

Architecture: Show On Mott Schmidt



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Georgian and Federal houses designed by Mott B. Schmidt

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IT was 1965 when Mott B. Schmidt's Federal-style addition of a ballroom to Gracie Mansion was completed, an event that was politely ignored in architectural circles. Adding to the old mansion in a period style was hardly the thing to do in those days — architects with any real creativity to them would come up with something modern, or so the common wisdom had it back then. Imitating historical styles was the province of little old ladies, not *real* architects.

Now, of course, real architects seem to like nothing better than imitating history; the acceptance of revivalism in the last few years has been one of the most dramatic switches in taste in this century — comparable, in a sense, to the movement toward modern architecture 50 years ago. We have come not only to see architects like Robert Stern, Robert Venturi and Charles Moore interpreting historical forms and offering personal variations on older styles, we also now see architects like Allen Greenberg and John Barrington Bayley producing works in much more literal historical style, as was commonly done all the way through the 1920's.

One offshoot of this reversal of taste has been a dramatic surge of interest in the architects of the 20th century's first revival period, the years leading up to 1929, when there were literally dozens of designers of talent. Not the least of such figures was Mott Schmidt, an architect who practiced in New York City from the early 1920's, but who did not fade when many of his contemporaries did. Schmidt kept going, producing Georgian and neo-Classical houses right through the 1960's in splendid obliviousness to the growing amount of modern architecture around him.

Schmidt was near the end of his career when he created the annex wing of Gracie Mansion; he was to die in 1977. But for nearly 50 years before then he had been producing townhouses and country villas in the Georgian and Regency styles in Manhattan, Long Island, Westchester and around the country. Westchester was his home; he built himself a sprawling brick Georgian house in Bedford that he lived in for decades, until he moved to smaller quarters, also of his own design.

Schmidt's work is the subject of an exhibition through March 2 at the Katonah Gallery, not far from his home turf, entitled "Mott B. Schmidt: An Architectural Portrait — Private Homes in the Classical Tradition." It is the sort of exhibition that would have been considered quite curious, not to say irrelevant, a decade ago, but today this assemblage of Georgian manor houses seems nothing if not au courant. It has been attracting architecture buffs from all over the metropolitan area, whose presence in such numbers attests to the renewed respectability of revivalist architecture.

The first thing that should be said about Schmidt's work is that it was very, very good. Mott Schmidt was an architect who produced no truly great works of architecture, but an enormous number of very fine ones. His buildings were civilized, in the deepest sense of the meaning of that word — they were ordered, handsome, knowledgeable serene places, buildings designed to contain lives that bespoke similar qualities.

Schmidt based his practice in New York City, and Manhattan is dotted with his works. He designed, among other buildings, the townhouses at and 3 Sutton Place and redesigned the entire block on Sutton between 57th and 58th Streets to create a private garden, the Vincent Astor house at 130 East 80th Street and the Clarence Dillon house at 124 East 80th Street, both double-width townhouses, and the handsome, disciplined houses at 43 East 70th Street and 15 East 90th Street.

Each of these buildings is an intelligent, fully thought-out work in itself — for all of their use of Georgian and classical forms, none of them seems designed by rote. Schmidt's gift, which he shared with his best colleagues among the revivalists of his time, was in the ability to take the classical vocabulary and use it to create original, varied compositions. Each facade is a remarkably balanced, even subtle, composition — an assemblage of elements in fine proportion, with strong symbolic content as well. The door was always the centerpiece, its ceremonial role emphasized by a portico or elaborate frame of classical elements; yet the

scale was always modest and domestic, no matter how large the structure. Not for Schmidt the overwhelming entrances and ice-cold ballrooms of the great Beaux-Arts mansions!

Indeed, Schmidt's work was, in part, a reaction against Beaux-Arts excesses. The immense, overscaled confections of Fifth Avenue built just before the turn of the century, and for a decade or so after, were considered vulgar by the time Schmidt came into practice in the 1920's, and he sought a more restrained tone, preferring to evoke the modest order of colonial times or of Georgian London rather than the lavishness of 18th-century France or Renaissance Italy. The differences between the architecture of Schmidt and of his predecessor revivalists, architects like McKim, Mead & White, Carrere & Hastings and Warren & Wetmore, are significant, for they remind us that the revivalists were not, in fact, all of a piece, but that different architects at different times had strikingly different values and emphases in their work.

Schmidt's interest really seemed to be in pure composition, for which his gifts were considerable. A facade like that of the Trevor House of 1926, at 15 East 90th Street, is as good an indication as one can ask for: a small house, it is an exquisite, bursting composition, in which a lovely Corinthian portico with a pedimented window behind it makes the whole facade glow, like a tiny red brick bouquet of flowers. There is no haughtiness here at all, but there is a self-assured tone, an air of confidence, yet of strength. Schmidt's facades are delicate without ever being prissy.

The exhibition includes a mix of period photographs and new ones, as well as a number of Schmidt's original drawings. Unfortunately, labeling is less than thorough, and, oddly, no material at all is included on the superb apartment buildings Schmidt designed, which include 53 East 66th Street, 1088 Park Avenue and 19 East 72d Street, the last in association with Rosario Candela.

But happily the exhibition does contain a considerable number of interior photos and floor plans, so that one can study at least a few of these houses in detail. The plans are as tightly, intelligently conceived as the facades — as in the facades, there is no slavish imitation of Georgian precedent, but an easy, knowing re-use of classical forms, adapted to the varying demands of 20th-century New York.

Schmidt died in 1977, the last survivor of a long line of first-rate eclectic architects from the 1920's. His work lost some of its quality toward the end — the Gracie Mansion annex is excellent, but some of the later country houses seem to lack the crispness of the earlier houses. It may well be that they do not themselves yet have the patina of time; buildings that wish to convince us by use of a historical style that they have a long and venerable history must have at least a little bit of history to achieve credibility, and Schmidt's houses from the 1950's may not yet have enough.

But Georgian villas built in the 1950's were, of course, buildings out of their time, and it may be that this means more. When Schmidt was surrounded by contemporaries doing similar work, it may well have energized his own — which makes one especially curious about what effects this new mood of revivalism now settling upon us will have on the architectural spirit of the 1980's, as architects again talk seriously about picking up on styles of the past.

Book-of-the-Month Appoints McCullough

David W. McCullough, managing editor of the Book-of-the-Month Club, has been appointed a member of the club's editorial board. He becomes the fifth judge, joining Clifton Fadiman, John K. Hutchens, Wilfred Sheed and Mordecai Richler. The judges pick the main selections for the members, the club's management adds alternate selections.

Mr. McCullough, 42 years old, lived in Brooklyn for 17 years and now lives in Hastings-on-Hudson, N.Y., with his wife, Frances, and two children. His first book, "McCullough's Brief Lives," a collection of interviews from his column in the club's newsletter, will be published by the club in April.