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DETAILS, DETAILS

William T. Baker brings to Greenwich his “discerning eye for what is, or is not, good taste”

BY MICHAEL ALLAN TORRE

LUSHNESS IN STONE A Corinthian capital in an Atlanta residence designed by William T. Baker, a fervent champion of the classical style that flourished in ancient Greece and Rome. Exquisitely carved by hand, this ornate capital, with its traditional acanthus leaves, shows a visual correspondence with the small flowered brackets above it. But before the fine craftsmanship of the stonemason who did the carving came the fine craftsmanship of the architect who did the construction drawings: To achieve so successful a result, the architect's rendering and enlarging or reducing of accepted classical forms, proportions, and scaling had to meet an exacting standard.

“There is no accounting for taste,” the ancient adage goes. But William T. Baker, principle and founder of an internationally recognized architecture firm, is sure of this: There *is* such a thing as *good* taste. His new book, *Architectural Excellence in a Diverse World Culture*, puts it firmly: “The person who trains his eye to discern proper scale, proportion, the rhythms of Nature, and fine ornament, can be said to have good taste; the person who does not, and whose love falls short of it, can be said to have faulty taste.”

Architectural Excellence acknowledges that most people are reluctant to express so bold a judgment, for they believe that taste is a matter of personal opinion: “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” They are wrong: There *are* absolutes or principles on which to make aesthetic judgments, Baker writes, and it is those on the academic and professional level who have the discernment to make them.

For Baker, good taste (at least, good taste in architecture) means a sympathy for the principles of architectural excellence. “In the larger sense,” he writes, “classicism is a state of perfection, as old and as new as architecture itself. When

fully developed, it expresses an aesthetic truth that stands the test of time. Its methods are repeatable because its design principles are clear and definable.... True classicism ennobles a society and enhances the dignity of its people.”

Baker has brought his passion for classicism and his eye for detail to Connecticut, with the opening of William T. Baker & Associates, in Greenwich.

Growing up the son of “a nationally acclaimed furniture designer” helped Baker develop, at an early age, his talent for drawing and his scrupulousness about detail. Two books influenced his design beliefs: William Ware’s *The American Vignola* and Edith Wharton’s *The Decoration of Houses*. Through them, he told me, “I came to understand the principles of classicism and to develop a discerning eye for what is, or is not, in good taste.”

Though he studied business finance as an undergraduate (and has earned an MBA), Baker found a way to put his innate love for drawing and his scrupulous attention to detail to good use: Early in his career, a real-estate developer in Atlanta gave him a highly responsible job—verifying that the homes were actually being built according to the



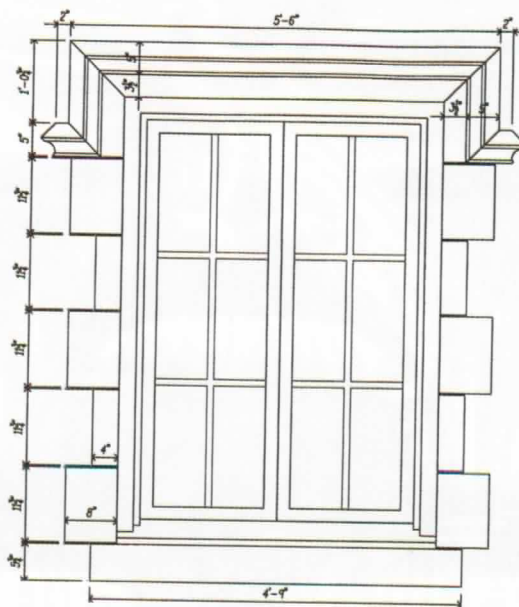
LIMESTONE PEDIMENT (This page, top left): The keystoned pediment, of limestone, over a window in another Baker-designed house in Atlanta is a perfect counterpoint to the red brick—and keeps rain away.

GRANDEUR IN WOOD (This page, center, far left): This Baker-designed, hand-crafted stair gallery is worthy of an English country estate. Over time, hand polishing will make it even more majestic.

CLARITY COUNTS (This page, center, left): A dark line drawing of a window in the Baker-designed Burfitt residence, in Atlanta.

ELEGANT CURVES (This page, bottom left): The butter-smooth carving of the brackets supporting a curved pediment reinforces the notion of a grand entry that promises more visual delights within.

SOLID ILLUSION (Opposite page): The front elevation of the Burfitt house is an example of superb design and a cunning use of stone in modern construction. Though it uses stone veneer (like the majority of 21st-century houses), the exterior is meant to look like that of a traditional “hand-crafted” stone house—and it does.



architect’s plans and detailed drawings. He transitioned into home design. One of his first houses he was asked to design—the Krone house, a grand Georgian, with hand-carved limestone details, in Buckhead, an exclusive Atlanta suburb—earned him Classical America’s Arthur Ross Award for the “splendid residence in the classical manner built in Atlanta, it reflects the power and permanence of architectural knowledge honed to perfection by Baker’s hard work and attention to detail.”

The Krone residence is just one of the impressive houses designed by Baker that are featured in his 2004 book *New Classicists: William T Baker*. Details of some of those houses are showcased in this article.

William Baker’s greatest achievement may be the fine crafting of the exterior stone in the Gothic Revival Burfitt house. Today, residences are rarely built as tra-

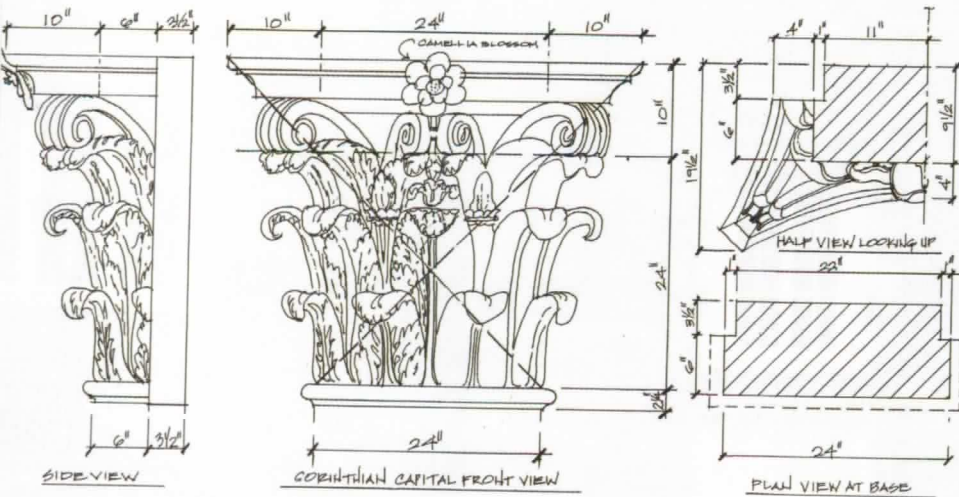


VISUAL HARMONY (This page, top left): Baker designed this residence so that the details on the interior and the exterior communicate with each other. The brackets, dentils, and other details inside are miniatures of those on the exterior.

EXACTLY SO (This page, center left): This is the drawing that showed the stonemason how to go about carving the beautiful capital shown at the beginning of this article. Such a superior result cannot be achieved unless there is continuous involvement between the designer and the craftsman executing the work.

MANIFEST GRACE (This page, lower left): Only a lifetime of apprenticeship and practice would prepare a modern-day "blacksmith" for the task at hand here.

PLASTER ART (Opposite page): Artful hand-laying of plaster and the creation of ceiling medallions—like those in this Baker-designed home—are rare skills. That's why, if you're renovating an old home, you'd be wise to save the ceiling medallions, if you can.



ditional stone homes. Rather, they are built of stone veneer applied over a framed wall and resting upon a concrete shelf that is part of the foundation wall. The problem of the architect and the stone craftsman is this: Can a stone veneer exterior be designed and executed to appear as if it were built in the traditional method, with its solid and very thick (18 inches or more) dressed stone? Renowned architect Robert A. M. Stern can do it—and so, on the evidence of the Burfitt residence, can William T. Baker. The Burfitt house achieves so high a level of design and execution that it appears to be a substantial and permanent "real stone house." **TME**

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