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**TYLER PERRY
CONQUERS
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GOTCHA!

**A P.I.'S
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MEOW!

**BACKSTAGE
AT THE
CAT SHOW**



BIG LOTS

ARCHITECT BILL HARRISON
DESIGNS MANY OF BUCKHEAD'S
GRANDEST ESTATES—BUT DON'T
DARE CALL THEM McMANSIONS.

By Jay Busbee

IT'S A WET-BLANKET, HUMID AFTERNOON, the kind of day that makes anyone from north of Chattanooga rethink moving here, and Atlanta's star architect is blazing up Roswell Road like he stole something.

Bill Harrison, arguably Buckhead's most prolific designer of jaw-dropping mansions, isn't angry, stressed, or even in any real hurry. Today, while he travels from appointment to appointment at just under sonic-boom speed, he's casual, calm, displaying a low-key wit that's drier than Arizona asphalt.

But as Harrison nearly jumps his SUV into the back seat of a black Mercedes

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SL500, he breaks into a grin that seems to say, *If you've got to deal with traffic, you might as well make it fun.*

Harrison may look like the definition of a college professor—toting sketches in a backpack, sporting a scruffy beard and blond hair that curls down over his collar, and speaking in a gentle voice barely tinged with a languid South Georgia accent—but his infamous driving habits belie the laid-back exterior. Harrison didn't become today's architect of choice for the pedigreed neighborhood of Philip Trammell Shutze, Neel Reid, and James Means by resorting to half-measures.

Harrison Design Associates has constructed more than 2,000 new and renovated projects in Buckhead and other pricey neighborhoods over the course of the last two decades. From his Italian villas with grand balustrades to half-timbered Tudors with turrets or shingled Arts and Crafts cottages with gambrel roofs, there is no trademark "Harrison look"—unless you count the "look at that!" presence that causes traffic to slow along Tuxedo, West Paces Ferry, and the rest of Buckhead's stately drives.

A native of Macon, he founded Harrison Design Associates in 1991 and has since worked in 30 states and several countries—filling walls with awards and bookshelves with magazine spreads. His client roster includes celebrities, sports figures, and captains of industry. The firm has another branch office in St. Simons, with the possibility for an outpost in Los Angeles in the near future. Harrison Design is also expanding its commercial slate, developing a Dahlonega vineyard/spa community and rehabilitating a Columbus historic church. Harrison has been joined by Greg Palmer and Tony Spann and now has some 80 architects working under him.

BUT STILL HE WORKS 80 HOURS a week. And today he's doing site visits in Atlanta. As he travels down Peachtree-Dunwoody, passing row upon row of brick-and-siding spec homes, he can't help but wrinkle his nose. "The people who built these homes weren't thinking about the livabil-

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ity of them," he says. "They were looking to get them done as quickly and cheaply as possible. There's just a substance that's missing from all of them."

He pulls up to a onetime-builder's spec Colonial Revival, probably 15 years old, that was recently purchased by a couple of his former clients. Here, he greets the new owners and his interior design specialist Karen Ferguson, and together they begin to pick apart flaws in the home's construction. The gargantuan staircase in the foyer is three sizes too large for its space—though it's a perfect pitch "if you're a billy goat," Harrison deadpans.

They proceed through the house, the couple throwing out a Christmas list of ideas as Harrison sketches, comments, and raises the occasional eyebrow at inappropriate architectural details—the apropos-of-nothing columns and octagonal recessed ceiling in the dining room, for instance.

"Could y'all just bring in a wrecking ball for this whole room here?" the wife laughs. Harrison simply smiles—as if he's thinking, *that really might not be such a bad idea.*

Then Harrison, Ferguson, and the couple sit down at the kitchen table, and what begins next is Harrison's forte—a combination brainstorming/therapy session in which he listens to the client's ideas, flips through the house's plans, and subtly divines where to focus his efforts. He approaches these conversations the way a gold prospector does a creek, watching the flow and keeping a careful eye out for a usable tidbit. As the couple discusses their hopes, dreams, and fears for this project, Harrison's most common refrain is a soft "mm hmm, mm hmm," encouraging them to continue talking until they've given him the information he needs.

The initial client meeting is the space for floating trial balloons, and today is no exception. The wife offers up a novel idea for the back deck—a two-tiered pond, one level cascading into the other, with a fireplace set behind the waterfall. She sketches it out as Harrison looks on with curiosity.

"You'd have to turn off the water to get the fire lit, wouldn't you?" he asks, without a hint of condescension. Of course, when he gives a back-of-the-envelope estimate of the cost—probably somewhere around 20 grand—suddenly the waterfall-slash-fireplace doesn't seem so entrancing, and the couple turn their focus to more practical matters.

"It's a neat idea," he says later, "but I think the money could be better spent elsewhere. And she agreed with me, which is always nice."

Harrison's title reads "architect," but he may as well add "therapist," "spiritual guru," "midwife," and "marriage coun-



The elaborate columns and symmetry of this Harrison-designed Buckhead estate reflect his appreciation for classical architecture.

selor" to that job description. Sometimes clients—particularly the married ones—seek Harrison's approval like squabbling siblings. One member of the duo—generally the wife—revels in his acknowledgment that her ideas inspired by magazines and HGTV are, in fact, feasible. The other spouse—yes, usually the husband—takes satisfaction in Harrison's admission that, while a naked-Cupid fountain indeed *can* be built in the bedroom, that doesn't necessarily mean it *should* be.

Usually, couples reach a happy medium. Usually. "One time, I had a couple get into a fistfight right in front of me," Harrison says, still stunned at the memory. "We were talking about something to do with a renovation—I don't even remember what. But he slapped her, and then she absolutely clocked him. They didn't end up becoming clients."

WHEN A YOUNG BOY SAYS he wants to grow up to be an astronaut or centerfielder for the Braves, adults tend to nod politely and wait until he makes a more considered choice. But when he announces that he wants to be an architect—and begins drawing up blueprints before he's old enough to drive—his elders start paying attention.

"When I was born, my family lived in a Greek Revival home," Harrison recalls. "About the only thing I remember were these four big white columns. But I was surrounded by all this gorgeous architecture in Macon. I'm certain that had some influence on me as I was growing up." As a 12-year-old, he interned at a local architecture firm and sketched an apartment building and a home renovation.

Harrison continued working in the field while attending Georgia Tech. After graduation, he embarked on a five-year tour of Europe and the Americas. But unlike many post-grads who use travel to dodge a career, Harrison was building the foundations for one. He researched the architecture of a dozen cultures—from Italian Palladian villas to Mexican haciendas—and observed principles on which he still relies today.

He also took some more philosophical lessons to heart. "What I learned was how passionate people are about the architecture of their communities," he says. "You see it in Italy, in France, in what were then the Eastern Bloc countries. They all have a sense of pride in their community, and the architecture is simply gorgeous."

Harrison himself appreciates a wide variety of architectural styles. "But 'style' is a bad way to judge a building," he demurs. "You need to judge by context. Is it well proportioned? Is it a good design? Does it fit well with its surroundings? As long it's in context, I like all kinds of styles." He admires what Elsie de Wolfe, America's first celebrity designer, would have called "suitability," pointing to the Swan House, the Fox Theatre, and the Academy of Medicine as exemplary marriages of design, context, and style.

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The desire for sanctity, for “quality time,” is also at the heart of Harrison’s architectural philosophy. People tend to see their homes “as sort of a refuge,” he explains. “In the world today, people are completely bombarded by confusion, information, and change. People as a general rule don’t like that, but they can’t get away—they’re mesmerized.” Harrison recognizes that Atlantans want to feel a sense of insulation in their homes, a chance to shut out the outside world. But he also believes that insulation shouldn’t equal isolation—that homes should be built on a “human scale,” as he puts it.

Known for designing 30,000-square-foot megamansions, Harrison is quick to point out that “human scale” doesn’t necessarily mean 8-foot ceilings. He adheres to classical tenets such as the Golden Triangle—a ratio of roughly 1 to 1.6, which, for centuries, has served as the standard proportion of height to width. Preserve that ratio, and even a vast space feels “appropriate” to most sensibilities. But deviate too far, and the room feels like a bowling alley or an elevator shaft. “People relate to certain proportions like the Golden Triangle,” Harrison explains. “If you design with these spaces in mind, people will be comfortable with them, even on a very large scale.”

Last summer, *The New York Times* referenced—and tarred by association—Harrison Design Associates in a story on the immense “McMansions” and “McBoathouses” mushrooming on the shores of Lake Rabun. The article—which smacked of more than a little Yankee condescension—sniffed at “younger, newer money in Atlanta” and the developers more than willing to take their money to create “full-blown follies” of design.

Harrison shrugs off the criticism. Scale, context, and materials—not square footage or cost—separate what Harrison would call an “ancestral” estate from a “McMansion.” “McMansions, in my opinion, are ‘fast-food houses,’” he says. “They’re cheap, large houses on small lots. They’re not built to last. They don’t have any kind of contextual sense, and they don’t use quality materials.”

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Too much of a gentleman to name names, Harrison admits, "There are several examples of bad buildings around town. There are things people do that say, 'Look at me! Look at me!' Those are very obvious. They're like a bad billboard."

Homes that aspire to a higher standard, Harrison believes, can create a sense of harmony. "People want more open floor plans, more interesting spaces, more light," he says. "They don't so much care for the big barns any longer. They want honesty in material—if it's stone, it's real stone; if it's gold, it's real gold."

LIKE "BARTENDER" OR "NOVELIST," "architect" is one of those jobs everyone seems to believe he or she could do: *I played with Legos and Lincoln Logs as a kid. How hard could designing a house be?* Part of Harrison's task is gently reining in some of his more zealous clients.

"I think one of the things that people make a mistake in is overdesigning," he says. "Someone who's doing a house for the first time is like a kid in a candy store—they want a bite of everything. But kids will eat until they throw up. If you have a bite of this, a bite of that [in a house plan], there's no coherent design. A striped jacket, a polka-dot shirt, and a plaid tie would work individually, but put them all together and they're horrendous."

"When you have a client, it's their money, their property, their program," Harrison says. "An architect has a responsibility to listen to that and respond to it. If they want a bank of TVs, give them a bank of TVs. It's not your responsibility to tell them how to live. Where you draw the line is where the client wants you to do something that's a) not functional, b) going to be ugly, or c) not going to hold up over time. All those things are creating liabilities not only for the client but for you as an architect."

Financial and aesthetic concerns aside, Harrison also has a professional interest. "We tell clients that it's your house, your project, but if it comes off badly, people will blame the architect," he says. "It's your house, but it's our reputation." ❊

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