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Designing Legacies

William Harrison, AIA, Brings His Southern Charm And Elegance West

BY LYNN MORGAN



OPPOSITE This Santa Barbara bungalow pays homage to the traditional Spanish influences of the California coastline designed with clay tile roof, large overhangs, exposed wood rafters, wrought iron doors and window grates, and landscaped with indigenous plants. BELOW Large windows in the breakfast room bring in natural light and provide views of the Santa Ynez Mountains in the distance.



“After building an acclaimed architectural practice on the East Coast, principals Bill Harrison, AIA and Greg Palmer, AIA, looked westward, bringing Harrison Design Associates’ refined vision of classical architecture to clients in Santa Barbara and Beverly Hills.

“We had several clients who had moved west, and were talking to us about new projects for them,” Harrison says. “Soon after Greg and I met Tony Spann, AIA, who had a well known firm in Santa Barbara, he came on board as managing partner of our Santa Barbara office.”

The first project Harrison Design Associates completed in Santa Barbara was a Design House, in Montecito. The site was majestic, a hilltop lot overlooking Santa Barbara’s coastline and bay. Harrison Design Associates crafted a graceful, Spanish inspired Mediterranean villa. “All of the stone that was used was quarried on-site; we used the leftover boulders for retaining walls. Every house should have the context, the soil and the stone of its environment integrated into its design.”

Although new, the house fit seam-

lessly into the town’s history and fiercely guarded heritage. “The president of the Architectural Review Board said it was a fine contribution to the architectural integrity of Santa Barbara,” the architect is proud to note.

History is at the core of Bill Harrison’s aesthetic and architectural philosophy. “We are classically trained,” he says. “Whether we are creating traditional or modern homes, every project adheres to the fundamental principles of classical design.”

The Santa Barbara office has become the busiest; the other three located in Atlanta, Beverly Hills and St. Simons, Georgia. Currently, Harrison Design Associates is working on projects including renovations and historic restorations of the Proscenium, an old Spanish fort, and the oldest house in all of Santa Barbara.

The firm’s newest outpost is located on Wilshire Boulevard in Beverly Hills, surrounded by a vibrant, cosmopolitan mix of fashion, design and—yes—architecture, despite the city’s undesired rep-



utation for callous teardowns and often, overlooked mansionization.

"It is exciting to be in Beverly Hills during a time when the city and its residents are reclaiming their architectural heritage. Contributing to the restoration of historic homes and neighborhoods gives greater meaning to our work; it makes us proud to be here."

As much concerned with educating the public about substantive design as he is with creating it, Bill is on the board of the Institute of Classical Architecture & Classical America in New York, dedicated to both training new architects and educating the public about architectural history. "People are becoming more interested and more knowledgeable about architecture," he says, "but they're not as well-versed in its history, and context and proportion are learned from the past."

The firm designs houses in a wide variety of styles: Italianate villas, Monterey style houses, Tudor inspired manors, imposing Georgians, and Arts

and Crafts style bungalows in the Greene & Greene vernacular. What they all have in common is Bill Harrison's encyclopedic knowledge of architectural history and unwavering dedication to quality.

"Any style of architecture can be well done if it's got the right proportions and it's made of substantive materials," he says. "You don't place a monumental house on a lot that is too small. We use *real* clay tiles for roofs, not concrete, and we work with high quality stone. Ornamentation needs to be *carved* in stone, not pre-cast and applied with Gorilla Glue."

Bill Harrison and his team of talented professionals have a passion for creating legacies. To make sure his artistic vision is translated into enduring reality, he works with a carefully selected group of contractors, including Tyler Construction, the JD Group, and Finton Associates—builders with artisans' sensibilities and respect for fine materials and timeless craftsmanship.

Currently, the firm is also working

ABOVE LEFT A curved corner fireplace in the kitchen provides a focal point with Southwestern flair. The detailed art niche and decorative tile insets reappear throughout the home. ABOVE RIGHT Natural materials and the application of stone on the base of the house and the retaining walls, custom wrought iron on balconies, and garden structures unite the home and grounds.



A series of classically inspired groin vaults and arches take on an easy elegance when treated in soft earth-toned plaster. ABOVE Principals of Harrison Design Associates are (from left) Bill Harrison, AIA, Tony Spann, AIA, and Greg Palmer, AIA.



on several projects in and around Los Angeles: "We're working on a house in Bel-Air, a 24,000 square foot Italianate villa, and a Palladian style villa at the crest of Bel-Air," he says. "We're doing some renovation projects in Hancock Park; we're working on a house in Brentwood, and projects in Calabasas and Hidden Hills.

"What we hope we are bringing to Los Angeles is a sense of the Bel-Air heritage. What we've received from both Los Angeles and Santa Barbara is an openness toward experimentation. We've learned to manipulate light and colors in California."

Bill Harrison doesn't "copy" old houses. He has adapted his rigorous, classically inspired vision to the California lifestyle, without sacrificing authenticity. "California is very diverse and so are our clients. LA houses are very bright and open, and there are huge amounts of outdoor living. People's loggias can be their family rooms; they need as much attention as interior spaces."

It is vital for this architect to design in harmony with the community and the environment. "I ask clients, 'What do you like about this area? Why do you want to live here?' I want to respect the context of the neighborhood." He strives to design houses that will satisfy his clients' deepest yearnings for "home." "When you do high-end design, it's not about *need*; it's about *desire*. Our clients want their houses to recall or evoke a powerful memory or a fantasy. We aim to give people what they want, and make it better than they ever dreamed."

Bill Harrison has traveled the world to study architecture and to deepen his knowledge of history and art. "You can look at all the books in the world, but architecture is not derived that way," he insists. "You have to see it in person to fully understand it." Ultimately, Bill Harrison wants to create "huggable" houses. "They make you feel good to see them, and they make us feel good about designing them." ■