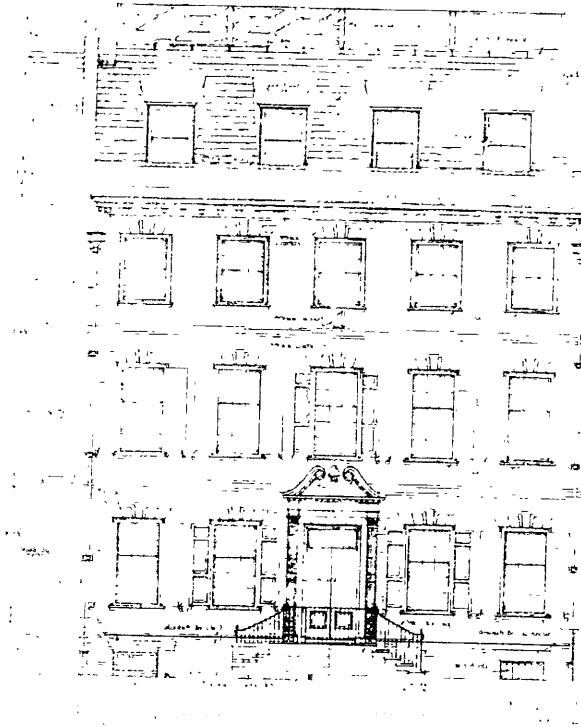


Mott B. Schmidt:
An Architectural Portrait

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National Academy of Design
1083 Fifth Avenue at 89th Street

Acknowledgements

Mott B. Schmidt: An Architectural Portrait, was organized by the Katonah Gallery and was on view from January 20 to March 2. So great was the success of the exhibition in Katonah that a location was sought in New York. Philip Johnson, whose *Appreciation* appears in this booklet, kindly suggested the National Academy of Design. The National Academy has had architect members since its founding in 1825, and Mott Schmidt was one. In addition, architecture has been one of the four principal concerns of the Academy—both in exhibitions and in its School of Fine Arts—so the Academy was a felicitous choice.

The National Academy wants to thank the originators of the exhibition from the Katonah Gallery: Lucie Campbell, Deborah McCain, Joan Wessel, their designer Shiela Zelermyer, and their photographer Alexandra Conway. Louis Schreider, whose great interest is architecture, brought the idea of the exhibition to New York, and brought as well his unbounded enthusiasm. Philip Johnson, and Erin Drake and Christopher Gray kindly allowed their statements to be included; and Henry Hope Reed, as president of Classical America, prepared a special text *Mott B. Schmidt, The Man and His Work*. The lenders, whose names appear below, agreed to extend the loan of their material and in doing so permitted a stop at the National Academy. For this we are very grateful.

John H. Dobkin
Director

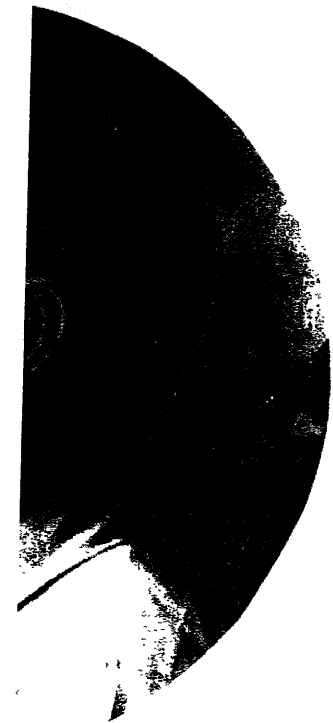


Pencil drawing of a door
Collection of Mrs. Katharine T. Schmidt

ers to the Exhibition:

Architectural Library, Columbia University
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Katonah Gallery
Arts Commission
Museum of the City of New York
Nargusian
Mrs. Roger C. Ravel
Mrs. Katharine T. Schmidt
in Accents Magazine



M.B. DeMonvel
New York

An Appreciation

Mott Schmidt, who I am glad I could call a friend, was the last of the academic Georgian architects of our time. I say academic because after him came either mere epigones or the revolutionary "post-Moderns" who may use Georgian forms, but deliberately, for other purposes than Revivalism, or accuracy of detailing, or similarity of forms.

I am personally acquainted with but a handful of his works, but they all have the stamp of sincerity, the mastery of form. Maybe the best known to most of us friends of architecture is the wing of Gracie Mansion where many New Yorkers attend the Mayor's parties. The entry and staircase are domestically scaled. It is the "Mayor's House." The big salon on the other hand is a party room; its scale is party-like, the windows are party-like. But it all fits. One shudders to think what a "modern" architect would have done in that gracious park.

The Gracie Mansion Annex is a late work. We can sense Mott's steadfastness and breadth when this is compared with an early house like the Vanderbilt house on Sutton Place. The same fitness to the needs, the same comfortable scale, the same detailing in the 1920's as in the 1960's.

Mott Schmidt's career was a fitting culmination of the chain of "Georgians" beginning in the '80's with Stanford White's tentative Taylor House in Newport, through the great 20th century architects, William Delano and Charles Platt, and

ending only with the death of our contemporary Mott Schmidt himself.

In spite of the Georgian flavor of his buildings, however, he was a most functional and meticulous planner. He did not shoehorn his clients into a symmetrical "Georgian" plan. Clients could always get those stairways, hallways, libraries where they needed them. In a day of functionalism, Mott was a functionalist.

Mott Schmidt was a man of his time who, I am glad to say, lived long enough to see the tastes of a new generation come full circle from the Modern Movement to a new sympathy, nay empathy, with his own work.

Philip Johnson



Mott B. Schmidt by Louis M B DeMonvel
Museum of the City of New York

Mott B. Schmidt: The Man and His Work

Perhaps the most extraordinary aspect of the classical tradition in these United States is that it has survived at all. Attacked, mocked, starved continuously now for fifty years it is still with us. Admittedly it remains confined to architecture. No matter. It is still there.

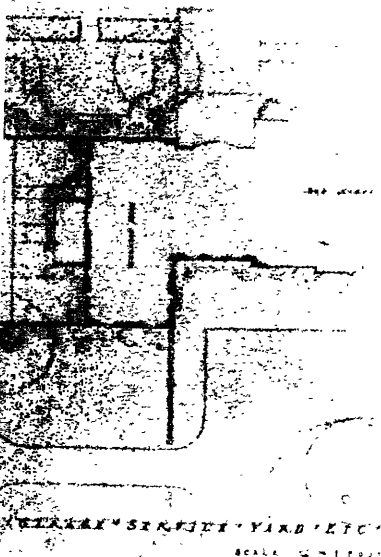
Now some might object, that after all, the classical is the main artistic current of Western civilization and that, therefore, it would survive inevitably. A possible argument, but if you look abroad, at France and Italy for example, the classical as a live artistic instrument can hardly be found. The same is true in England. Only in this country has it remained alive. The explanation is not hard to find. Let fashion seekers rage on all sides, let trendy editors headline the novelties, let the clerks of university and college see progress in every clenched fist of artistic rebellion, let the artistic winds and water-storm, but to a man like the late Mott B. Schmidt they were as nothing. Again, it might be asked how he and the classical architects of his generation, and for that matter those of today, were able to withstand the anti-classical storm. He did so because he accepted the art of architecture as existing only in terms of an age-old tradition. Mott Schmidt was not about to invent the wheel of architecture. Others had gone before him. He saw himself as an artist following a grand tradition.

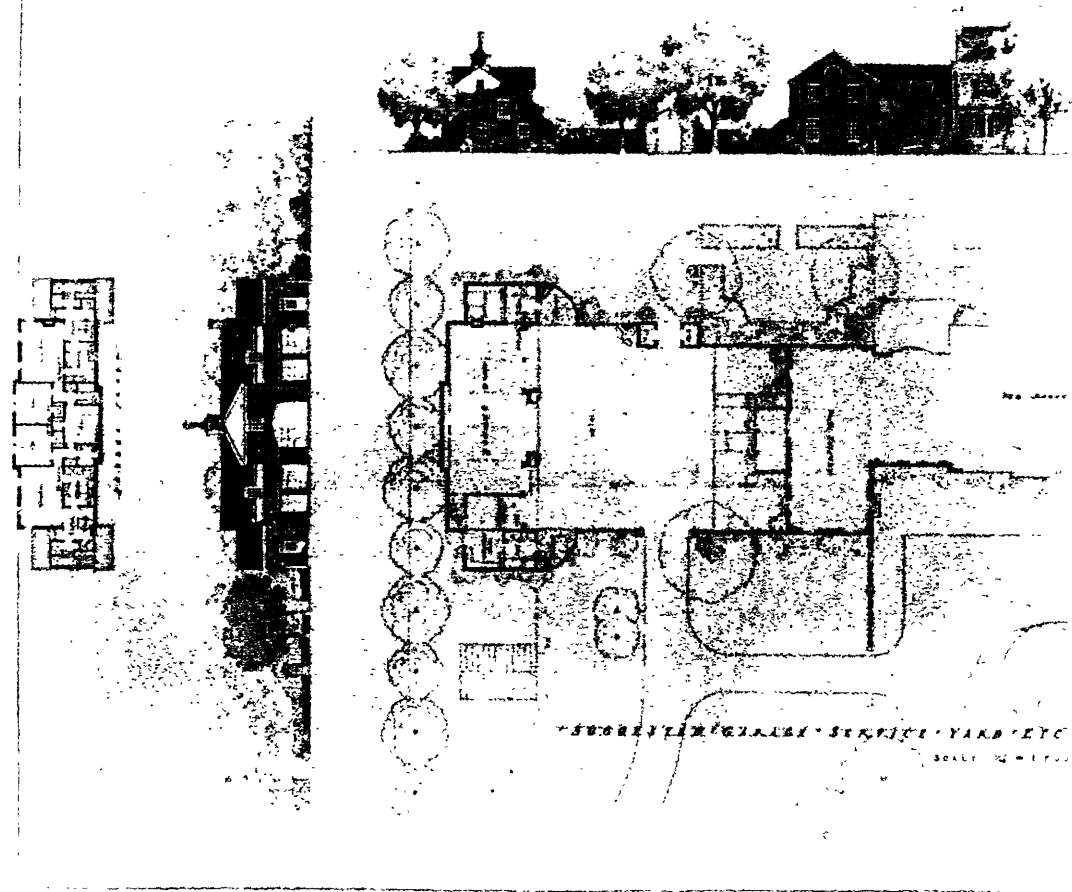
There was a solid base of common sense in Mott Schmidt's attitude to artistic novelty. John Rus-

kin—a most unlikely source one might think—best conveyed that grasp of reality in an address to some young architects bent on inventing a new style. "... May I ask them first," said he in 1857, "whether their plan is that every inventive architect among us shall invent a new style for himself and have a country set aside for his conceptions, or a province for his practice? ... I will grant you this Eldorado of imagination—but can you have more than one Columbus? Or, if you sail in company, and divide the prize of your discovery and the honour thereof, who is to come after your clustered Columbuses? ... When your desired style is invented, will not the best we can all do be simply - to build in it?—and cannot you now do that in styles that are known?"

While the "clustered Columbuses" sailed off in search of their new styles, Mott Schmidt simply abided by the classical, dominant when he began to practice architecture around 1910. To say "classical" is not quite sufficient as it comprises a wide range. He opted for that part of it generally called "Georgian," a term which includes our Colonial, the Adam Style and other styles of the English 18th century.

With the coming of that great flourish of the classical which goes by the name of the American Renaissance—it sprang from the patronage of the Vanderbilt family in the early 1880s—the Georgian was little known. To be sure, in 1877, Charles Follen McKim, Stanford White and William Rutherford Mead, soon to become





Plan for a house in Grosse Pointe, Michigan
Collection of Mrs. Katharine T. Schmidt

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gness to welcome the painter on Schmidt's

part is to be underscored. The best known of the
artists who worked with him is Allyn Cox, N.A.,
who is at present completing a mural for the
House Wing of the National Capitol.

Mott Schmidt also did a large number of country
houses. The two-story Georgian house of brick
with slate roof, often with one-story wings,
might be said to be his standard model. He
brought to them that sense of proportion,
thoroughness in detail and sound knowledge of
style found in his town houses. He also did sev-
eral apartment houses. One of them, at 19 East
72nd Street, was even Modernistic, and he han-
dled this alien style with his accustomed skill. Of
these apartment buildings, 1088 Park Avenue at
89th Street ranks among the finest in a city
which long ago set an international standard for
the building type. The rusticated entrance, the
U-shaped plan, the fenestration (court side) of
the ground floor hall, a Vignolesque fountain in
the courtyard, as well as the practical and easy
disposition of the rooms within each apartment,
show that here, also, Mott Schmidt was in his
element.

One recent work of our architect deserves more
than a passing glance, the Susan B. Wagner
Wing of Gracie Mansion, the Mayor's Residence
in Carl Schurz Park. It was a design which re-
quired the utmost architectural tact, if I may
adopt such a phrase. In an age not known for
architectural good manners, it was essential that
an addition to what was originally a modest
country house should be at once dignified and
unobtrusive. Working with John Barrington
Bayley and the late James Grote Van Derpool of

the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission,
Mott Schmidt produced the clapboard-sided
annex with its handsome ballroom.

In 1959 Mott Schmidt married Mrs. Katharine
Lapsley Stone. He remained as busy as ever.
Other than the addition to Gracie mansion, he
obtained commissions for several large country
houses as well as for smaller ones. He continued
as always, if at a more leisurely pace, almost to
his death in 1977.

Admirers of Mott Schmidt's work have been sin-
gularly fortunate in that so many of his houses
have escaped the iron ball. What is more they
have been lovingly maintained for the most part.
Where the work of his compeers and of a later
generation (the "clustered Columbus") has be-
come dated, his has withstood time admirably.
His career is good proof of Oscar Wilde's
apothegm: "Nothing is more dangerous than
being too modern, one can grow old-fashioned
quite suddenly."

Henry Hope Reed
President
Classical America

partners, had made their famous trip through New England on which they discovered what came to be known as "Colonial." But it was not until the 1890's that some architects began to adopt the Georgian. A decade later even Horace Trumbauer of Philadelphia, who worked chiefly in the French 18th-century mode, had designed a Georgian house. Soon other firms such as Delano & Aldrich, York & Sawyer, Charles Adams Platt leaned to the style. Mott Schmidt found it the most congenial, and so did wealthy New Yorkers tired of brownstone fronts, Renaissance palaces, and Romanesque keeps. The young architect came on the scene at the right moment.

Mott B. Schmidt was born in Middletown, New York, in 1889 and raised in Brooklyn. He went to Pratt Institute, graduating in 1906. Several years abroad, then work with a New York architect followed, and in 1912 he had his own office. As was customary, and still is, the first jobs of the beginner were alterations.

A major break for Schmidt occurred directly after the Great War with the development of what is now Sutton Place, then known simply as part of Avenue A near East 57th Street. Miss Elisabeth Marbury, probably America's first important literary agent, had discovered a sedate row of brownstone houses in what was then a quarter given over to breweries, furniture manufacturing and cigar making. Buying one house for herself she persuaded several friends, among them Miss Anne Morgan and Mrs. William K. Vanderbilt, to buy others. Through the well-known firm of Elsie de Wolfe, which was in charge of the decorating, Mott Schmidt was re-

tained as architect. As the houses remain largely unchanged on the exterior it is easy to identify the Schmidt style of brick with some stone trim, windows with small panes, entrances with subtle classical detail, all pleasing variations on the Georgian theme.

The connection with the decorating firm not only led to his executing plans for this cluster of houses but to his meeting his first wife, Elena Bachman, who worked for Miss de Wolfe. (They had one child, a daughter, who died young. The first Mrs. Schmidt died in 1956.)

Mott Schmidt was now launched. Good examples of his subsequent work are to be found on the south side of 80th Street between Park and Lexington Avenues. Probably his finest town house, designed for Vincent Astor at Number 130, is here. Executed in a beautiful limestone with the front divided by Ionic pilasters supporting a cornice, attic and pediment, it shows something of the influence of Robert Adam, the Scottish architect who captured London in the 1760's. Also, the Ionic porch is to be noticed. Those privileged to see the interior—the building is now occupied by the Junior League of New York—will see excellent examples of Schmidt's handling of space and of interior detail.

One distinction of Mott Schmidt's which is sometimes overlooked was his ability to persuade the client to have some mural decoration. As the general absence of mural work in American buildings, especially houses, is notorious, this willingness to welcome the painter on Schmidt's

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Mott B. Schmidt: His City Houses

Mott B. Schmidt was born in 1889 in Middletown, New York, but grew up in Brooklyn. His father, Edward Mott Schmidt, was of artistic inclination and the younger Schmidt was interested in architecture from an early age. Setting up a private practice around 1912, he designed city and country houses almost exclusively until his death in 1977.

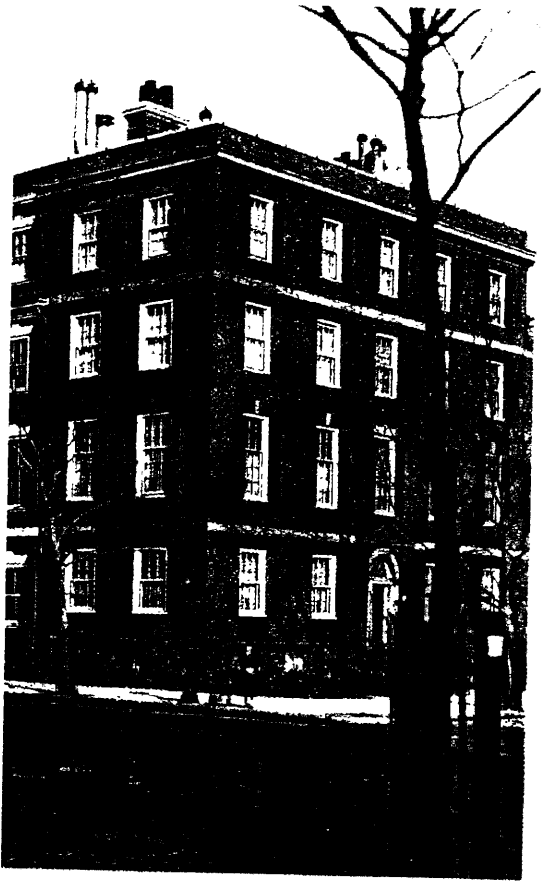
You see, I wanted to be an artist, and I also wanted to go into business. Business has always been one of the most romantic things in the world to me. So I went into architecture, where art and business are linked.

So said Mott Schmidt in a 1921 interview. After his graduation from the Pratt Institute in 1906, Mr. Schmidt travelled abroad for two years, and then worked in an unidentified New York architectural office until 1912, when he left to set up his own practice. Apparently his earliest works were brownstone alterations for friends near his parents' home in Brooklyn, but his oldest identified extant work is the 1917* alteration to the Grenville T. Emmet house at 39 East 63rd Street. He kept on with these house alterations until the early 1920's, when he was able to concentrate on completely new urban and country houses. From 1930 until his death in 1977, his work was a steady three to ten commissions a year of country houses and individual apartment alterations. Although he occasionally designed some non-residential work like the warehouse at 185 Cherry Street in New York City (c. 1920's),

the Municipal Building in Mount Kisco (1931), and the acclaimed Gracie Mansion Annex (1965), Mr. Schmidt always considered himself a domestic architect.

Grenville T. Emmet, Jr., remembers that he was "someone that people liked to be around. . . . He had a great sense of taste and proportion; there was never anything cheap about what he did." Allyn Cox, the noted muralist, who worked with Mr. Schmidt on a number of projects, remembers him as a "man of enormous charm" who also was able to quickly and accurately define the final cost of any size project or change, an area of chronic difficulty for most architects.

The acceptance of the multiple dwelling by the bulk of the upper classes (c. 1910-1920) meant the obsolescence of the single family dwelling. As soon as a 100' square site could accommodate 40 or 50 families rather than 5 or 6, the rise in land values made large scale construction of private houses comparatively rare after 1920. The few that were built were concentrated in the hands of specialists who were equipped (and inclined) to take on this limited, nearly antiquarian practice. After 1920, Delano & Aldrich, Charles Platt, Frederick Sterner, and Mott Schmidt formed a core group of New York architects who did not take an interest in the "general work" of the time, that is, tall apartments and commercial buildings, but instead concentrated on private domestic architecture, never before so specialized a field.

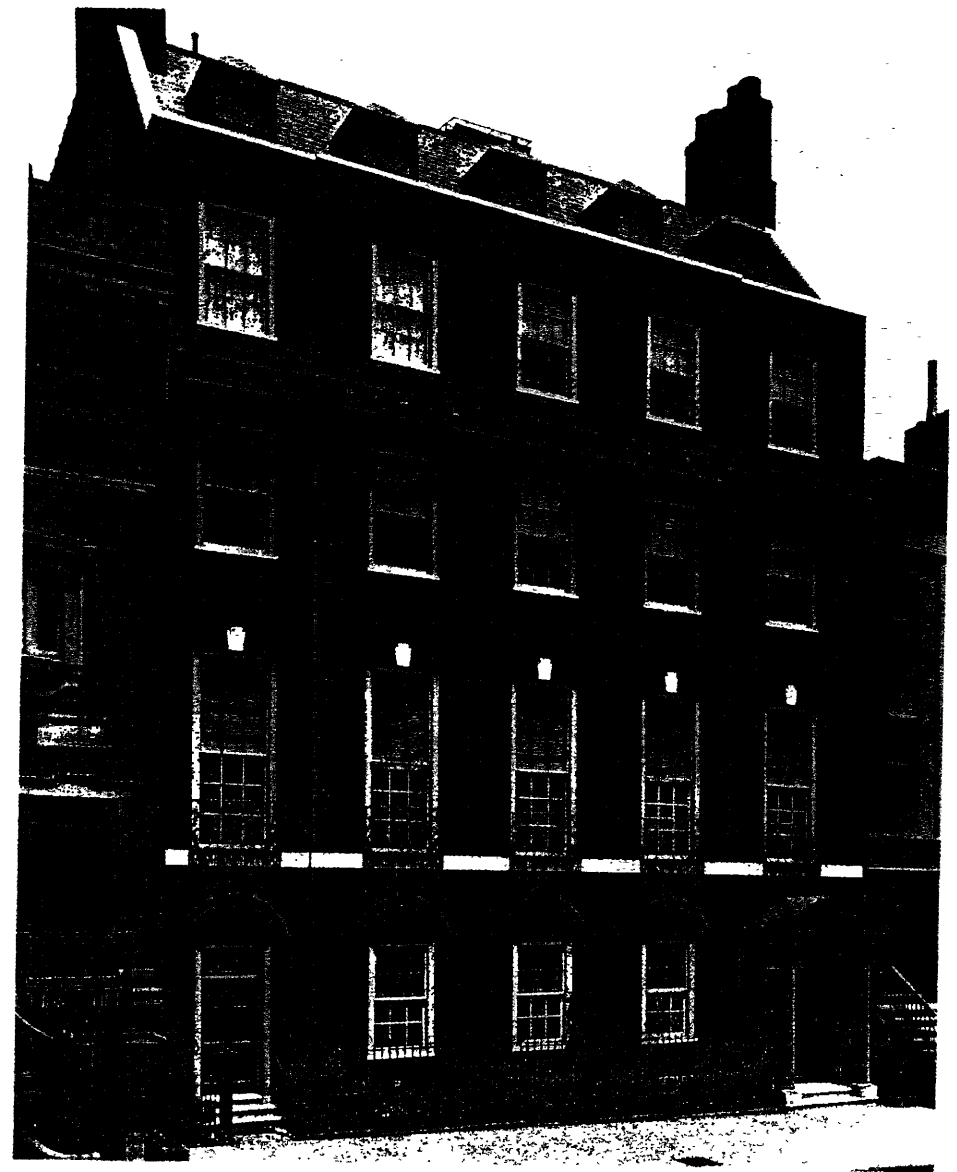


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61 East 91st Street
built in 1923 for Guy Cary, now the Dalton School
Avery Architectural Library, Columbia University

In a 1921 interview, Mott Schmidt made clear his preference for the neo-Georgian style for residential work: "To my mind, the most successful houses in the world from the standpoint of a rational dwelling place are the old Georgian houses in London." Mr. Schmidt's work is often identified as simply neo-Georgian, but his city houses were often distillations of Georgian, Colonial, Federal, Adam, and Regency styles.

In New York the young affluent, many of whom had grown up in the ostentatious *chateaux* that once lined Fifth Avenue, began to reject the florid excesses of the Beaux-Arts and neo-French Renaissance styles that their elders had embraced. A more sophisticated generation, they sought instead the refined elegance of Georgian London, and the simplicity of American Colonial design. This interest dovetailed with a general American preoccupation with Colonial and Federal-era styles, which were viewed as sources for a truly native architectural style for the newly powerful United States.

Architectural magazines published more and more articles on buildings of this period after the turn of the century, in a wave of historicism similar to the preservation movement of the present day. Mr. Schmidt's city house work offered his clients the elegant, circumspect "rational dwelling place" that they desired.

Mott Schmidt's early brownstone alterations, like the Emmet residences at 39 East 63rd Street (1917) and 3 East 94th Street (1919) have a stark, pared-down quality often associated with Regency style. This quality reflects both

the limitations of townhouse alteration and Schmidt's own taste for simplicity. One feature of the interior of the 63rd Street house proved to be a hallmark of his work: a curved stairway in the front hall.

With full house commissions like the Vanderbilt and Morgan houses at 1 and 3 Sutton Place (1921), Mr. Schmidt was permitted to explore a more recognizable Georgian style: brick laid in Flemish bond, paned sash windows, and raised brick courses between the floors. Although modeled on an urban Georgian prototype, the house at 3 Sutton Place, with its two main facades and river siting, brings the large Georgian houses on the James River to mind. The public (street) facade is asymmetrical and restrained, while the private (river) facade is elaborately detailed with a double stairway, prominent doorway, elaborate dormer floor, and Chippendale-style balustrade.

The adjacent Vanderbilt house, on its prominent corner site, did not afford Schmidt an equal opportunity to play the public against the private. The design of this house is uniformly simple and refined. It is virtually unadorned except for an elegant, pedimented brick door surround identical to ones used on James River Georgian structures such as Berkeley Plantation.

By the mid-1920's, Mr. Schmidt was able to attract sustained commissions for new buildings, and responded with more sophisticated designs. At the Trevor house, 15 East 90th Street (1926), he retained the informal mixture of materials of his previous neo-Georgian designs, but assem-

Schmidt's houses have lasted where those of other architects have not; their refined proportions, studied detail and simple composition have never been considered out of style.

Drake
Textural Historian

Joseph Gray,
Director of the Office for Metropolitan History

Mott B. Schmidt—Some Buildings in New York City

Residences

1 Sutton Place, 1921, for Miss William K. Vanderbilt
3 Sutton Place, 1921, for Miss Anne Morgan
13 Sutton Place, 1921, for Miss Elisabeth Marbury
17 Sutton Place, 1921
39 East 63rd Street, 1917, for Grenville T. Emmet
46 East 66th Street, 1919
46 East 69th Street, 1925, for Neville Jay Booker
43 East 70th Street, 1928, for Walter Ewing Hope
123 East 79th Street, 1925
124 East 80th Street, 1928, for Edwin H. Bigelow
130 East 80th Street, 1926, for Vincent Astor
15 East 90th Street, 1926, for Miss Emily Trevor
61 East 91st Street, 1923, for Guy Fairfax Cary
3 East 94th Street for Grenville T. Emmet

Apartment Houses

20 East 67th Street, 1924
53 East 66th Street
19 East 72nd Street, 1937, for Gregory B. Smith
1088 Park Avenue, 1924

Other

Susan B. Wagner Wing at Gracie Mansion, 1966
689 Fifth Avenue, Elizabeth Arden, 1929

Dates refer to the date of design or earliest drawing.

bled them in a more complex composition. The simple, raised fascia moulding around the lintels, delicate wrought-iron grillwork, and the portico are its most handsome features, but the orange-colored brick makes it appear younger than it really is.

At the Astor residence, 130 East 80th Street (1926), the most formal of his townhouses, Schmidt theatrically manipulated the proportions of its taut, planar facade by using superscaled Ionic columns at the second story, and a truncated, pedimented fourth story at the top. Surely the Regency work of Nash and Soane in early 19th century London provided inspiration for this design. The Dillon house, next door (1929), is the last of Schmidt's urban single family residences. Although neo-Georgian in style, with a brick facade, it is modeled heavily on the Astor house in proportion and arrangement of detail. This later house lacks the crisp elegance of its neighbor, but the studied doorway, a persistent Mott Schmidt trademark, is thereby made more prominent.

Today Mott Schmidt's buildings continue to look fresh, escaping the dated appearance of the work of many of his contemporaries. Most of his New York City buildings remain, three as designated Landmarks, enhancing their neighborhoods and the city as a whole. The present interest in architectural preservation has provided an impetus for the renewed appreciation of his work, and "post-modern" architects like Robert Stern have obviously learned a great deal from the austere formalism of specific houses like the Astor residence. Partly by chance and partly by design,

Mott Schmidt's houses have lasted where those of other architects have not; their refined proportion, studied detail and simple composition have never been considered out of style.

Erin Drake
Architectural Historian

Christopher Gray,
Director of the Office for Metropolitan History

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Residences

1 Sutton Place
3 Sutton Place
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17 Sutton Plac
39 East 63rd S
46 East 66th S
46 East 69th S
43 East 70th S
123 East 79th
124 East 80th
130 East 80th
15 East 90th S
61 East 91st S
3 East 94th St

Apartment Ho

20 East 67th S
53 East 66th S
19 East 72nd S
1088 Park Ave

Other

Susan B. Wag
689 Fifth Ave

*All dates refer to the date of design or earliest dated drawing.