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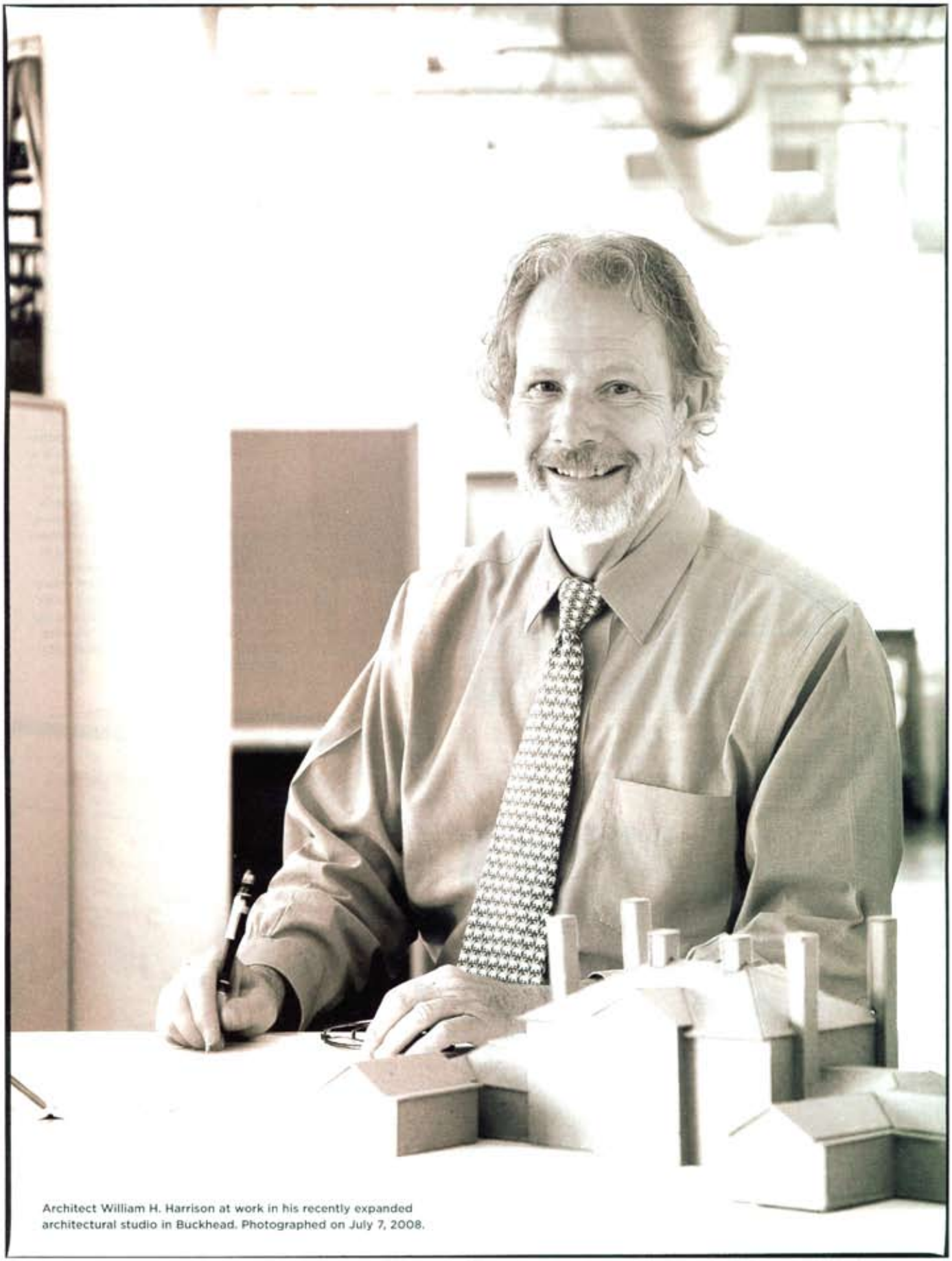
HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE DECORATORS' SHOW HOUSE & GARDENS



Architect William H. Harrison at work in his recently expanded architectural studio in Buckhead. Photographed on July 7, 2008.

WILLIAM H. HARRISON

THE ATLANTA-BASED, INTERNATIONALLY RENOWNED ARCHITECT IS, BY ALL ACCOUNTS, A LOCAL TREASURE. HE RECENTLY SAT DOWN WITH *AH&L* TO DISCUSS HIS ACCOMPLISHMENTS TO DATE, SIMULTANEOUSLY BEING CELEBRATED IN THE JUST-RELEASED TOME, *HARRISON DESIGN ASSOCIATES: A DECADE OF WORK.*

INTERVIEW BY HEATHER J. PAPER PORTRAIT BY STEVE POMBERG PRODUCED BY CLINTON SMITH

ATLANTA HOMES & LIFESTYLES: After working as a draftsman in your teens, you decided to study architecture at Georgia Tech. Tell us about the path you followed from there to the point you founded Harrison Design Associates in 1991.

WILLIAM H. HARRISON: I came into the business very differently than most architects because I came into it from the development/construction/business side. In the early '70s, people wouldn't hire you to do good architecture. So I started buying old houses and fixing them up, particularly in Inman Park, Cabbagetown and Virginia-Highland. You learn, by looking at a house, what works and what doesn't work. And I was curious about the how, what and why of buildings—how the pieces fit together, what was good and what was bad.

So let's fast-forward. What do you remember from your first major project in Buckhead?

It was a house over on Valley Road. Essentially, we had to gut the house because it was built very poorly. But at that time there was no one who made cast stone, no one who made balustrades—any of that stuff. So we made it all ourselves. It was the same thing if you were working on a Victorian in Ansley Park; you had to make the parts yourself. By the time I was 40, I had a huge construction company. We had our own roofing crew, we had our own carpenters, we had our own millwork shop, we made our own cabinets. I think people started hiring us because we were different.

1970s Bill Harrison establishes local client base. 1984 Harrison meets future wife, Deborah Hodge. ← Bill's first major commission on Valley Road which he designed and built.

1991 Harrison Design Associates is officially established. ← 1996 Harrison wins First Design Awards from *Atlanta Homes & Lifestyles:* Bath of the Year Grand Prize Winner and Kitchen of the Year Grand Prize Winner (left).

← 1998 Harrison creates Norman-inspired development at 675 West Paces Ferry. Firm also designs first show house in conjunction with Neiman Marcus and *Southern Accents.*

The focal point of this Harrison-designed dining room is a hand-carved marble mantle with fluted friezes and columns. The cornice contains traditional egg and dart molding combined with fluted friezes embellished with rosettes. ■ A semicircular porch, opposite, is detailed entirely with Indiana limestone, including Doric columns that support a curving entablature and fluted Ionic pilasters that frame the mahogany door.

1999 Greg Palmer is promoted to the role of managing principal. ← 2000 Firm completes first show house with sponsor *Atlanta Homes & Lifestyles*, the 30th Annual Decorators' Show House.

2001 Harrison Design Associates creates Visiting Scholar Endowment Fund at the Georgia Institute of Technology. ← A Sea Island beach retreat solidifies firm's presence and reputation on the Georgia coast.

← 2002 A Grand Beaux Arts estate is completed in north Atlanta. Firm designs a show house in Montecito, California. 2003 Harrison Design California opens in Santa Barbara. 2004 *Timeless Architecture* monograph of firm's work is published.

2004 Establishes the Southeast Chapter of the Institute of Classical Architecture & Classical America. Tony Spann becomes managing principal of west coast operations. ← 2006 Establishes a modern studio within firm.

← 2006 St. Simons Island office opens. Firm completes first significant commercial project, the Island Design and Architectural Center.

We are fortunate to have Bill as a director of the Buckhead Coalition because he adds a depth of sensitivity in our deliberations to residential quality-of-life interests. His soft-spoken demeanor is disarming and persuasive for the common good.
—*Sam Massell, President, Buckhead Coalition*

Bill and his firm are extremely important to the development of new classical and traditional architecture, not only in the work of the firm, but also in their gifts to Georgia Tech that have created the Harrison Design Associates Visiting Scholar program. Bill is also on the Board of Directors of the Institute of Classical Architecture & Classical America—the single most important national support organization for reviving knowledge of classical design in the country through their programs of coursework.
—*Elizabeth Meredith Dowling, Ph.D., College of Architecture, Georgia Institute of Technology*

Bill Harrison is outstanding! He has done architectural work for me on several projects, gaining my complete confidence. I asked Bill to design the Pavilion at Lake Rabun and, without hesitation, he said that he would not only like to do the project but that it would be his contribution to the Lake Rabun Association (LRA). His work, once again, was superb and greatly appreciated. Bill has the respect of his clients, his business associates and his friends.
—*Dick Stormont, President, Atlanta Rotary Club*

Bill is an amazing and talented architect whose mantra after working on EcoManor has become 'you can have it all without taking it all.'
—*Laura Turner Seydel, owner of EcoManor*

Bill has a wonderful blend of traits that make up his personality, both professionally and socially. He is extremely creative, intelligent and flexible in his designs as well as having a great work ethic along with a terrific sense of humor. I am pleased to have him as my friend as well as our architect.
—*Jeffrey Small, President, Lantrac Properties Inc.*

To what do you credit the firm's seemingly meteoric success?

We started out doing a couple of houses here in town, then we started doing more houses and started to grow exponentially because we were lucky enough, or smart enough, to hire the right people—really good managers and good business people, which allowed me to expand on what we do. And to have good follow-up. So, as we grew, the quality didn't diminish; it actually got better. Because we have more resources, and more talent in the pool, we can produce a better product.

To this day, so much of your firm's work—whether it's Tuscan-, English- or Mediterranean-inspired—seems right at home in Atlanta.

I think the way you get it right is that you never think your last solution is right. You're always looking for a better solution. And you're always looking critically at what you do. Any project that we take, we typically want to go see the site, we want to see it in context. As an architect, your responsibility is to not only create good architecture but to do it in the right place at the right time.

How do you go about looking for that "better" solution each time?

I feel, over the years, I've acquired enough knowledge to know the questions. So now I can put the questions out and watch how people react. I know my answer, but is my answer the best answer? I really want a client's desires—their information to incorporate into my solution. Without that, it's not a good solution. I get excited about trying to extract more and more information out of whatever situation I'm in. I get excited about projects that allow us to expand who we are as a firm, and that really push the envelope.

Your approach obviously works.

I think one of the best compliments that I've gotten over the years is "You guys have really raised the bar in Buckhead; you've made people appreciate good architecture." That's allowed not only our firm to be successful but a lot of other firms to be successful. But setting the bar means you're accomplished, raising the bar means you're working at it. We're always working at it, trying to make each new solution better than the last.

There's some real passion behind that thought.

I've always been extremely passionate about architecture. Whatever you're doing, you should be doing it the best you can. Because that's the significance you bring to the community and to your life—to be good at whatever you're doing.

2006 Firm completes EcoManor, first LEED Certified Home over 6,000 square feet in the Southeast (far left). **2007** Commercial division is established with creation of Montaluce in North Georgia (near left). Firm is instrumental in the development of the Master of Science Degree program in Architecture with a Concentration in Classical Design at the Georgia Institute of Technology. Beverly Hills office opens.

2008 New monograph celebrates the firm's past decade of work. ← Firm is the exclusive designer for finished residences at The Mansion on Peachtree, and is working with purchasers of shell units to create customized plans for their individual spaces.

Harrison's personal home in northwest Atlanta features Italian influences, but its design has been adapted to this region's climate and geography and its specific site in Fulton County. A decorative trellis running the length of the loggia's arched openings supports the growth of muscadine vines and roses, offering lush seasonal color and fragrance.