Bob THE BUILDER

Why Robert A.M. Stern, formerly dismissed as old-fashioned, might just be the architect of the moment.

By Philip Herrera

EVERY MORNING the New York–based architect Robert Arthur Morton Stern dons a sober suit, tailored in London, puts a canary-yellow silk handkerchief into the breast pocket, slips on yellow socks and Gucci loafers in dun-colored suede, and starts his day. The basic outfit does not change, though, of course, his suit, shirt and tie do. "Not worrying about what I'm going to wear," he explains, "saves me fifteen to twenty minutes a day."

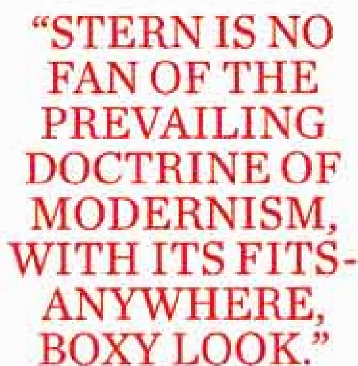
Largely because of such close attention to self-branding, organization and detail, things have been going very well for Robert A.M. Stern lately. Last August he was picked to design George W. Bush's presidential library in Dallas—"a great honor," he says. In December he was appointed to his third five-year term as dean of the Yale School of Architecture and has won accolades for making Yale arguably the nation's top design school. This fall he will see the completion of his first truly important commission in New York—something friends say he really, really wanted—the luxury condominium complex with its own chic residential address for a name: Fifteen Central Park West. Its 201 apartments have sold out (for around $2 billion) to the likes of Sanford Weill, Norman Lear, Lloyd Blankfein, Denzel Washington and Sting. Meantime, Robert A.M. Stern Architects (RAMSA) has landed ever more work, including an eighty-story residential tower in downtown Manhattan and prize projects in Paris and Kazakhstan, plus stately houses from California to the south of France. All this leads architect Alexander Gorlin, a former pupil and still a Stern watcher, to marvel, "Bob's undergoing a reevaluation."

It would be about time. Although Stern is widely known and liked within his profession, he is usually put down as a "classicist," which is a polite way of saying that his designs look as if they have more to do with yesterday's architecture than today's. In an era when new museums tend to be on the architectural cutting edge, RAMSA's 1993 Norman Rockwell Museum, for example, in Stockbridge, Mas-

Fifteen Central Park West. Stern's latest accomplishment. A rendering shows its limestone-clad towers facing east across the park.

sachusetts, just looks quaint, like something borrowed from a New England village green.

To define his position, Stern, a compact, articulate man with the face of a professor and the effusiveness of an impresario, argues that there are two kinds of architects: "There's the autobiographical architect, whose work is always more or less the same; it's about him. And there's the portraitist. His buildings are not so much about the architect as about the site. There are many places where anything goes, but some places have a little tradition. Why not make the buildings grow out of the site?"



As a confirmed portraitist, Stern is no fan of the prevailing doctrine of modernism, with its fits-anywhere, boxy look. He even frowns on the use of that quintessentially modernist material, glass. "In a glass apartment building the glass can expose the tenant's quasi nudity. In office buildings, glass from floor to ceiling exposes the mess of work." To most contemporary architects, such statements mark Stern as "retro."

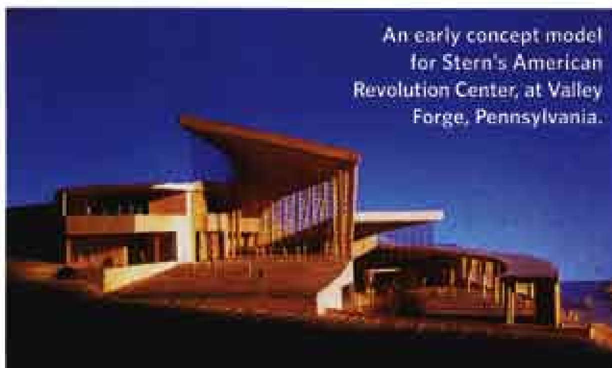
Self-confident might be a better adjective. Born sixty-nine years ago to a middle-class Brooklyn family, the child was father to the man: bright, ambitious, often witty. "I was the kind of kid who rode in the front of the first car of the subway, where I could see everything and figure out how it worked," he says. Thrilling buildings were going up in New York in those heady postwar years. Stern was so interested that he decided to become an architect while he was still in high school.

He went to Columbia University, then on to the Yale School of Architecture. "Yale had a new dean, Paul Rudolph, and renowned teachers like Vincent Scully," Stern recalls. "It turned out to be a very exciting place." A fellow student, the Chicago architect Stanley Tigerman, remembers Stern as "haughty, almost arrogant," adding, "He was the only student with the chutzpah to call Paul Rudolph 'Paul.'"

In the years following his graduation, in 1965, Stern made a splash promoting a hot new movement called postmodernism. Part rebellion against the crisp sameness of modernism, part celebration of traditional building details, postmodernism suited Stern's impish nature—he loves to defy expectations and to ask people to think anew—and asserted his preference for eclecticism. Otherwise, he had one architectural success: some graceful Shingle-style houses in the Hamptons. He'd learned the style by renovating an exemplar in Dublin, New Hampshire, actually taking it apart and putting it back together again.

Stern remains steeped in the history of architecture and has written or helped to write at least a dozen books about it, including a five-volume series on the buildings of New York from 1865 to 2000. But he found his biggest audience through TV. In 1986 he hosted *Pride of Place,* an eight-part series. "I learned the measure of Architecture with a capital *A*," he says. "People tend to look for representative monuments—icons. But a city made up only of icons would be a theme park. You need background buildings, too." He insists that a building should have a responsibility to place. "Good buildings, when you look again, have a very nice relationship to the street."

RAMSA, Yale, books, even the occasional crusade to save notable structures from the wrecker's ball—how does Bob Stern do it all? First, he works seven days a week. Second, he is in perpetual motion, shuttling among his Manhattan apartment, a small house in East Hamp-



An early concept model for Stern's American Revolution Center, at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania.

ton and a loft in New Haven, not to mention one airport or another. And third, he uses people well. He tells a story about his teacher Paul Rudolph. "Paul had a staff of eighty-five, and he worried that was too many—he would lose contact with the project if he had more. But he changed his mind in later life, saying that if he'd employed more people he would have accomplished much more." Bob Stern has not made the same mistake. RAMSA has an office of 300.

Stern spends three days a week at Yale, where he has proved to be a masterful fundraiser and a leader who does not let his personal philosophies limit his choice of teachers and subjects. Both the conservative Léon Krier and the radical Peter Eisenman have taught recent classes.

In his Manhattan office, Stern has a hand in every job his firm lands but depends on six of his seven partners to get the projects designed and built the way he wants them. (The seventh handles business matters.) "We've been working together for twenty or more years. We know each other, and they keep track of everything so I'm freed to do other things. There are so many chances for a perfectly good design to go wrong. I watch."

In other words, Stern acts as a talented editor who steps in when he sees something he does not like. His changes virtually always improve the work, says a young employee who has watched the process many times. "Bob identifies problem areas that the design team can then fully correct." The buildings may end up looking a little retro, but they work very well, in large part because RAMSA specializes in certain types of structures: town libraries, college dorms and campus centers.

Aesthetically, these are "background buildings," to use Stern's phrase. They are not meant to smite the eye but to fit politely into the local context, adhering to local tradition. Trouble is, Stern's examples often seem too bulky for their sites. Even Vincent Scully, his teacher and longtime friend, notes dryly in the introduction to a book on RAMSA's work that the firm's buildings "seldom beguile," tending instead to be big, blunt and bluff.

Stern's houses, by contrast, are out of the public eye and are often unabashedly grand—"real houses for real people," says interior decorator Bunny Williams, who occasionally works with him. "And unlike so many country houses, they're well sited. Bob gets the correct interplay of inside and outside."

The architect has mastered not only the Shingle style but also Spanish Mission, French Directoire, Italian villa and other traditional idioms. To help the potential client who doesn't know what she wants, RAMSA will give her a book illustrating various styles and is also prepared to venture off the menu, so to speak. One of Stern's most striking residences, outside Aspen, is inspired by an idiosyncratic mansion by English architect Sir Edwin Lutyens. Another, on an island in British Columbia, is a glorious mishmash of several appropriately "rustic" looks.

Today's affluent clients know precisely what they want inside their houses, says Stern. "They want beautifully proportioned rooms, plenty of light, intimate visual contact with the landscape. They want walls upon walls where they can hang their pictures. They want a house big enough to entertain in. They want extra rooms; people like to sit in the family room, but they also like a library."

A Massachusetts estate inspired by the work of Sir John Soane.

Stern got the breakthrough condo commission at Fifteen Central Park West precisely because, says William Lie Zeckendorf, who developed the building with his brother, Arthur, they were "impressed by his ability to design notable residences." The project, consisting of a thirty-five-story tower behind a twenty-story building, occupies the entire city block between 61st and 62nd streets from Broadway to Central Park West. To make the structures blend in with their neighbors, Stern sheathed both in light-gray limestone. "People tell me that the buildings look like they were always there," he says happily.

Inside, the apartments are noble, with ample, well-lit rooms arranged in graceful layouts. Spaces that in pre-World War II buildings would have been devoted to maids' rooms serve instead as second, informal dining rooms, family rooms, breakfast nooks. Kitchens are big enough to eat in; ceilings are high (from ten to fourteen feet)—"good for hanging contemporary art," says Stern. "You can't do that easily in most New York apartment buildings." Services include a private dining room for residents and a waiting room for limousine chauffeurs.

Although Fifteen Central Park West took its looks from the old masonry buildings that frame Central Park, it was built in a thoroughly modern manner. The limestone was quarried in Indiana and then shipped to Canada, where the stone was fitted into precast panels, which were later sent to the site and snapped into place. Such technological advances, Stern says with a grin, are causing even modernist architects to explore the possibilities of decoration.

And Stern himself is taking another, friendlier look at modernism. His American Revolution Center, at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, is unlike anything else he has done: it burrows into the landscape and has a canted "green" roof and torqued windows overlooking the historic encampment of 1777. Even more surprising, RAMSA is building a glass tower in Philadelphia for Comcast, which Stern concedes reflects lessons learned from the modernist master Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Architect Gorlin has an explanation: "Modernism is now 100 years old. That's old enough to become an institutional style acceptable to Bob."

You could also say that the reevaluation of Robert A.M. Stern gets more interesting by the minute. ✖