects and their patrons," he explained. The paintings are formal but with a respectful wit, as if the subjects were gently mocking their creator.

French Benedictine monks pushed for the Romanesque.

Before that, Mr. Smith, built another small contemporary classical home for his family in Richmond, Calif., in 1982, a house that Robert A. M. Stern, dean of the Yale School of Architecture, called transfixing.

To Mr. Stern, Mr. Smith's interpretation of classical design is "free and fresh." He said that Mr. Smith, who turned the Notre Dame architecture school into a center for the study of Vitruvian principles, "put that school solidly on the map."

Some say orderly design strikes deep chords, counteracting a contemporary case of the nerves with a little visual Paxil. Another explanation for its appeal is universal exposure to those mimeographed sheets in fifth grade comparing Doric, Corinthian and Ionic capitals.



Thomas Gordon Smith Architects

Thomas Gordon Smith's Vitruvian House in South Bend, Ind.

Clem Labine, founder of Traditional Building magazine (and before that Old House Journal), declares that classicism is the next retro thing. "The early modernists were trained in this, and early modernism had a rigorous symmetrical look," he said. He has added classical touches to his own meticulous Park Slope Victorian, including a bas relief by Mr. Smith, whom Mr. Labine calls one of the 15 most influential forces in traditional design in the last 15 years.

Mr. Smith described La Grange Terrace as a touchstone for the project at the American wing, a way to get him thinking about the right context for a collection of neo-Classical works. He would clearly love to get his hands on a larger piece of New York real estate.

"We've had a hundred years now of modernism, and many of us are feeling that this is not a necessary fixture of our time," he said, adding that classical architecture offers wholeness and "a solidity that would give us a sense of construction, not deconstruction."

As for ground zero, he dislikes the plans, saying the site has become a showcase for celebrity architects driven by current cultural imperatives to translate communal grief into a commemoration of individual loss. He describes the proposed designs generally as shards.

Christine G. H. Franck, a New York designer who studied under Mr. Smith, says that young classicists are reacting against cityscapes "that are ugly and disjointed and sad."

"The real people who live in cities," she said, "have a need to understand the architecture that surrounds them. To celebrate chaos instead of order makes no sense." Contemporary classicism, she added, is conceived by architects who have vigore mobili, a Vitruvian phrase that Mr. Smith delights in translating as lively mental energy.

Ms. Franck, who embraced classicism when it was largely shunned, says job opportunities are expanding for designers grounded in the field. "It is vastly different now as far as the number of people practicing and the things being built," she said.

And at the Classical Institute, where membership has doubled in just a year, she said, classes are attracting more and more real estate agents and developers whose clients crave something more authentic than faux Colonials and poorly proportioned McMansions.