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The Unerring Eye

San Francisco Architect Andrew Skurman Is Admired—And Hired—For His Refined Classical Architecture Informed By A Lifetime Of Learning And Study

BY DIANE DORRANS SAEKS

Andrew Skurman, principal and owner of Andrew Skurman Architects, founded in 1992, specializes in superbly designed and crafted custom houses. His passion and expertise lie in classical architecture and the interpretation of its forms in French, Georgian and Mediterranean styles.

Andrew Skurman Architects, based in San Francisco, designs some of the most striking, sophisticated and architecturally appealing houses and interiors being built today. California clients commission landmark houses inspired by the architectural traditions of French châteaux, Mediterranean villas and Georgian country houses.

"We draw from our extensive architectural library and historical reference materials of European and American design," says Skurman. "We work closely with our clients to identify historical precedents that meet their tastes and their lives. The goal is always to create houses of quality and substance that embrace the spirit of homes built generations ago."

Skurman's projects inhabit the most desirable locations in San Francisco and Northern California, along with Paris, Southern California and New York. He holds architectural licenses in California and in New York.

Skurman received his Bachelor of Architecture in 1976 from Cooper Union in New York and began his design career apprenticing with the New York firm of I.M. Pei & Partners. He worked in the San Francisco office of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill as a Senior Associate and subsequently served as a studio director at Gensler and Associates in San Francisco and Los Angeles.

Today, Andrew Skurman is also committed to the highest ideals of ecological design, and creates LEED certified houses and incorporates green strategies in all projects wherever possible.



> CH What was the moment you decided to become an architect?

AS I grew up in New York and as a teenager, I loved spending hours in the museums. At 14, during my school holidays I drafted for my grandfather's elevator company in the Bronx. That summer, I accompanied him on a sales call to Philip Johnson's office in the Seagram building on Park Avenue in New York, and was transfixed.

CH How did you get started? What was your education and apprenticeship?

AS At 18, I attended New York's Cooper Union. Students from around the world at this privately endowed institution are on a full scholarship. I was most interested in analyzing the cubism of Juan Gris as it relates to modern architecture. At 23, I apprenticed with I.M. Pei who works around the world but has just one office on Madison Avenue. I was involved in the design of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts addition and of the Pyramide du Louvre in Paris. Pei was both a prince and the most modest of men. When we traveled together to a meeting in Boston, he insisted that I see the recent City Hall, by

ABOVE Andrew Skurman in his San Francisco office with an 18th century map of Paris.

Photograph by Kit Morris.

OPPOSITE A covered outdoor entertaining area was designed adjacent to a new Georgian style home. The solid roof provides weather protection, but is articulated as a trellis. Photograph by Mark Darley.



another architect, and never mentioned his masterpieces in that city. At age 28, I left Pei's office and moved to San Francisco to take a job with Skidmore, Owings and Merrill.

CH Who has been a mentor to you?

AS John Hejduk, dean of the Architecture School of Cooper Union, who taught me to think conceptually; I.M. Pei, for teaching me integrity, as well as designing in a three dimensional grid; the San Francisco office of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, where they let me be in charge of my own buildings; and Gensler San Francisco, where I learned how to get clients.

CH Which architects have inspired you the most?

AS The sixteenth century architect Andrea Palladio from the Veneto for his eternal rules on classicism, and the early

twentieth century Parisian architect Le Corbusier, the greatest of all modernists, for his poetry of the free plan.

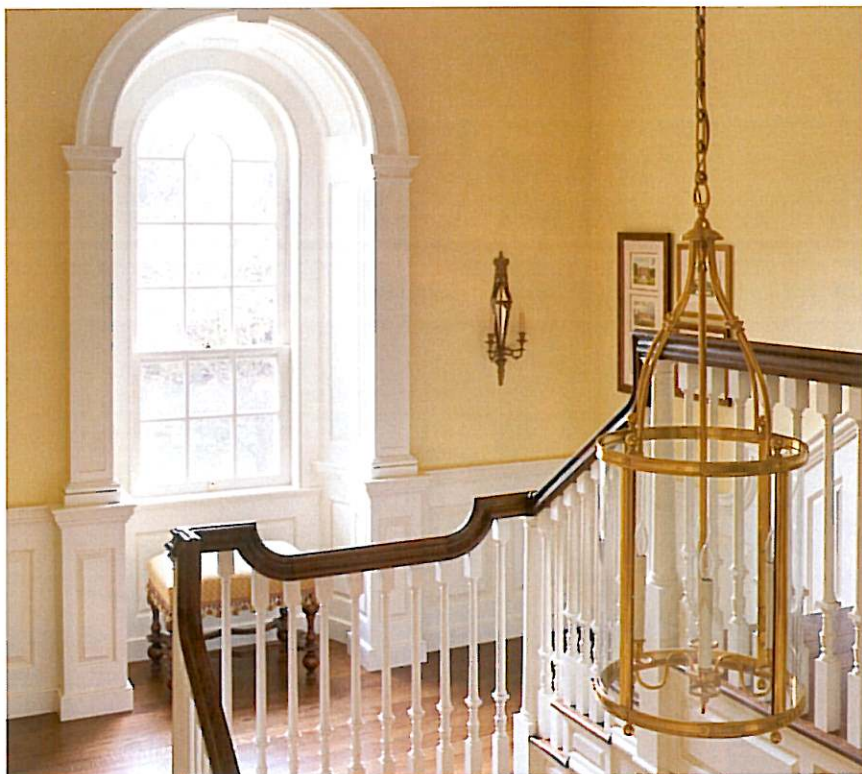
CH Which is the most admirable architecture you have seen on your travels?

AS Four houses by Karl Friedrich Schinkel, that have been restored to their original condition in Berlin and in the nearby royal city of Potsdam. Glienicke, Charlottenhof and the Roman Bath are in Potsdam. Schloss Tegel is in Berlin. It was built in the 1820s for Wilhelm von Humboldt, a diplomat and philosopher and the founder of the Humboldt University in Berlin. In those days, Prussia was not a wealthy country, and nevertheless, they were able to convey a sense of supreme elegance. The paneling and crown moldings are painted on, rather than applied three dimensionally. Humboldt's collection of large white plaster classical figurative sculptures are dis-

played inside. It's about making more impact with less. The scale is modern and modest by today's standards, approximately 4,000 square feet with a symmetrical floor plan. That's my idea of perfection.

CH You are very versatile and can create any kind of custom architecture for clients. However your passion is for classical architecture. When did you decide to create classical architecture? How did you decide this was your forte?

AS I am a firm believer in modern architecture for public buildings and monuments—punctuation points in the fabric of the city. When I created my own firm, I did what I enjoy: working on private houses and apartments. In this hectic and violent world, I believe in a different solution for each person within the unique harmony of classicism.



LEFT The landing between the first and second floor in a Georgian style house. The dramatic window niche features an arched casing with keystone supported by Doric pilasters and provides abundant daylighting. Photograph by Mark Darley. **OPPOSITE LEFT**

A renovation of a Julia Morgan apartment with a new paneled library which was designed to provide a sense of continuity with the refurbished original woodwork. A painting by Kees Van Dongen hangs above the antique Adam fireplace mantel with inlaid Wedgwood plaques. Interior design by Tucker & Marks. Photograph by Matthew Millman. **OPPOSITE RIGHT** A renovation of a city mansion by Andrew Skurman is in the French style. The Michael Taylor inspired floor is comprised of a grid of oak on a limestone field. The 18th century style bronze railing with gilded highlights was fabricated by Michael Bondi. Interior design by Tucker & Marks. Photograph by Matthew Millman.

CH What architecture directions do you admire today?

AS Frank Gehry's deconstructivism, exemplified by the Bilbao Museum (Spain) and L.A.'s Disney Concert Hall. Santiago Calatrava's structural expressionism, of which I particularly like the Milwaukee Art Museum addition for its exceptional use of light reflection through the structure. William McDonough's sustainable architecture, which uses solar energy and recycled materials to create buildings that are friendly to the environment.

CH You have a superb design book collection. Which architecture books do you treasure the most? Why?

AS To an architect, books are like children. You love them all. I have a thousand—books that is. Love goes undivided to all, and all of them are precious. At this stage of my career, the most useful ones are *A Parallel of the Orders of Architecture, Greek and Roman*, by Charles Normand, Pub. John Tiranti & Co, London, 1928, in which I check the proportions of the different orders. *French Period Houses and Their Details*, by

Ronald Lambell, Pub. Butterworth-Heinemann Ltd., Oxford, 1982, and *Mouldings & Turned Woodwork of the 16th, 17th and 18th Centuries*, by Tunstall Small and Christopher Woodbridge, Linden Publishing Company, Fresno, CA, 1987; these two books have scale drawings of architectural details in the French and Georgian styles. Invaluable.

CH Which architecture book would you love to own?

AS Jacques-François Blondel's encyclopedia on *L'Architecture Française (1752- 1756)*. The court architect to Louis XV, Blondel is the major historical reference of the eighteenth century. I have an eye on a first edition available in a remote area of Paris.

CH Favorite source for books?

AS I used to buy books at Wittenborn in New York, which has closed. I'm now buying them in San Francisco on Montgomery Street, from William Stout Books, a treasury of architecture books from around the world. Stout is also a wonderful architect and a publisher. This bookstore is a landmark in a city known for its architecture.

CH You and your wife Françoise entertain with great flair. Who would be your dream dinner guests?

AS This is my best opportunity to discuss politics and power, in relation to aesthetics and talent, regardless of period. We'll have Catherine II of Russia and her architect Charles Cameron, Jackson Pollock with Peggy Guggenheim, and in the same spirit, for Françoise's pleasure, Cary Grant and Barbara Hutton.

CH Favorite restaurants?

AS Yacout in Marrakech for its location in the Medina, great authentic decor and the best chicken in the world. Le Train Bleu, in Paris at the Gare de Lyon, for its exuberant Belle Époque décor and fresh churned butter. I sit in the gold room, even though it's the smoking section, and with thirty foot ceilings it's not so bad. Margaux in Berlin for its hot pink and red murals by princess Ingeborg zu Schleswig Holstein. La Veranda, near the Vatican in Rome where you can dine with cardinals and bishops in a frescoed and vaulted Renaissance setting.

CH Favorite architectural approach?

AS Neoclassicism. While the proportions and symmetry of classical architecture are respected, there is something idiosyncratic about them. The personality of the architect shines through. For instance, in St. Petersburg, the Cameron Gallery named after Catherine the



Great's Scottish architect Charles Cameron, was built in 1780-1785. There is a lightness to the structure, like an acropolis in the sky, for viewing the surrounding Catherine Park.

CH Favorite piece of furniture?

AS A dressing table and accessories in steel, silver and gilded bronze, in the Pavlovsk Palace, St. Petersburg. It was made by the Tula Imperial Armory, one of the few examples of "beating swords into plough shares." As a member of the European Decorative Arts Council of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, I am proud of having contributed to the acquisition of a piece of Tula furniture.

CH Favorite painting?

AS "The Ideal City," by Piero della Francesca, in the Galleria Nazionale, Urbino, Italy. And I would like to quote his contemporary, the fifteenth century architect Leon Battista Alberti: "The city should not be only for the convenience and the necessity of homes, but

should also be laid out in such a way that there are pleasant and honest places."

CH Favorite travel to see architecture, and why?

AS Paris, walking the streets and window shopping. I love the density, the consistent height and style and palette. When I arrive, I like to go on "my tour." After visiting each gallery of the Carré des Antiquaires, in the 7th, I go "up" as they say, this is away from the river, on the rue du Bac to the Conran Shop. They have the most innovative objects for the home.

CH Where are you traveling next?

AS A swing through Italy for research in hospitality work. Starting at the Villa Feltrinelli in Gargnano on Lake Garda, beautiful interiors by BAMO, in San Francisco. Down to the Hotel Lungarno in Florence on the Oltrarno side of the river, on a high floor with a view over the Arno and the city. Then to La Posta Vecchia, J.P. Getty's former home on the sea, which still feels like his person-

al residence, in Ladispoli, half an hour from the Rome airport.

CH Secret of traveling well?

AS Ambien, the miracle sleeping pill. To eliminate jet lag.

CH What do you enjoy most about being a designer?

AS Meeting clients with whom it is possible to create beautiful designs. They are often extraordinary people and together we give birth to really great projects.

CH What advice would you give to young designers?

AS Hard and good work follows you all your life. When I was working in a big firm, I was the project architect for an office building client who was happy with my work. Years later, after I had established my own firm, he remembered me and hired me to work on his five star resort. Do what you are good at, and success will come. There is no such thing as luck. ☐