New Yorkers, as a rule, are creatures whose passion for living in their city is unrivaled; yet so many of them are equally desirous of a country retreat that serves as an escape from Gotham’s hubbub. This dichotomy of rural and urban living is often resolved with the purchase of a residence in both locales, and these homes may display the extremes of elegance, depending on the owner’s taste and purse.

While there are certainly many architects who specialize in rural or suburban architecture built from a historical perspective, there are far fewer bringing such an interpretation of Classicism into an urban cooperative. Fewer still are the professionals who are adept at both scenarios.

One notable exception is John B. Murray Architect, a firm based in Midtown Manhattan that creates lyrical, Regency-esque interpretations of Classicism within the intimidating confines and restrictions placed upon the construction trade in Manhattan cooperatives.

Classically Restrained

Reinterpreting Classical architectural forms and ornamentation requires a deft touch. We all have seen far too many examples of would-be Classicists who dwell under the impression that one’s abilities are best measured by the size of their pilasters; while the application of ornament is usually dictated by its order, it is the proportion and judiciousness of this application that is crucial to a successful project.

“Working within the context of New York City, there’s usually a limit to ceiling height,” says firm principal John Murray. “We often don’t have the 12- or 13-ft. ceiling heights that you find when you get out of the city. You need to adapt the detailing so that it accentuates the attributes you have – you take what wall height is available, tailor it to the design, and try not to overdo it.

“The key to this is analyzing every condition of detail by drawing and having the experience to understand what those drawings imply, and how the room will look when it is actually built. Understanding the relationship between the drawing and the built work prevents you from being heavy-handed. We often render full-size drawings – for example a section of a paneled library wall – to study the proportion of the parts of the whole, know that the scale is correct, and that it results in a successful composition.”

Cooperative Challenges

Those of us involved in residential construction outside of the urban milieux seldom spare a thought for those who must build within city limits, particularly in an area as densely populated as Manhattan. Murray and his firm thrive in what can only be described as one of the more intimidating construction environments imaginable, and on top of this, this environment is populated by clients who are, shall we say, not known for their casual attitude concerning deadlines.

“The biggest challenge we have to face is what is known as the ‘summer schedule,’ and it applies to most of the buildings we work in,” says Murray. “This is the period of time between Memorial Day and Labor Day, but in some cases, construction isn’t permitted until late in June. This schedule is very inflexible; a number of buildings have onerous financial penalties if you have to work past Labor Day, and some will just shut you down. This is also aggravated by the noise restrictions, so you can’t begin work until 10 in the morning, and you have to finish up by four in the afternoon.”

Architect John B. Murray lends a tasteful Classicism to the many facets of residential construction. By Dan Cooper

City House, Country House

John Murray of New York City-based John B. Murray Architect has a broad portfolio of urban and rural designs, including this Georgian Revival estate (top) featuring massive symmetrical wings that embrace the circular drive. A sunken garden and rough stone outbuilding are part of the complex. All photos: H. Durston Saylor, Inc., unless otherwise noted

John Murray of New York City-based John B. Murray Architect has a broad portfolio of urban and rural designs, including this Georgian Revival estate (top) featuring massive symmetrical wings that embrace the circular drive. A sunken garden and rough stone outbuilding are part of the complex. All photos: H. Durston Saylor, Inc., unless otherwise noted
Murray says that every year he’s typically faced with two or three projects that need to be completed within a summer schedule. “This process isn’t for the faint of heart, and a colleague has described it as ‘D-Day,’” he says. “You need a really good general contractor who is comfortable with the summer schedule, because there is no room for failure. Part of our success is because we’re very mindful of who is going to build the work. We’ve learned that everyone from the team has to pull their weight, and that’s there’s no room for interpretation.”

For a typical summer-schedule project, according to Murray, the existing property will be demolished in the first summer, exposing any surprises and allowing the firm to create a thorough layout before proceeding the following year.

“On a city project, very little typically remains of the original apartment, as we’ve found it more cost effective to demo the entire unit because of the intricacies of HVAC and electrical systems within a normal apartment footprint,” says Murray. “We take it down to the bones of the structure, which usually are the building masonry walls and the structural slabs above and below—it’s basically a concrete environment. Buildings have taken to limiting the amount of time for demolition, therefore this work is contracted out to one of several reliable firms that specialize in it. They know this aspect of the business well and will systematically tear out everything.”

The next step in preparing for a summer-schedule project involves the months of planning and design. “We’ll secure the general contractor by the winter before the project starts, and a certain amount of pre-construction occurs,” says Murray. “Materials, such as doors and windows are ordered and some rooms, like libraries and dressing rooms, are prefabricated so as much as possible is completed before the summer of on-site construction. Once it begins, we’ll have 20 to 40 persons on site every day, including plumbers, electricians, carpenters, stonemasons and plasterers.”

Another daunting aspect peculiar to urban construction is the task of simply getting materials on-site. “Typically, our only option is getting everything in through the service elevator,” says Murray. “If you think about it, imagine all of the materials you’d use in a country house having to pass through a small doorway. When you’re doing a New York project, you’re limited to whatever you can get through the basement maze of hallways and into the service elevator. Often, materials need to be cut down to smaller sizes, otherwise—and this does happen—we’ll have to use a crane.”

The City Apartment

Paging through Murray’s portfolio, one cannot help but be impressed with the elegance and caliber of finish of the firm’s work. Apartment projects located on Central Park West, Park Avenue, the Upper East Side and the Upper West Side reveal a graceful use of ornamentation and proportion that manages to be grand without being ostentatious.
A hallmark of Murray’s projects is the detailed built-in cabinetry in the dressing areas and halls, all of which efficiently utilize precious Manhattan square footage while maintaining a spacious feel to each room. Galleries, libraries and bedrooms often incorporate substantial moldings, mantels and paneling designed with a careful eye for proportion and massing, while another trademark of the architect’s is the parquetry floor, which adds tasteful ornamentation to accompany the decorative plasterwork. A library in one residence conveys a clubby feel with its dark wood paneling and ornamental frieze, and in another, an intricately embellished wine room features a curved storage vault to maximize access to a larger number of bottles. In this latter flat, Murray created an elliptical staircase with an iron and bronze balustrade that displays the delicacy of late-18th-century Classicism. In sum, one finds it remarkable that these lush, historically inspired apartments exist high above the streets of New York City and not just over the Connecticut border.

The Country House
Murray’s exurban work spans the realm of historic design, from a massive Georgian Revival edifice to a restrained interpretation of indigenous Upstate New York rural architecture. The first is a sprawling, brick-faced estate adorned with symmetrical, front-gabled wings, an intricate sunken garden and rough-stone outbuilding that, in this architectural conceit, pre-dates the main residence. Embracing a circular drive, the house’s grand presence is embellished with details such as white-washed brick, stone lintels and four matching chimneys that convincingly impart the impression that the structure is far older that it actually is.

This fascination with the supposed evolution of a house over time is evidenced on a simpler scale in a current project in Columbia County. “It’s a new ‘old’ house, and as we developed the plans, we considered how this complex would have evolved over the decades,” says Murray. “It’s on 120 acres of a former farm property that did not have a house on it, and our approach included using reclaimed doors and other components, such as antique wood for the floors and ceilings, to help age the building. We gave it Dutch roots, and then added a Federal addition on one side, with a simple, later 19th-century addition to that on the opposite side, so you can observe how it changes from an 18th-century structure into a late-19th-century structure.”

Above: Murray designed this crescent-shaped pavilion to accommodate both a swimming pool and an existing tennis court.

Right: A gothic doorway and timbered ceiling were employed to convey an Elizabethan impression on this country estate.
Another facet of Murray’s work is the renovation and restoration of existing historic estates. "On an early-20th-century stone estate project, the existing house had been empty for a long time," he says. "In the 1990s, the owners removed the secondary floors, essentially converting a four-story house into a two-story house with double-height ceilings. Our client commissioned us to return it to more of its original feeling; we added an entry portico, garage, screened porch, dormers and chimney, and matching the old stone proved to be quite a challenge. We had to find identical black granite, have it quarried, and then we re-pointed the entire building, power-washed and sealed it.”

Although he is certainly passionate about Classical architecture, Murray does not limit his work solely to that style; a Hampton residence reveals a graceful Shingle Style more in keeping with its ocean environs, and occasional Tudor, Norman and other Continental influences are to be found in his work as well.

Murray lavishes equal attention on outbuildings, when so charged. For example, he created a pool and tennis pavilion that neatly combines a gentle curve with Classical motifs, and yet the raw wood finish tempers the formality of the structure. “We chose a crescent shape that would sit comfortably in relation to an existing tennis court and swimming pool. The geometry of the pavilion straddles the two structures quite successfully.” Another pool pavilion, far more formal in nature, is in the Cotswold-Tudor style with a carved limestone fireplace whose flames reflect out onto the central axis of the pool. The project was recognized in 2009 with a Palladio Award.

By establishing his firm not only as a resource for artful Classical design, but also one that can complete it in the proverbial New York minute, Murray has flourished in these challenging times and he continues to do so. “While our city versus country work ebbs and flows as to which is greater at any given moment,” says Murray, “it’s our ability to fulfill both sides of our clients’ idea of a house – both city and country – that’s been a key to our success.”

A hallmark of Murray’s projects is the molded, built-in cabinetry in the dressing areas and halls, all of which efficiently utilize precious Manhattan square footage. Murray created this elliptical staircase with iron balustrades that displays the delicacy of late-18th-century Classicism. An intricately embellished wine room features a curved façade to maximize access to a larger number of bottles.