

THE CLASSICAL COUNTRY HOUSE



FROM THE ARCHIVES OF
COUNTRY LIFE

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RECENT HOUSES IN THE USA AND THE BAHAMAS

From the late twentieth century a remarkable revival of the Classical country house has taken place in the United States of America. This has been marked by a return to the kind of respect for local materials and traditions that the Modern Movement thought it had abolished. A significant feature of the Classical Revival on both sides of the Atlantic is that this new respect for the past has included a revival of the tradition of architects writing books on historical aspects of architecture to serve as a model for current design. This is true of Allan Greenberg, Demetri Porphyrios, Thomas Gordon Smith, Peter Pennoyer, Robert Adam, George Saumarez Smith and Hugh Petter. A pioneer from the 1980s is the distinguished Classicist, Allan Greenberg, architect of numerous country houses, many in New England and Connecticut, including Huckleberry House, New England (1982–85), with a two-storeyed circular ballroom, projecting as a domed bow in the centre of the garden front. Greenberg has published *George Washington, Architect* (1999), *The Architecture of Democracy* (2006) and *Lutyens and the Modern Movement* (2007).

Gil Schafer, from a younger generation, built for himself Middlefield, New York State, in 1999, a house with a handsome, hexastyle, Greek Doric portico. He had hoped to buy one of the many nineteenth-century houses in a Greek Revival vernacular in the Hudson Valley, but finding them impossibly expensive created this one for himself. He used a local builder, designed the timber details in the local manner, and referred to source books used by nineteenth architects in the neighbourhood, such as Minard Lafever's *The Modern Builder's Guide* (1833). Though Middlefield looks externally traditional, it is internally wholly modern, centering on a large 'family room' and a generous kitchen for eating, all opening into each other in a great spatial flow. In the drawing room is a handsome chimneypiece, of c.1835, flanked by Ionic columns. The hilltop site of the house would also have been hardly possible in earlier periods when, before the arrival of the snow plough, it would need to have been sited near a road.

Schafer employed in the design of the house three assistants trained at the influential School of Architecture at the University of Notre Dame, South Bend, Indiana. Astonishingly, this is the only school in the world that teaches the practice of traditional and Classical architecture, with the result that its students are in enormous demand by clients throughout the USA. The Classical programme of the school was established by the architect, scholar and author, Professor Thomas Gordon Smith, during his chairmanship of the school from 1989–99. His Vitruvian House, South Bend (1990), led to other commissions for Classical country houses, such as Kulb House, Central Illinois, inspired by Mid-Western houses of c.1840, with its portico of limestone Ionic columns.

Middlefield, New York State, built for himself by Gil Schafer has a Greek Doric portico and timber details, derived from local nineteenth-century models.

