

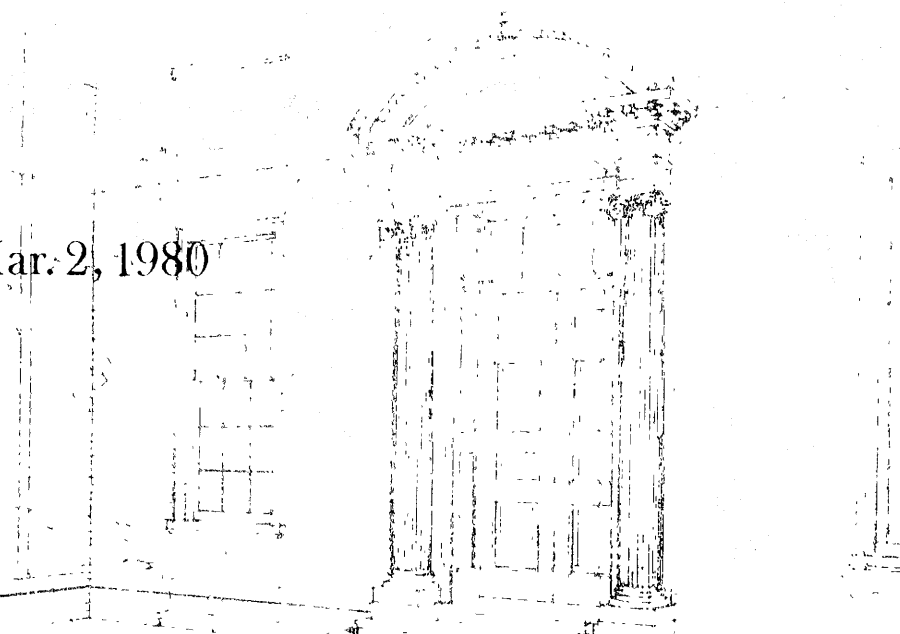
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Southern Accents Magazine

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The  
Katonah  
Gallery

Jan. 20 - Mar. 2, 1980



MOTT B. SCHMIDT: An Architectural Portrait  
Private Homes in the Classical Tradition

## 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

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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.

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

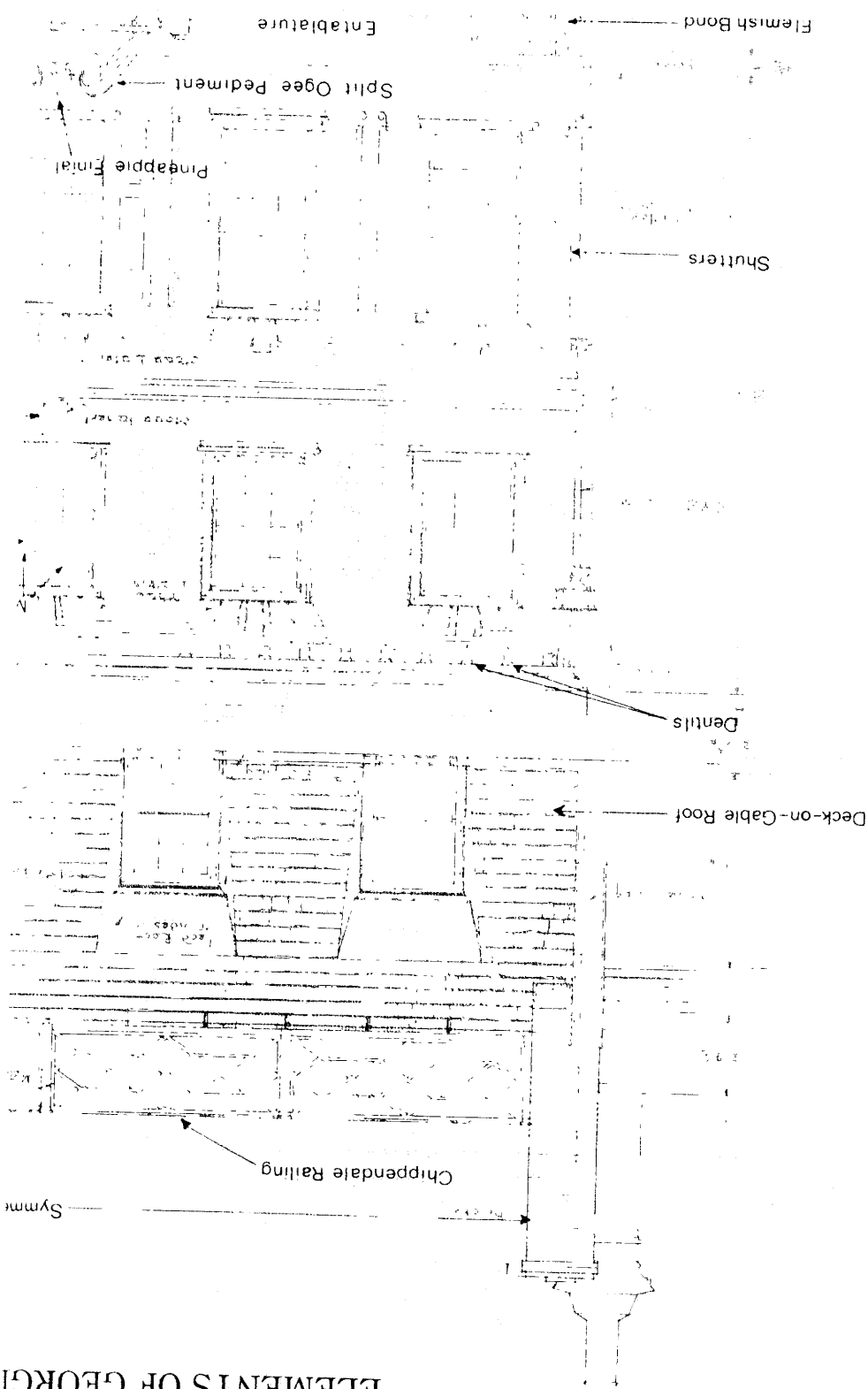
At the Astor residence, 130 East 80th Street (1926), the most formal of his townhouses, Schmidt theatrically manipulated the proportions of its taut, planar facade by using superscaled Ionic columns at the second story, and a truncated, pedimented fourth story at the top. Surely the Regency work of Nash 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 modelled 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.

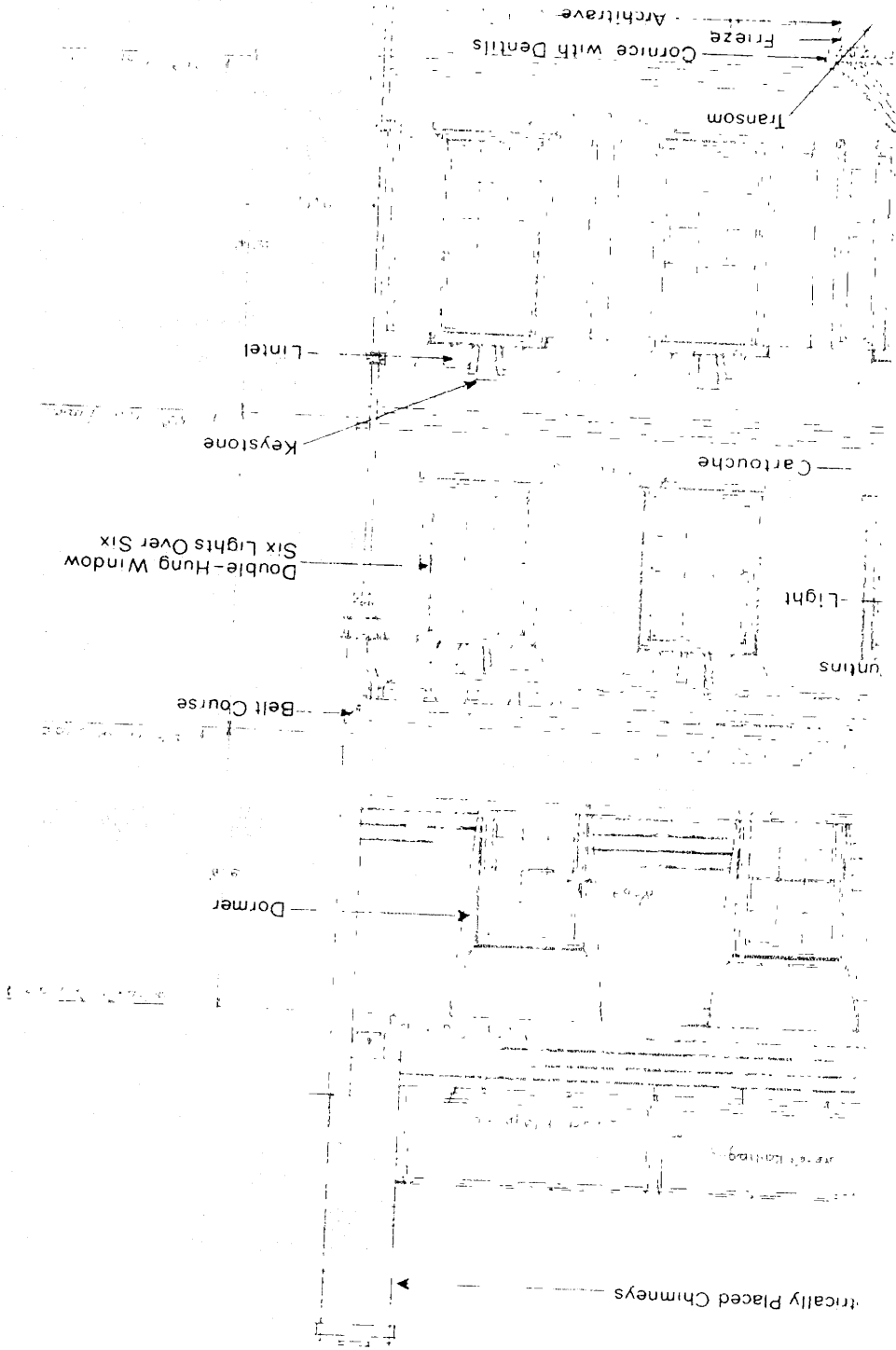
\* All dates refer to the date of design or earliest dated drawing.

c. 1980 Erin Drake & Christopher Gray

# ELEMENTS OF GEORGI



# AN ARCHITECTURE

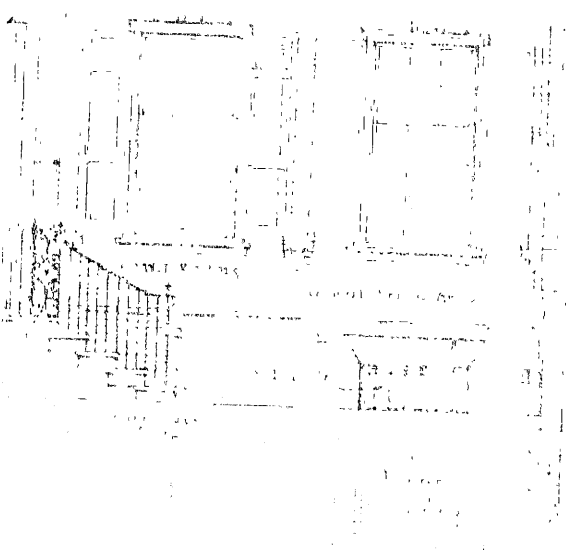


Pilaster

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Katonah Gallery is proud to present Mott B. Schmidt: An Architectural Portrait, a retrospective exhibition documenting the career of a 20th century classicist. A resident of Bedford and Katonah for fifty-two years, he was a master designer of the private home. We hope our exhibition reflects the traditions of the Georgian and Federal styles so beautifully detailed in the Schmidt designs.

Our research has taken us to many sources and we wish to thank, in particular, Adolf K. Placzek, Director of the Avery Architectural Library, Columbia University, and his assistant, Janet Parks; A. K. Baragwanath, recently retired Curator of Prints, Paintings and Photographs, and Steven Miller, of The Museum of the City of New York; Pierre Nargusian, Mr. Schmidt's draftsman, and Mr. and Mrs. Roger C. Ravel. We received additional help from Henry Hope Reed of Classical America, Marjorie Pearson of the Landmarks Preservation Commission of the City of New York, and Marita O'Hare, executive director of the Architectural League of New York, and many anonymous voices at the Department of Buildings of the City of New York.



As we developed additional contemporary material, we met many of the present owners and we are most grateful, especially, to those who opened their doors to admit our photographer, Alexandra Conway.

We wish to thank Philip Johnson for his gracious remarks and Erin Drake and Christopher Gray for their informative monograph.

We are also grateful to our designer, Shiela Zelermyer, who, with her limitless patience and unfailing talent contributed the elegant graphics and the inspired installation. Special thanks go to our valiant docent corps who have studied and prepared for the guided tours of the exhibition.

Finally, and most importantly, we wish to thank Katharine T. Schmidt for her continuous help, her willingness and enthusiasm in dealing with our large and small problems, and her steadfast encouragement as we developed this retrospective.

Lucie Campbell, Deborah McCain, Joan Wessel