The Devoted Classicist . . . . . . . John J Tackett . . . . . . . Classic Residential Design

Friday, August 1, 2014

Gracie Mansion

John J. Tackett

With a Bachelor of Architecture degree and further training with remarkable employers, not the least being the legendary interiors firm, Parish-Hadley, I founded my own multi-faceted studio in 1987, John Tackett Design. Classic residential projects -- new houses and renovations -- have been completed nationwide: Lake Vermillion, MN, to Palm Beach, FL, and Mount Desert Island, ME, to Pebble Beach, CA. Collaborations are welcome.

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BLOG ARCHIVE

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There has been a storm of Sharknado intensity in the social media this week about the donation of $65,000 worth of furniture from the mall/mail-order store West Elm for Gracie Mansion, the official residence of the mayor of the City of New York. Attention-getting headlines such as this one from Curbed New York, “De Blassios Swap 300-Year-Old Antiques for West Elm at Gracie,” incited indignation that the comparatively uncouth new First Family of NYC would not appreciate the relatively lavish refurnishing undertaken during the Bloomberg years, all paid for by private sources including a significant amount donated by Bloomberg personally. But it must be noted that the West Elm furnishings were for the private quarters of the residence and were given to the Gracie Mansion Conservancy, the non-profit group that supports the historic and decorative aspects of the property.

The Gracie Mansion Conservancy was founded in 1981 at the start of a $5.5 million renovation that was carried out 1981 to 1984 during the administration of Ed Koch. Two interior designers at their peak of popularity, Albert Hadley of Parish-Hadley Associates and Mark Hampton of Mark Hampton LLC, were invited to donate their services to decorate the mansion. Albert was to create a viable décor for the public rooms in the historic part of the house, essentially the Entrance Hall, Parlor, Sitting Room and Dining Room in addition to the State Guest Room suite. Mark was to decorate the Visitor’s Entrance Hall, the Banquet Hall, and the Ballroom, all in the 1966 addition designed by architect Mott B. Schmidt and named in honor of former Mayor Robert Wagner, Susan, who had worked towards the creation of the wing but died before it was completed.
I worked at Parish-Hadley in the 1980s and assisted Mr. Hadley in the aspects of the Gracie Mansion project that required architectural input from designing the improvements to the State Guest Suite to locating electrical outlets and reviewing construction plans as they impacted the interior design. The sketch titled “The Hall” above may or may not have been intended for Gracie Mansion but it is indicative of the drawings Mr. Hadley used to convey his ideas for committee approval and stir up support from his deep-pocketed friends. And it is from the same time period as his involvement at Gracie Mansion.

Although Mr. Hadley was not opposed to painting the floor in two tones of gray as a checkerboard, the results as carried out under the direction of the Conservancy (and executed by a compensated family member of the committee) were too theatrical, including the marbleizing of the stair risers (painted out in a later refurbishing) and the non-relating compass star.
Albert Hadley’s concept for the furnishing of Gracie Mansion was not unlike that carried out for the second floor rooms at the White House for the Kennedys that he had worked on twenty years before with Sister Parish, later becoming her business partner in the legendary firm Parish-Hadley Associates. The idea was to take some historic pieces of Mid-Atlantic, if not New York, origin of the late 18th and early 19th century and supplement them with quality new furniture and comfortable upholstery to allow these rooms to be realistically used on both daily and official entertaining occasions, not a museum setting despite the historic nature of the mansion. It was not unlike how the Kennedys used the Yellow Oval Room, Family Dining Room and the adjacent hallways in the White House, decorated to be attractive enough for distinguished guests but comfortable enough for family use.

Despite being known later as the Albert Hadley Refurnishing of the historic part of the mansion, very little of the work he proposed was actually realized. Although Mark Hampton seemed to have fared better in the Wagner Wing, the Conservancy committee approved but prevented most of Albert Hadley’s contributions from being realized. The Dining Room was the one space where Mr. Hadley’s ideas were clearly evident. All the furnishings were donated by Hadley supporters including the scenic wallpaper. Among Albert’s own donations, in addition to his time, were the simple gauze curtains hung from stamped gilt metal valances; the committee
fought him on those, insisting much more formal window treatments would be better suited for the room. The final straw was the fitted carpet; the multi-colored striped carpet had been selected for the adjacent sitting room and a durable dark green moire-patterned plush-cut carpet was specified for the Dining Room. When the carpet company brought the goods (donated because of Mr. Hadley) to be installed, some ladies of the committee made a last-minute Executive Decision to switch the goods as the rooms were of similar size and the striped carpet could be stretched a bit to make up the difference. Since there was not any patterned fabric in the room, they thought the more colorful carpet was better. By the end of the day, Albert Hadley officially resigned from the effort and the committee was left to ‘play house’ as it wished.

Despite press reports to the contrary, Mayor Ed Koch did not live in Gracie Mansion on a regular basis, preferring his rent-controlled apartment in Greenwich Village. A rule that allows that the only overnight guests may be the immediate members of the First Family and the official guests of the City of New York prevented Mayors Giuliani and Bloomberg from cohabitating there with their girlfriends. Mayor Bloomberg did contribute some of his own funds, however, to the $7 million restoration in 2002 with the interior design carried out by his decorator of choice, Jamie Drake. Those interiors may be seen as photographed by Architectural Digest here.
More can be read about the history of Gracie Mansion on John Foreman's Big Old Houses blog [here](#) and on the official website of the City of New York [here](#). In summary, the mayors bring their own furniture for their private rooms and it looks like the Gracie Mansion Conservancy arranged for this donation by West Elm to supplement the De Blassios' belongings although the furniture officially belongs to the Conservancy.

**SUNDAY, JULY 3, 2011**

**Villages of Coral Gables**

The Devoted Classicist cannot move on without presenting one more of the many fabulous historic aspects of Coral Gables, Florida. As mentioned in the previous post on Venetian Pool, George Merrick began to realize his City Beautiful vision of a Mediterranean style community in 1921 with the help of a team of architects, artists, and landscape architects. Merrick relinquished some control, however, in 1925 by deeding over 100 building lots to the American Building Corporation, and investment group based in Cincinnati, Ohio, and former Ohio Governor Myers Cooper. A series of as many as twenty period revival theme villages were considered with a thousand residences. But fewer than 80 were ultimately constructed in six villages. The 1926 hurricane and the depression that followed ended Merrick's dream and, heavily in debt, he was removed from the Coral Gables commission.
My favorite is the French City Village designed by Mott Schmidt because it is such a successful semi-urban enclave. Schmidt partnered with Anderson Fowler, a New Jersey developer and attorney, to create a contiguous but slightly varied group of small classical villas with walled gardens and garages in an interpretation of the eighteenth century French style.

Consisting of a total of eleven original lots on a block bordered by Hardee Road on the south, Cellini on the east, Cotorro on the north, and Leonardo on the west, the houses form a desirable grouping that anticipated the “townhouse” developments that started becoming popular forty years later. The corner garden pavilions which appear as gate houses are an especially nice touch.

New houses in a sympathetic design have now filled in the remaining lots, except for 1042 Cotorro Avenue; it is listed for sale for $790,000 and includes a design for a small villa in the same style of the neighboring houses.
The Devoted Classicist is enamored of the abandoned shell at 1032 Cotorro at the intersection with Leonardo Street. (Early readers of this blog might recall some coincidental similarities to the new house by John Tackett Design featured in the December 19, 2010, post of The Devoted Classicist). The classic proportions and siting so close to the sidewalk are noteworthy; despite the current condition, it is a wonderful semi-urban house. The real estate ad notes that it is a Short Sale, subject to bank approval; the listed price is $1,550,000 as is.
The house at the corner of Hardee and Leonardo, 1033 Hardee Road is listed for sale at $2,495,000. (See the July 4, 2011, post of My Little Housing Blog, linked in the Blog Roll on the right margin of this page, for more photos). And 1013 Hardee is listed for $1,095,000. More information on these property listings can be found by a Google search of the address.
A view along Leonardo Street showing No. 6105 on the left, and 1033 Hardee on the right.

Photo: John J Tackett for The Devoted Classicist blog.

1013 and 1009 Hardee Road, Coral Gables.

Photo: John J Tackett for The Devoted Classicist blog.

1025 and 1021 Hardee Road, Coral Gables.

Photo: John J Tackett for The Devoted Classicist blog.
1001 Hardee Road, Coral Gables.
Photo: John J Tackett for The Devoted Classicist blog.

The “Gate House” garden pavilion at 1001 Hardee Road.
Photo: John J Tackett for The Devoted Classicist blog.

The ground floor plan of 6105 Leonardo Street.
Drawing: Mark Alan Hewitt, THE ARCHITECTURE OF MOTT B SCHMIDT.
The floor plans of the houses are variations of a common theme. They all were designed with the ground floor to have an entrance hall with stairs, an adjacent vestibule with coat closet and powder room, a living room with a fireplace, a dining room, a serving pantry, a service porch, at least one small porch suitable for entertaining, and two servant's rooms sharing a bath. No second floor plans were available, but the original scheme was smaller than the ground floor footprint; my guess is that there were usually three bedrooms and two baths upstairs.
Nearby, Phillip Lippincott Goodwin was the architect of the French Provincial Village. It has some charming houses, but the development lacks the cohesive quality that helps make Schmidt's block so successful. Goodwin teamed with Henry Killam Murphy to co-author the 1924 book *French Provincial Architecture* which proved to be an inspiration for houses around the country. Murphy designed a development in Coral Gables as well; his Chinese Village is surely one of the most exotic examples of 1920s residential architecture in the whole country.

The other unique development that sparks my imagination is the Dutch South African Village by architect Marion Sym Syms Wyeth. The white stucco walls, shaped gables, and twisted column chimneys are delightful.
All these unique homes are cherished today and any proposed renovation must keep the integrity of the original design. The City of Coral Gables Historic Committee reviews all plans for the required approvals prior to issuing permits for construction.

For more information on the architect Mott Schmidt, see *The Architecture of Mott B Schmidt* by Mark Alan Hewitt, the source for the measured drawings and historic photos shown in this post. It was published by Rizzoli in 1991.

*A special thanks to Ian MacDougald for his expert navigation and driving in taking The Devoted Classicist to these locations.*