

# House Balkenhol in Buchen

FIRM: Ecker Architekten

DESIGNER: Dea Ecker, Dipl. Ing., M Arch, BDA  
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PHOTOGRAPHER: Fotografie Brigida Gonzalez

CLIENT: Sparkasse Neckartal-Odenwald

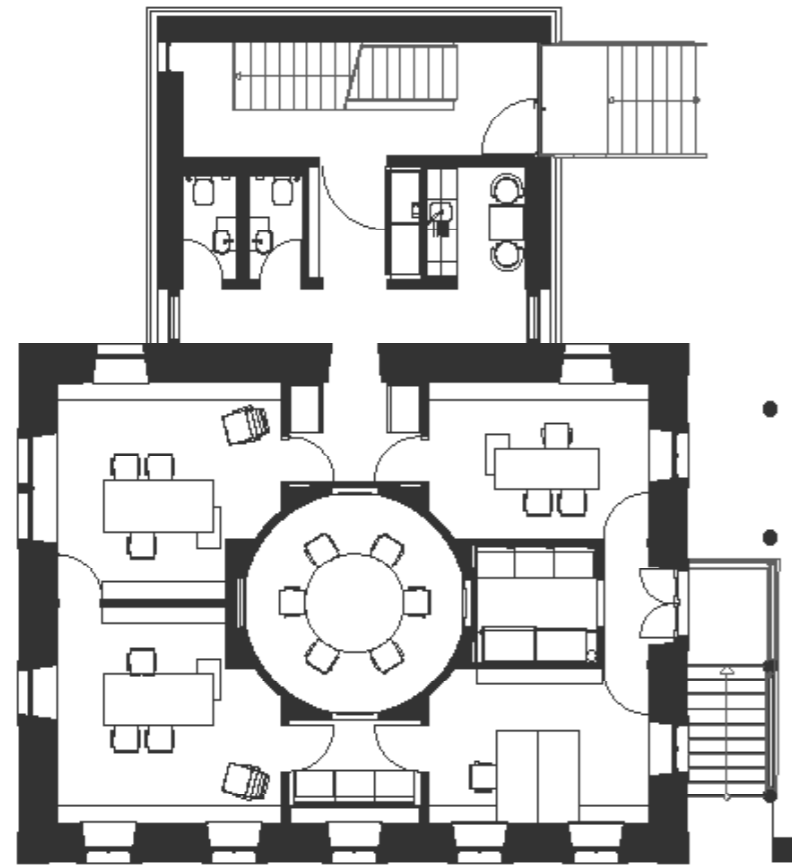
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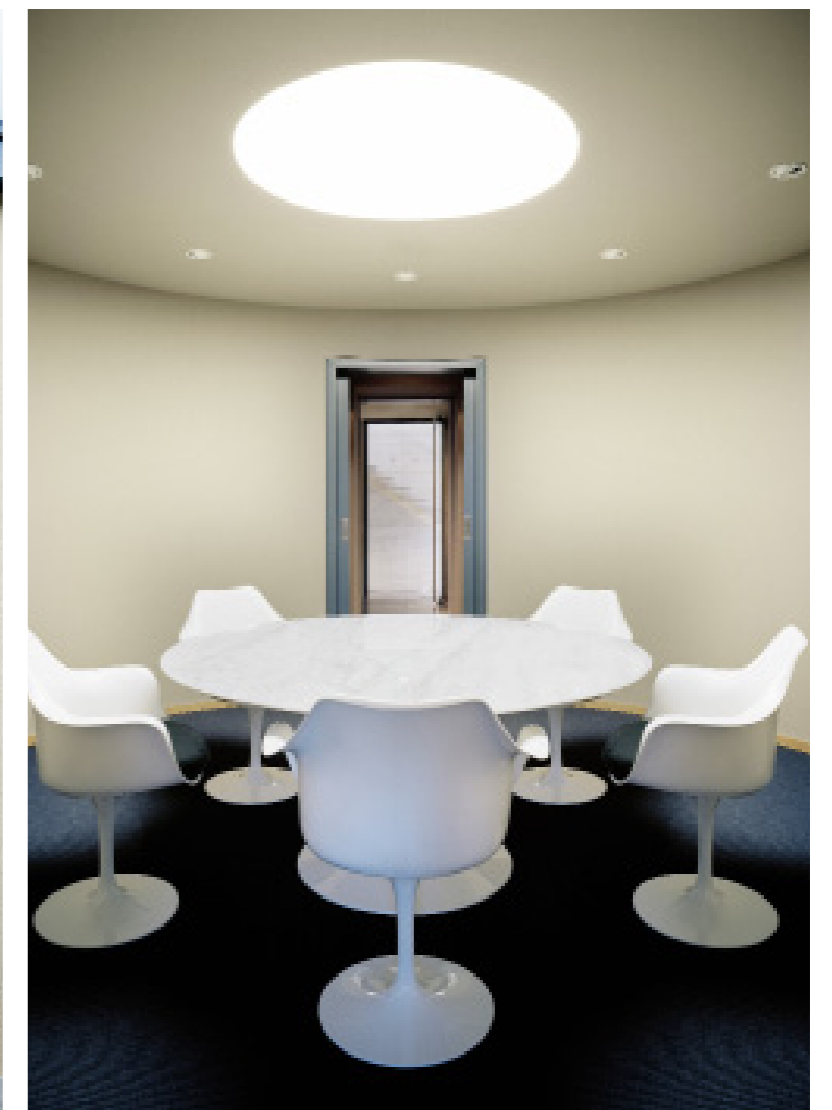
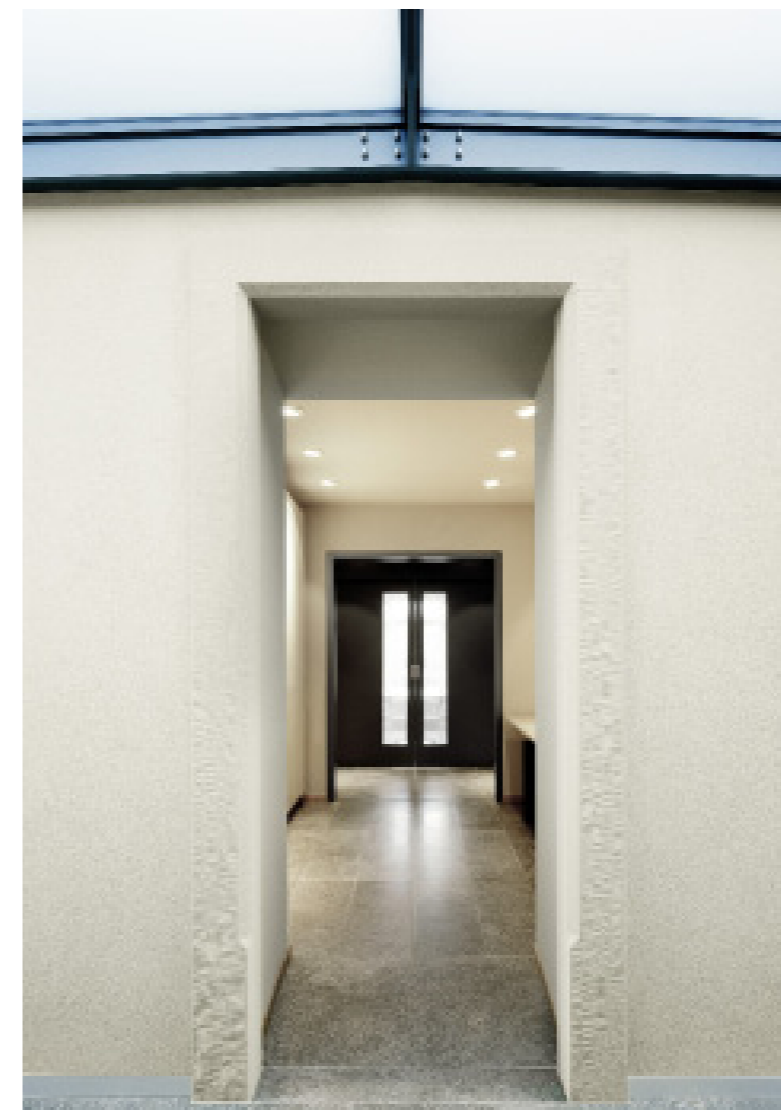
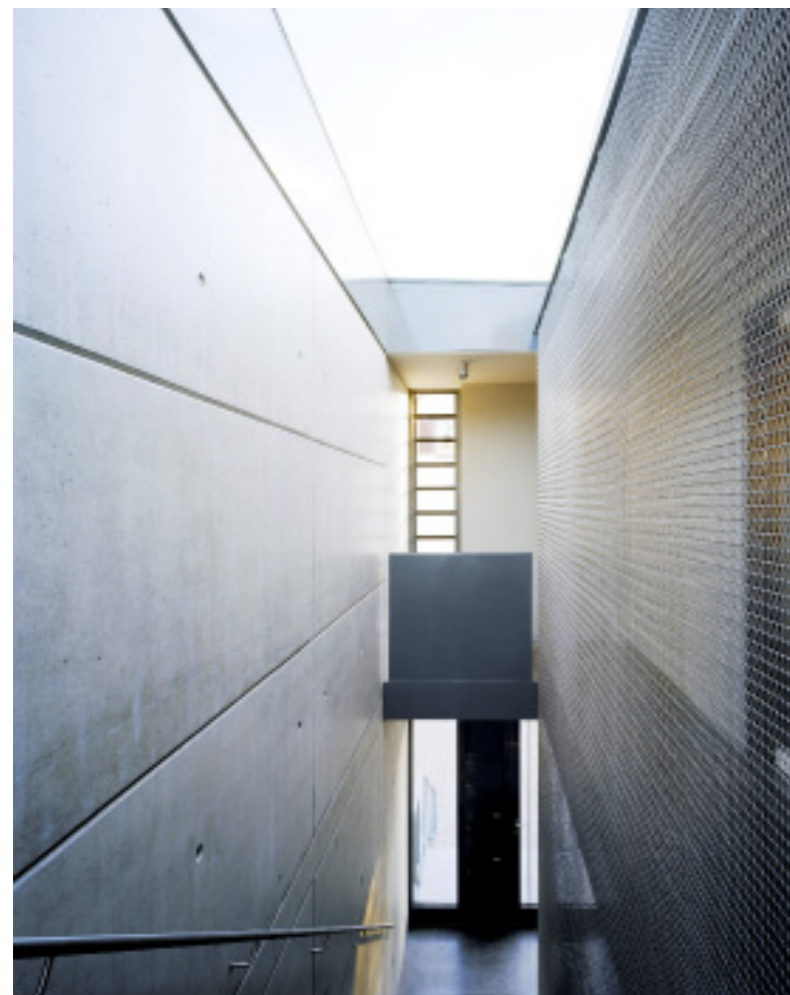
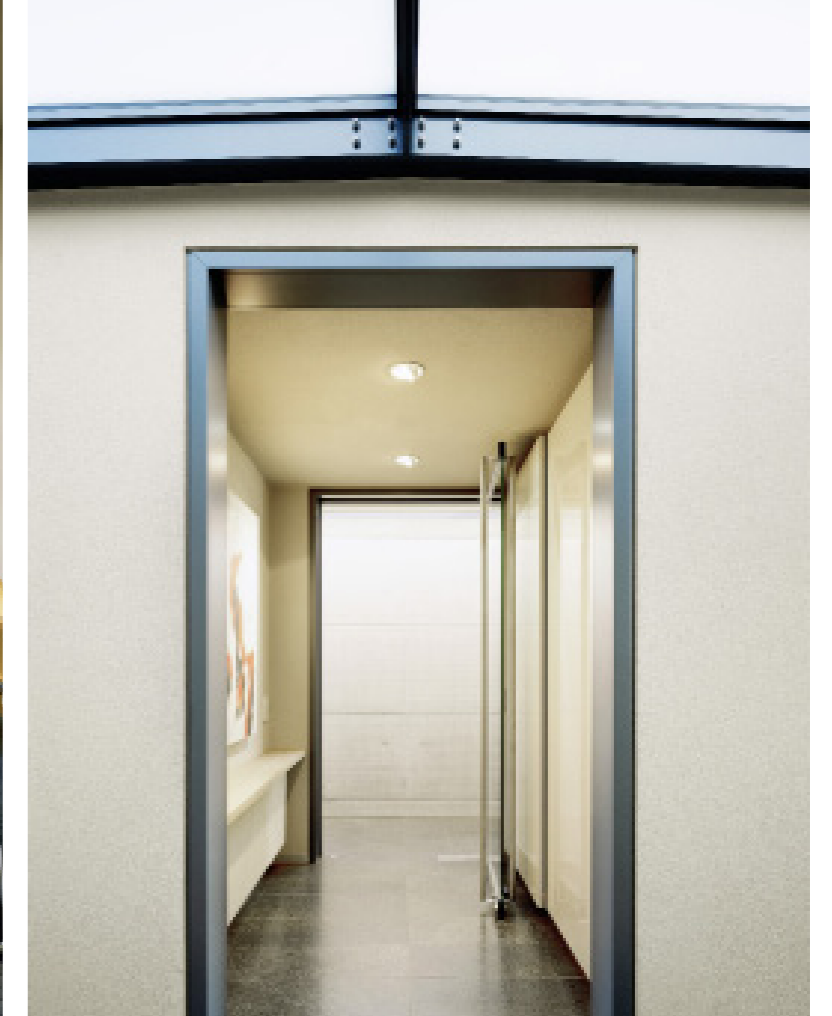
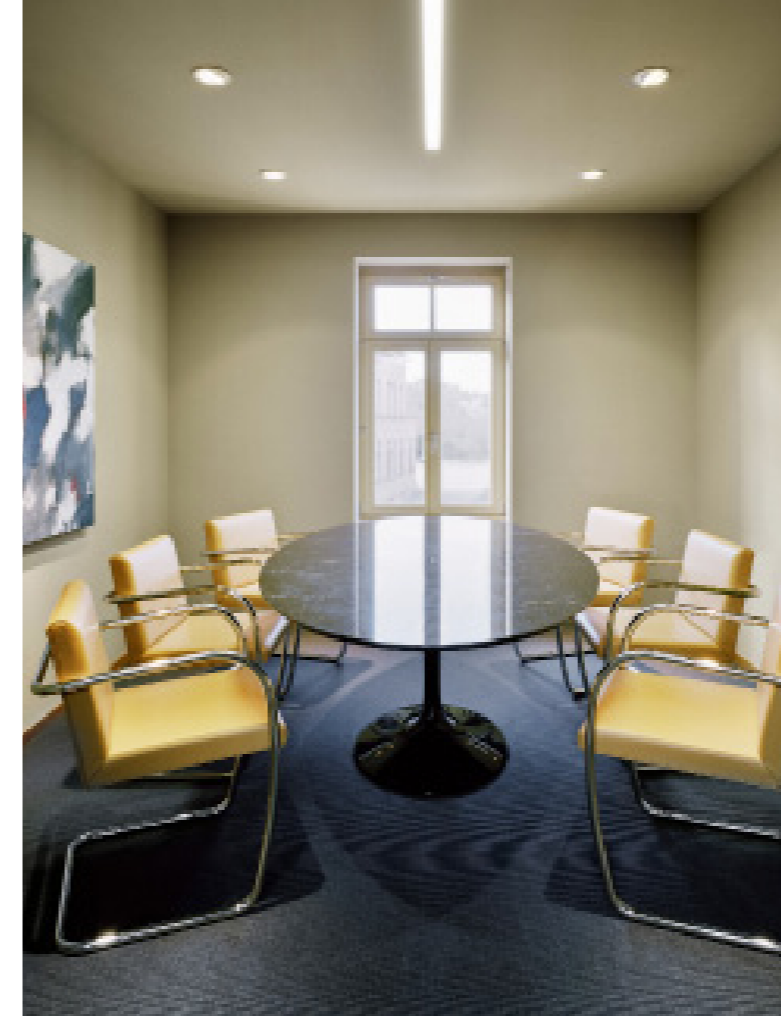
The House Balkenhol is a prominent landmark in the urban fabric of Buchen, a medieval town in North Baden, Germany. The structure, built in 1824, served as the town apothecary until the late 1950s. Ecker Architekten was contacted to develop an approach to renovate the existing structure in a way acceptable to historic preservation regulations, and to bring the building up to the standards of energy efficiency and technological capabilities expected in a modern office building.

This building is protected under historic preservation laws and was renovated as a professional leasing property for law offices and an accounting firm. Built on a massive plinth, the two facades are adorned with sandstone ornament in the neo-classic style. Due to decades of vacancy and neglect, the bearing capacity of the floors no longer met code and the entire building, from the cellar to the rafters, was gutted. The outer envelope was the only remnant of the original structure to remain intact. A former addition to the rear of the existing structure has been replaced by a new centrally-located building core containing stairs, entryways, toilets, wardrobes and break rooms. This aluminum-clad extension is separated by a fully-gazed circulation space that demarks a neutral joint between the historic main building and its modern counterpart. The colors and materials palette creates a harmonious composition of old and new, and restores the luster to this small gem in the Odenwald. The differences between the 'old' and 'new' construction is underscored by two design motifs. The historic building was internally partitioned to reflect the bi-lateral symmetry of the structure. The modern addition was developed in a manner that works against such symmetry, providing a dynamic counterpoint to the formalism of 1824. Additionally, the size and location of windows in the new building contrast sharply with the traditionally-positioned and dimensioned fenestration found in the extant structure.





floor plan



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# FOREWORD

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## Robert Piotrowski, BDIA

*M Arch, Architect, Interior Architect*

*Partner – Ecker Architekten*

### EDUCATION

*Harvard University*

*Graduate School of Design*

*Masters of Architecture with Honors, 1988*

*Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule Zürich*

*Student Exchnage through Harvard University, 1987*

*The School of Architecture and Environmental Design*

*State University of New York at Buffalo*

*Bachelor of Science in Architecture cum laude, 1984*

### MEMBERSHIPS

*Member, Chamber of German Architects in Baden-*

*Württemberg*

*Member, Chamber of German Interior Architects in*

*Baden-Württemberg*

*Member, Marfa Foundation for the Arts, Marfa Texas*

### TEACHING

*Illinois Institute of Technology, College of Architecture,*

*Studio Director, 5th and 6th semester studio*

*University of Southern California, Visiting Design Critic*

*University of California at Los Angeles, Visiting Design Critic*

*Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Visiting Design Critic*

*University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, Visiting Design Critic*

*Illinois Institute of Technology, Paris Program, Droste*

*Visiting Critic*

How does one define the term 'classic' in design? Once determined, how can one apply this definition to original new works of architecture and interior design?

Are cultural and historical styles nothing more than stumbling blocks of progress, which unnecessarily hamper the development and evolution of our living environments, or should they be promoted as a valuable lexicon of continuity in society and cultural history—a living encyclopedia that incessantly breathes new life into architecture and interior design?

Is it possible to foster traditional architecture within a vacuum, with nothing but the context of the modern production of buildings and rapid development as a platform for this undertaking—to attempt to intentionally manufacture a 'classic' environment in the manner one might successfully produce a 'classic' automobile?

As I weighed these questions, and collected my thoughts in preparation for the writing of this foreword, two news articles, recording recent events in the world of design, grasped my attention.

The first announced that the former residence of Liang Sicheng and Lin Huiyin, a traditional Chinese courtyard house in which the internationally-known architect duo had lived during the height of their careers, had been demolished.

Even in its heyday, the house at 24 Beizongbu Hutong was no architectural jewel, just one of a myriad of brick-and-timber courtyard homes that congested the convoluted heart of Beijing. The Ivy League-educated architects, who had returned home to champion the notion that a great nation should hold dear its historic patrimony, had lived in this house from 1931 to 1937. It was from this house that they had set out to execute their field studies in China. They were interested in the study of traditional Chinese architecture and in the preservation of monuments as witness to the immense richness of human knowledge, wisdom and skill. They discovered, among other things, that the Great Buddha Hall at the Nanchan temple on Wutai Mountain in Shanxi is the oldest extant wooden construction in China. The structure was built in 782 during the Tang Dynasty. The results of their research are an important contribution to the conservation and the history of Chinese architecture.

It is tempting to imagine the demise of 24 Beizongbu Hutong as Beijing's Pennsylvania Station moment, when outrage over the demolition of the iconic rail terminus in New York City catalyzed the preservation movement in the United States. But judging by the reported pessimism of the architecture students, history buffs and ordinary citizens who visited the rubble-strewn site, there is little reason to expect any change in the status quo. The building, listed as an official "immovable cultural relic" was easily destroyed by a real estate developer during the Lunar New Year holiday.

The second, and more universally recognized event was the awarding of the 2012 Pritzker Architecture Prize to the architect Wang Shu, whose buildings in a rapidly developing China honor the past with salvaged materials even as they experiment with modern forms. Wang Shu has often commented that he sees himself as a scholar, a craftsman and an architect, in that order. His studio's work is often characterized by spontaneous changes or adaptations in response to the environment and to conditions that may arise during the construction of a project. Wang Shu expresses the belief that humanity is more important than architecture and simple handicraft is more important than technology.

Wang Shu serves as the Dean of the Architectural Faculty at the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou. Last year, he became the first Chinese architect to hold the position of "Kenzo Tange Visiting Professor" at Harvard Graduate School of Design, my Alma mater.

Both of these articles contained the core aspects of the publication I was working with. Both bridged the gulf between Eastern and Western cultures, both contained an earnest respect for the past, both had an interest in continuity and transformation. And both had, in very different ways, something to say about how one might integrate the accumulated knowledge, craftsmanship and expression of a culture into work that improves upon the large majority of professional, soulless design that is practiced today.

The question of the proper relation of present to past is particularly timely, for the recent process of urbanization in China invites a broader and international debate as to whether architecture should be anchored in tradition or should look only toward the future. Every great work of design is able to transcend this debate, producing an architecture that is enduring, deeply rooted in its context and yet universal, regardless of the specific stylistic choices made by the designer.

The Venice Charter (The International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites) of 1964 was a major step towards the conservation of traditional structures and locations. Drafted by European, South American and African delegates, the Preamble of the Venice Charter emphasizes that each country is responsible for applying the principles of the charter within the framework of its own culture and traditions, in "the full richness of their authenticity". However, the requirement of Clause 9 of the Charter, stating that new work 'must be distinct from the architectural composition and must bear a contemporary stamp', has been seen by some as being misused to justify contrasting modern additions, alterations and new buildings in historic places worldwide, and to validate modernist interventions in traditional buildings and places. Conversely, any attempt at building in a traditional manner has been seen as derivative and disingenuous. This polemic interpretation of the charter, designed to preserve a living bond with the past, gravely threatens any effort towards continuity.

We now live in a world that has become so pre-occupied with trends, fashion and originality that we can all too easily forget how crucial traditions are in handing on the immense richness of human knowledge, wisdom and skill. Instead of transforming culturally meaningful building methods with innovations in science and technology, the last century has witnessed the tendency to discard our inheritance, consigning tradition to the museums and history books. Working within a historic context, actual or fabricated, requires the ability to be flexible, to improvise and to solve unexpected problems. Conventional practitioners of most modern design and construction find it easier to make buildings as if nature, history, and place did not exist. Beneath the radar of architectural fashion and the popular press however, architects and interior designers have been busy working out the elements of a much richer concept of the 'classic' in design.

It is clear that there is a universal human need for environments that express a fundamental sense of humanity and harmony. A search for the 'classic' in the design of buildings, places and things is a pursuit of excellence, a quest for the definitive, an investigation of the self-evident.

A Dialogue with the Classic: Contemporary Interiors is a compendium of interior design projects from around the globe. The book provides a case study of the cultural differences in responding to environmental contexts and illustrates attempts at the invention of traditional canon where none exists. The projects have been chosen for their design excellence, and for the purposes of contrast and clarity, have been divided into two sections—Oriental and Western design. Although they represent only a small sample of the diversity of approaches to a problem that continues to become more apparent, they amply illustrate the multiplicity of answers to these difficult questions and the way in which this field has evolved since the drafting of the Charter of Venice.

Important as it is to fill the need for information about the differences in the Western and Oriental approach to classic design, for me the chief interest of the book lies elsewhere. This publication captures a place in time that steps beyond a dogmatic response to the Charter of Venice, and presents a diversified portfolio of interior design as one that can be used to illustrate the shared successes and failures in the field to help shape the future of the profession.

It is also a unique tribute to the many architects, interior designers, and craftsmen that revel in a stylistic synthesis—one that embraces equally both the demands of modern reality and an historically informed approach to interior design.

Included are diverse works such as the conversion of a former church into a private residence for art collectors in the Netherlands, an exquisite technology-driven interior design for the Bank of Moscow surgically inserted into opulent, traditional and representational surroundings, and a tiny, nearly monastic dormitory in Japan whose monochromatic interiors and sparse furnishings appeal to the tastes of minimalist designers and Transcendentalists alike.

It has been a pleasure to collaborate on what amounts to a cross-cultural lexicon of projects that illustrates the diverse range of possibilities when crafting a stylistic synthesis of modern and classic design elements. I believe that the authors can be confident that there will be many grateful readers who will gain a broader perspective of the disciplines of architecture and interior design as a result of their efforts. It is my earnest wish that professional architects and interior designers, students and design enthusiasts will all find inspiration in this book, regardless of which form or direction it may take.

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