

# John B. Murray Breaks Down Why Classical Architecture Will Always Be Relevant to Contemporary Design

In his new book, *Contemporary Classical Architecture*, Murray shows how good architecture makes for good decorating

TEXT BY [JULIA LEWIS](#) · Posted October 8, 2018



A collaboration between architect John B. Murray and interior designer Brian McCarthy, this Park Avenue apartment's L-shaped in the living room and connected alcove plan allowed for multiple seating arrangements. Subtly articulated fluted pilasters, cornice, and ceiling beams ground the space. High-gloss ceilings invite light in.

Photograph by Francesco Lagnese/Courtesy of John B. Murray Architect

When a project calls for an architect who can draw from the language of classicism to compose spaces that elegantly respond to the needs of today, few are more skilled at bridging the past and present than **John B. Murray**. "Whether John is restoring an old house, redesigning an awkward apartment, or creating a home from the ground up, one always has the sense that this is the way it should have always been," says friend and fellow Parrish-Hadley alum Bunny Williams. "His work has the subtle quality of a master who knows how to design spaces that will stand the test of time."



This fact is made abundantly clear in the pages of his second book *Contemporary Classical Architecture* ([Monacelli](#), \$65), a splendid portfolio of collaborations with a who's who of top designers including Brian McCarthy, David Kleinberg, Cullman & Kravis, and Tony Ingrao & Randy Kemper. The Stanford White Award-winning architect spoke to AD PRO about the fundamental importance of classicism and what he learned from his mentor, Albert Hadley.

**AD PRO:** Your book's title, *Contemporary Classical Architecture*, might sound like an oxymoron to some. Can you explain?

**John B. Murray:** At heart, I am a classicist and the title speaks to the way that the projects in the book are consistently rooted in classical ideas and forms. This philosophy is always behind the work. The basic tenets of classical architecture organize the plan, elevations, and sections. I continue to find inspiration from architects who may have studied at the Ecole des Beaux Arts or prized themselves for present-day ingenuity. Order, symmetry, scale, proportion, logical flow, a passionate appreciation for natural light, an almost childish enthusiasm for the latest in technology and efficiency in systems—this is who I am as an architect and JBMA brings this classical approach to each of our projects.





A dramatic staircase rises three floors to a skylight in a 19th-century Georgian Revival house.

Photograph by Durston Saylor/Courtesy of John B. Murray Architect

**AD PRO:** So, what exactly is at the heart of your interest in classical architecture?

**Murray:** It is not a specific stylistic direction but rather a certain approach to design that starts with a plan. We carefully study the arrangement and alignment of spaces and openings. These determine how we compose the three dimensions of a room. We think about balance, symmetry, and proportion, which have inherent beauty and make a space feel right. We use these elements to resolve shapes in the plan so that everything works in concert. These are the big ideas that translate into all of the work that we are doing, all the time. We appreciate the roots of classical architecture, but we are open to interpretation.



A paneled ceiling, pilasters, and articulated frieze complement contemporary furniture and sconces in a New York apartment.

Photograph by Simon Upton/Courtesy of John B. Murray Architect

**AD PRO:** You're suggesting that classicism is not a rigid system of design, that these principles can evolve and adapt?

**Murray:** Yes. Think back to the 1920s, when architects from the École des Beaux Arts in Paris came to the U.S., bringing with them the ability to manipulate classical forms in very inventive ways. Today, we continue to use the classical vocabulary to create new forms. The contemporary feel that we bring to our work is a deft reinterpretation of shapes that have their roots in a classical vocabulary but are a fresh take. It might be simplified or minimized, but it is still effective, casting light and shadow, for example.



Stylized acanthus leaves crown the pilasters in a Park Avenue apartment.  
Photograph by Francesco Lagnese/Courtesy of John B. Murray Architect

**AD PRO:** How does this inform the way that you reconcile the past and the present within a project? What is the process like?

**Murray:** We are frequently asked to fit an older, historically beautiful home to the needs and desires of a contemporary family. Interiors usually require a layering of technology, be it mechanicals, lighting, motorized shades, radiant heat flooring—21st-century comforts. Often, windows must be replaced, even reappropriated, to create more openness but still keep the character of the place intact. Being able to refresh the interiors with all of those systems in place while being careful to preserve the attributes that are key to their quality is a bit of an art.



**AD PRO:** In these cases, what sorts of changes do you find yourself making, even when faced with a beautiful, classical plan?

**Murray:** We're currently working on a 1927 home with a formal layout that included service areas oriented around the kitchen but are now about open, family space and modern living. Yet, it was important to retain the patina of history. In these cases, there might be aesthetic shifts and the interiors might end up with a less formal, contemporary feel—a more minimal, open flow to accommodate a family's lifestyle—but the proportions and bones remain intact. So, there's always that rootedness and connection to the past.

**AD PRO:** What about the opposite, for example, reviving a pre-war apartment that has been completely stripped down?

I've worked on a number of apartments that have been stripped of their historic elements. We will go back in and reestablish a more classical framework with more articulation, more definition, and improved flow. Ironically, this return to a classical foundation usually makes the spaces feel larger.





An intimate dining alcove in an apartment overlooking Central Park.

Photograph by Nick Johnson/Courtesy of John B. Murray Architect

**AD PRO:** You're part of the famous Parish-Hadley family tree. What lessons did you learn during your years at that firm?

**Murray:** Albert Hadley really mentored me in the design studio, and he taught me many things. Most importantly, that a design should be gracious. What does that mean? Spaces should work. We paid a lot of attention to proportion, functionality, and scale. And, he always said, "Make it clear to our clients that we'll make it beautiful." Which we did.

**AD PRO:** That must have been a formative experience. How did it shape you as an architect?

**Murray:** When I landed at Parish-Hadley, not long after graduating from architecture school, I learned that I could turn to the past in a positive way. It was a vocabulary that was ours to use and manipulate. It was liberating. Furthermore, it instilled an appreciation for the discipline of decorating. When a room is well-built and beautiful, it has validity.

**AD PRO:** This must account for your extraordinarily successful collaborations with so many prominent interior designers—with so many varying styles—which we can see in your book.

Yes. Most projects involve a collaborator and together we create a vision that we're both proud of.



The library in a Central Park South apartment is paneled in warm, antiques, and waxed white oak.

Photograph by Simon Upton/Courtesy of John B. Murray Architect

**How do you ensure both visions are coming across and complement each other?**

**Murray:** It's a slow and steady process with a lot of cross-checking, so that everyone understands what the intent is. Every detail involves a lot of feedback and study. But it's never a struggle, because there is mutual respect. The talents we work with have always appreciated what we bring to the table. And that's also our attitude when we work with a decorator.

**AD PRO:** Can you sum up the architect's role in this collaboration?

**Murray:** Good architecture makes for good decorating!