

profile

# ALVIN HOLM: An Odyssey From Curtain Walls To The Corinthian

Philadelphia-based architect Alvin Holm spent his youth worshipping modernist dogma, and then switched to classicism in the 1970's, with no small amount of angst. Now he's devoted to guiding the rest of the profession to the light.

BY EVE M. KAHN

"Converts are always the most zealous," he says. He likes to call modernism "largely bullshit"; he likes to call classicism "a fountain of continuous nourishment that transcends fashion." He is not embarrassed by the streamlined steel-and-glass schools, hospitals, and factories he designed before his conversion; "I was a happy modernist," he says. But he is far prouder of the offices, restaurants, mansions, and skyscrapers he has designed in the pure classical mode. And although he is soft-spoken and far from arrogant, he will not rest until a larger percentage of the profession follows his lead.

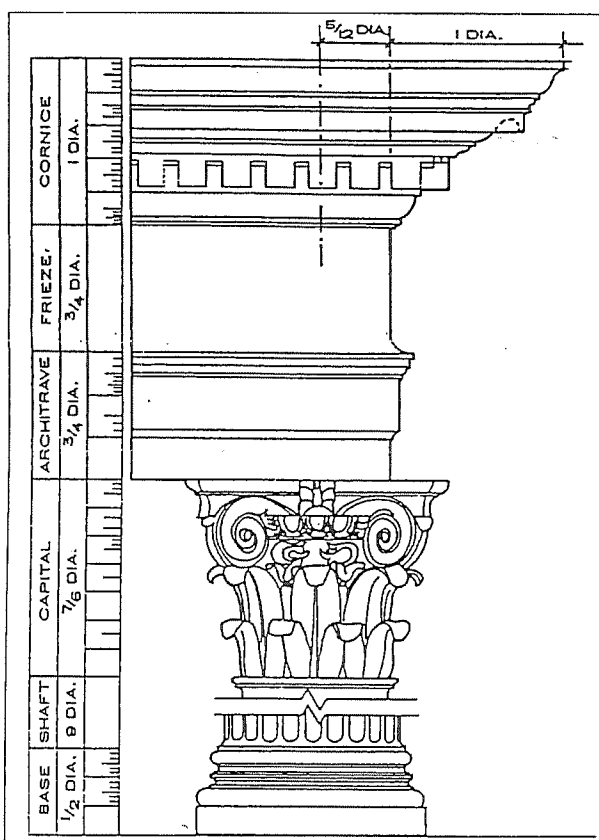
"I'm not saying all buildings should be classical, but we have to go back and look at what we've lost, and schools have to teach the classical basics first, the way the modernist masters learned them," he says. "If we can do that, whatever comes after will be all right."

Numerous other architects have taken up the classical banner (see *Traditional Building*, Nov./Dec. 1990 for more examples). What sets Holm apart is both the intensity of his devotion and the unexpected intellectual places it has led him. He studies and lectures on feng shui, geomancy

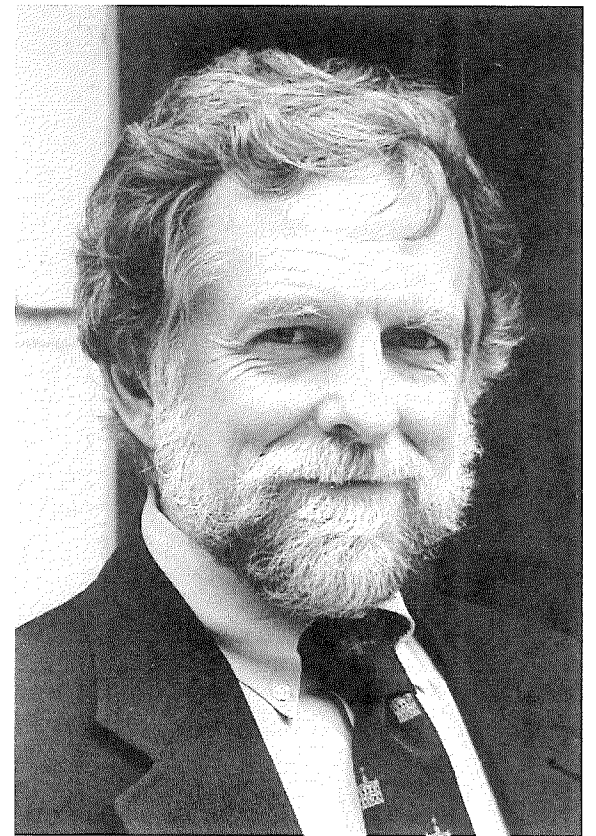
(a.k.a. dowsing), and American prehistoric architecture, from phallic stone statues in Vermont to Phoenician directional carvings on Pennsylvania boulders. While he seldom incorporates his extracurricular interests into his architecture, he does find reinforcement in them for his faith in classicism. "Menhirs, or standing-stone precursors of classical columns, exist in all cultures — Nordic, South Pacific, Oriental — and often they're placed at the intersections of energy lines in the earth, like giant acupuncture needles," he says. "They represent the gods; they are the link between the terrestrial and the spiritual."

## A Bauhausian Upbringing

His childhood in Oak Park, Illinois, sparked his interest in architecture. "I thought all towns had as many Frank Lloyd Wright buildings as mine did," he says. His older sister, an art student of Moholy-Nagy, had inculcated Holm in Bauhaus beliefs by



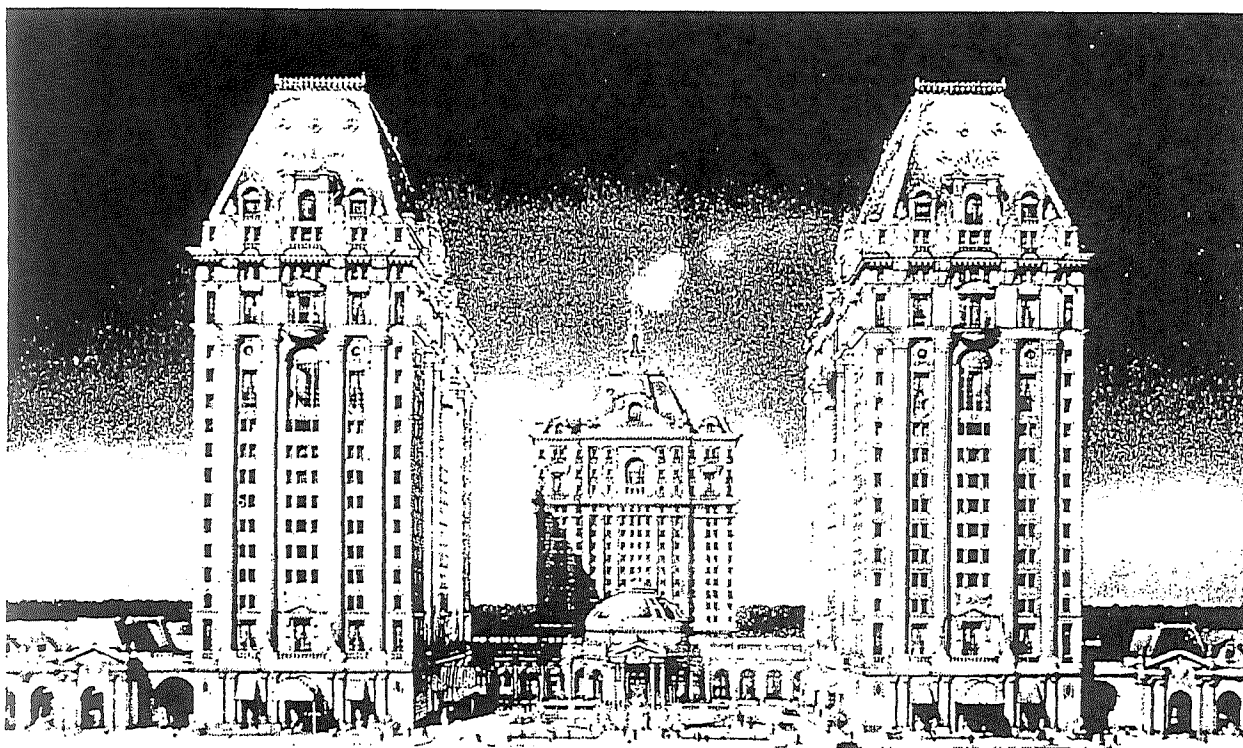
Holm's office put the classical orders back into *Architectural Graphic Standards*, after a 50-year absence. Drawings by David Kulick & Roy Lewis



the time he was a teenager, and during his freshman year at Yale in 1954-5 three equally powerful forces took hold: He read Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead*; dated a steely beauty who reminded him of Dominique, the novel's heroine; and enrolled in a course taught by the legendary Vincent Scully.

"My eyes were really opened," he says (but he adds that he no longer regards Scully as "revealed truth"). "It quickly became apparent I was an architect," Holm says, "but I never thought of being anything but a modernist. I learned about the rise and fall of styles and thought we were in the middle of a rise. And classicism, I was taught, was the architecture of the enemy, of fascism and communism; we were never told how universal and flexible it could be." He followed Louis Kahn ("my idol back then") when Kahn left Yale to head the University of Pennsylvania's architecture school and earned his graduate degree there. After two years of firm-hopping, he settled at Vincent G. Kling and Partners: "Kling might not end up in the history books," says Holm, "but he built half of downtown Philadelphia — and hundreds of fine hospitals and schools elsewhere."

Doubts did not disturb Holm's contentment until 1969, when the federal government asked Kling to complete Federal Triangle in Washington, D.C., a 1920's monolith that was missing a few pieces. Kling surprised all by deciding to make his additions indistinguishable from the older portions of the structure. "It was very moving to hear Kling, who has a big ego, say he wanted to be invisible," says Holm, who spent the next two years developing Kling's plans. Holm took to the project slowly. "But once I got into the spirit of it, studying old buildings and drawings," he says, "it was delicious; it felt wonderful." Then Kling asked his estimating department to price the project three ways: in a modernist mode; in a traditional mode; and in a combination of the two. All three versions cost about the same. So Holm learned that classicism is not only friendly but also economical. "I'd been taught that traditional work was unavailable, and if it was available it was too expensive," he says. (The project was never built, and now another classical scheme for the site is underway, designed by Pei Cobb Freed & Partners, another set of modernists who have changed their tunes.)



Holm's plan for a hotel, retail, and office complex in San Antonio shows how classicism can be adapted for buildings large and small

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**Retreating from Modernism**

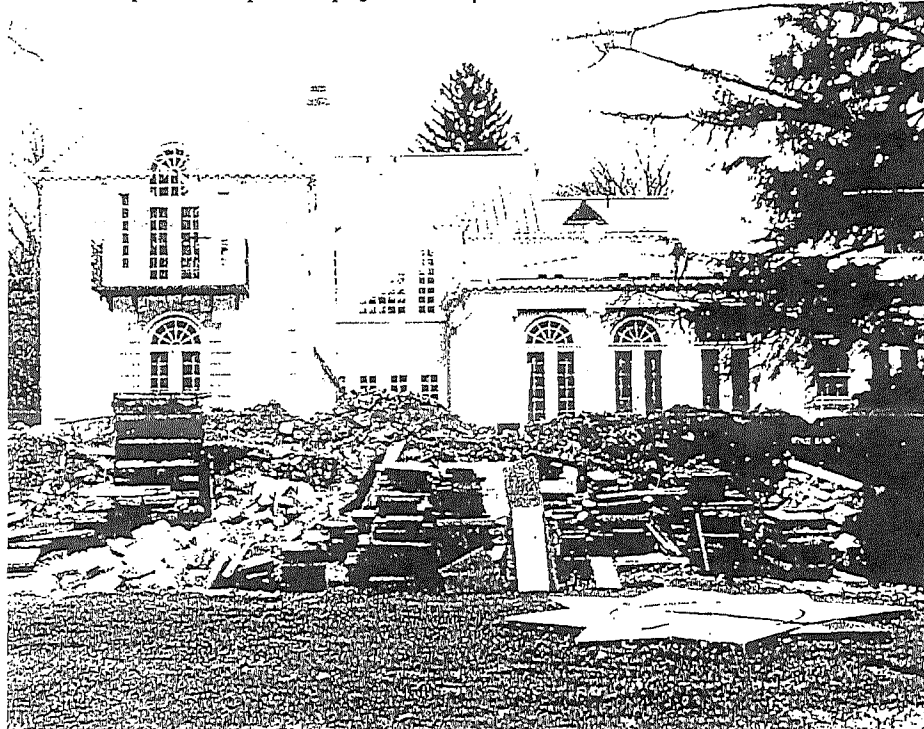
After a recession struck in the early '70s, Holm discovered more gaps in his schooling. He began hunting restoration jobs for Kling, since no more schools or office towers were needed, and realized that no one would entrust vintage structures to the firm. "The work went to the older guys with small firms who'd been languishing, and who'd been trained before the war and who understood traditional construction techniques," says Holm. By the mid '70s, with "Roots" and the Bicentennial inspiring widespread interest in heritage, Holm's already shaky commitment to modernism collapsed.

"I decided we had created a world that was not as nice as the one we had replaced," he says. "And all that honesty nonsense about a building expressing its structure or its mechanics — the average person passing by couldn't care less. I realized all old buildings are lovable and new buildings, except for a very few products of individual genius, are just so much lifeless, joyless junk." He left Kling in 1976 and undertook two c.-1800 house-museum restorations: The George Read II House and Eleutherian Mills, a complex that includes the E. I. DuPont residence and nearby gunpowder mills, all in Delaware. The former had changed little since its construction, and Holm spent months minutely examining its components. The latter, which had been blown to bits six times in its lifetime and rebuilt each time in the neoclassical style of the day, allowing Holm to view the many possible incarnations of his soon-to-be favorite style. When he began teaching architectural history at the Art Institute of Philadelphia in 1978,

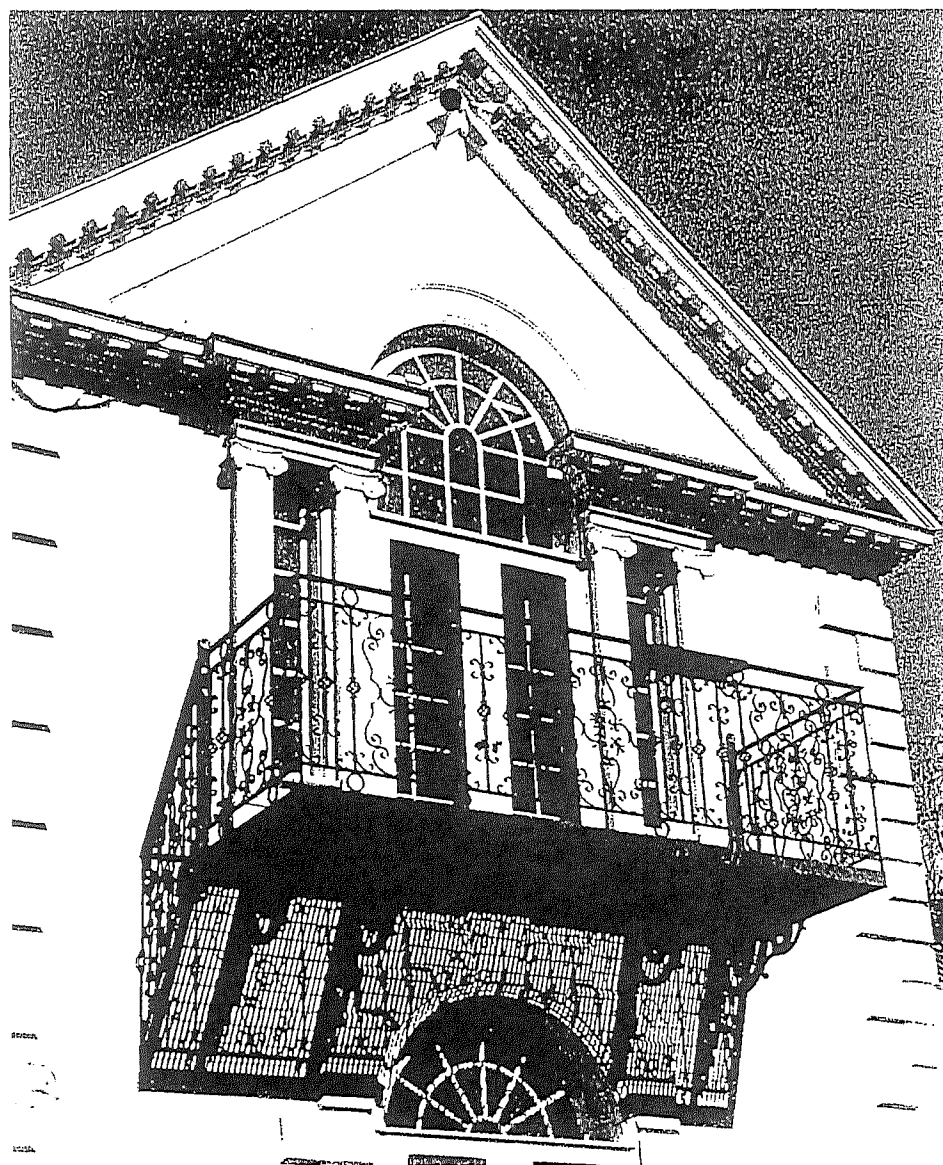
"As I read up to prepare for the course," he says, "classicism kept recurring, both chronologically and geographically. I realized that it is politically neutral, and it can go anywhere, in any material, with any local labor. The Romans built the same temples and villas and baths in the desert that they built in the English countryside. It truly is the International Style. That same year he re-read *The Golden City* by Henry Hope Reed, founder of Classical America. He contacted Reed and adopted him as his mentor, and at Reed's suggestion he enrolled in a drawing course taught by Pierce Rice, a director of Classical America. Holm took the course five times in a row: "It permanently altered my approach not only to drawing but to design in general." So far his classical projects include a Palladian garage and car wash, several rich woodwork-lined restaurants, a dozen residential and commercial renovations, and a handful of from-the-ground-up homes, the most recent being a Palladian country house for H. C. Frick II. Holm has found that classicism makes life easier on the job site: "Even for workmen who've never done anything in the style before, it makes sense, it seems like something that comes from a higher authority rather than a whim." Among his prize designs are a plan (as yet unbuilt) for a four-tower office/retail/hotel complex in San Antonio and a domed float which led Bush's inaugural parade and is based on verbal descriptions of a parade structure that celebrated the 1787 signing of the Constitution. Not that the style's witty side has escaped him; he has proposed to transform Philadelphia's City Hall into a giant birthday cake (with candles on every cornice) and to plant an eighty-foot statue of Bacchus with drink in hand in Manhattan's Times Square.

He also takes great pride in the many ways his office has enabled other practitioners to enjoy classicism. For example, the office produced the drawings for reinstating classical orders into *Architectural Graphic Standards* after a 50-year absence. Holm has also taught the style to hundreds of eager acolytes: Since 1981 he has offered a course in classical fundamentals at Manhattan's National Academy of Design, under the auspices of Classical America (and he attributes much of what he now teaches to Reed and Rice). Several of Holm's former students (including Donald Rattner, *Traditional Building's* Nov./Dec. 1990 profile) offer versions of his course around the country; and Martin Brandwine, another former student, is now taking over Holm's National Academy course. Although pleased with classicism's reawakening, Holm is not yet complacent; he regrets that not every structure he sees meets Palladian or Vignolan standards, and he remains modest about his own contribution to the movement. "It's the perennial philosophy

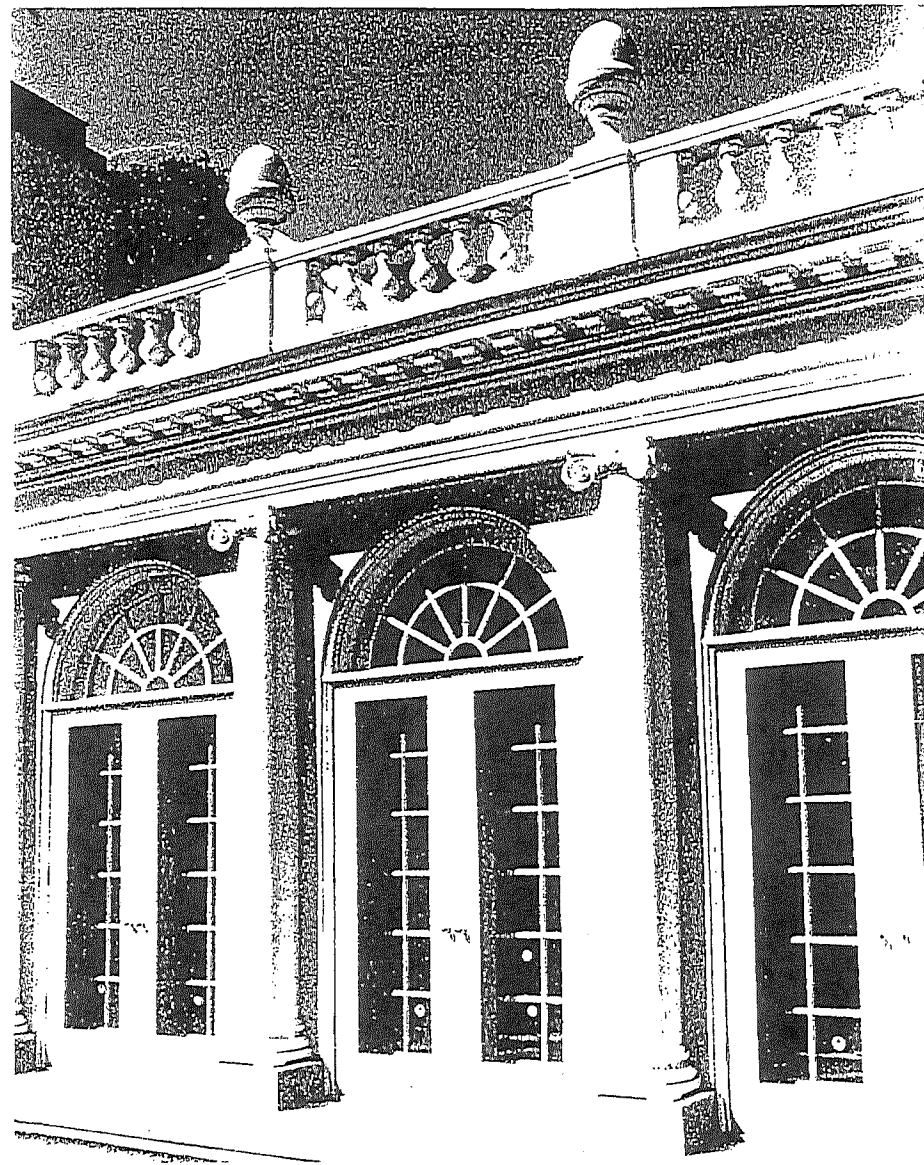
he considers classicism one of humankind's more sophisticated efforts to, reach the essence of Platonic truth; and he believes that while the style may wander in and out of the mainstream, it will never vanish. He worries that he sounds a little New Age when expounding these theories, but he is nonetheless driven by them. "Look at this Corinthian capital," he says, pulling a stone one off a shelf in his office. "The same number of leaves, the same volutes, the same rosettes appear hundreds of thousands of times, in dozens of diverse materials over several thousand years, but it's not as if it's easy to make one. That gives credibility to the legend of the Athenian sculptor, Callimachus, who created the Corinthian capital as a memorial to a maiden in a form that would never change. Like Athena, it sprang from the head of a man, full-blown and ready to live forever." He puts the capital back on the shelf and gazes fondly at it. "I'm not interested in self-expression at all," he says. "I just want to be part of classicism's massive integrity, and I want to help spread the word." ☐



A classical country house under construction. Associates Ann Sutphin AIA and Tami Siegal ASID were in charge



A Palladian window and ornate iron balcony grace the facade of the house



Stone acorns cap the roof balustrade