

# Keeping up a family tradition

GIL SCHAFER FOLLOWS HIS ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE

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The apple, as they say, doesn't fall from the tree. It always seemed a given that Gil Schafer would become an architect.

"I am the grandson and the great grandson of architects," explains Schafer, "and it was very much in my DNA. I knew my heritage at a young age and I knew I wanted to work in architecture. As a child I was always creating, making things out of Legos, and drawing houses. It just felt natural and right and it was something I loved doing."

## Travel and living experiences

Schafer learned early in life the importance of home and being happy in one's environment. Due to various circumstances, he spent his childhood living in many different places.

"I had what one might call a peripatetic childhood," he says.



"For much of my younger life we lived on a seventy-five acre farm in a rural part of New Jersey. We had sheep and cows with a rustic barn, an apple orchard, and a vegetable garden. Summers we would visit my paternal grandparents who resided in a fieldstone and shingled house just outside of Cleveland, with an amazing view of the city and Lake Erie. Or I would find myself in California where my great-grandmother lived in a stone cottage at the legendary San Ysidro Ranch. There I got to experience the Spanish Colonial architecture of Santa Barbara."

The travel and living experiences continued for Schafer after his parents' divorce. Among others, there was the funky surf cottage in Carpinteria, California; a quirky house on the island of Eleuthera in the Bahamas; and visits to an aunt and uncle's nineteenth-century cottage on the coast of Maine.

"Though I had yet to start my career as an architect, I learned two things on these childhood rambles that have served me well professionally. The first was that a house that makes you feel happy, welcome, and secure is a success, no matter the style of architecture or the degree of lavishness. The other was that how I felt about any residence I visited was entirely intertwined with my response to its setting. The nature of the nature – the climate, the



landscape, the sounds, aromas, and light – was a strong determinant of my feelings about a home."

## The learning curve

Schafer attended Haverford College, just outside Philadelphia, and then on to Yale for graduate studies in architecture. Upon graduating he went to work for his studio critic Bernard Tschumi, the leading deconstructivist architect and then dean of the Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation at Columbia University. The irony was that a classicist had gone to work for the leading proponent of the opposite of classicism. But it was an important learning curve for Schafer.

Schafer moved on to work for Ferguson & Schamamian, one of the leading high-end residential architectural firms in the country, where he stayed for almost a decade. Over sixteen years ago Schafer started his own firm and is in

Above: A new Dutch colonial revival-inspired house by Gil Schafer is reached by a winding gravel drive where a refined entry portico and wide Dutch door welcome guests. © *A Place to Call Home* by Gil Schafer, Rizzoli, 2017. Photo by Eric Piasecki. Left: Architect Gil Schafer sitting on the front steps of his Maine retreat. © *A Place to Call Home* by Gil Schafer, Rizzoli, 2017. Photo by Eric Piasecki.

Continued on next page ...

constant demand and is considered one of the leading practitioners of contemporary classical architecture. He is a member of *Architectural Digest's* AD 100 and winner of the Art of Design Award from *Veranda* magazine.

**Forces at work**

With his team of 35 people, he is able to offer a multitude of services and also work on small projects as well as the more challenging large ones. The first meeting with a prospective client is where it all begins. “Usually we try to meet at our offices,” explains Schafer, “and evaluate if we are the best architectural firm for the project; to see what the client’s goals and dreams are. Ideally our points of view mesh and we are off and running. Then we go to the site and get a sense of where it is, what the challenges are, and what forces will be at work. Context is so important.”

Schafer describes himself as a classical architect, always traditional and always rooted in American architectural history. He describes his style as understated, but tied to



Above, L-R: A new kitchen in a restored, historic Charleston carriage house. © *A Place to Call Home* by Gil Schafer, Rizzoli, 2017. Photo by Eric Piasecki. An antique dining room mantelpiece was exquisitely carved during the Federal period and found by Gil Schafer for this new house on the Navesink river. © *A Place to Call Home* by Gil Schafer, Rizzoli, 2017. Photo by Eric Piasecki. Below, left: The 'snug' in this bucolic Mill Valley, California, house is tucked into the lower level of the garage, making for a perfect, stylish getaway. © *A Place to Call Home* by Gil Schafer, Rizzoli, 2017. Photo by Eric Piasecki.

place and context and designed to look as if it has always been there. Reading the landscape is uppermost in his design process.

“As important as a commitment to classicism has been to me, no less meaningful is my desire to create architecture that is effectively responsive to a set

of circumstances. To me, architecture is never about a theoretical idea. The question is always ‘How does it feel?’ Once I have forged an emotional connection with a project, I begin to experience it as I draw it – a specific narrative unfolding as if I were writing a story.”

From re-configuring a structure in Mill Valley and turning it into

the perfect California residence to a Connecticut colonial, a spectacular Adirondack haven, a Fifth Avenue apartment with panoramic views of Central Park, a magnificent historic house in Charleston, and in projects from Maine to Georgia, Schafer has created unique but timeless residences for a multitude of clients.

**Completing the project**

In addition to the architectural aspect of the project, Schafer does occasionally take on the decorating aspect of a project.

“I am always grateful and excited when clients offer me a chance to complete the project by allowing me to create a specific decorative vision to accompany my architectural one.”

Schafer has recently published *A Place to Call Home: Tradition, Style, and Memory in the New American House*. In it he profiles seven of his projects, including his stunning A-frame on the coast of Maine. It is the perfect companion piece to his first book *The Great American*

*House: Tradition for the Way We Live Now*, in which he documents four houses that are related stylistically. Reading his design philosophy and viewing the accompanying photographs, one can understand why he is in such demand. There is an innate understanding of the project and the person and the importance of melding them together, which he does so well, along with a sense of comfort and tranquility.

In his spare time, what little of it that he has, Schafer spends time at his country house in Millbrook, looking at land, poking around antique shops, and enjoying the fruits of his labors.

“I’m a guy who loves what he does,” Schafer says. “My career is built around my passion and that’s a great privilege. I love working on houses and have been fortunate enough to have clients that have brought me to interesting places.” ●