

Architect George Ranalli found Chatham, his second home, twelve years ago. Our countryside reminds him of lands in Torrice, south of Rome, Italy. And our village architecture here influenced his design of a community building in Brooklyn that critics are hailing as one-of-its-kind architecture – in the best tradition.

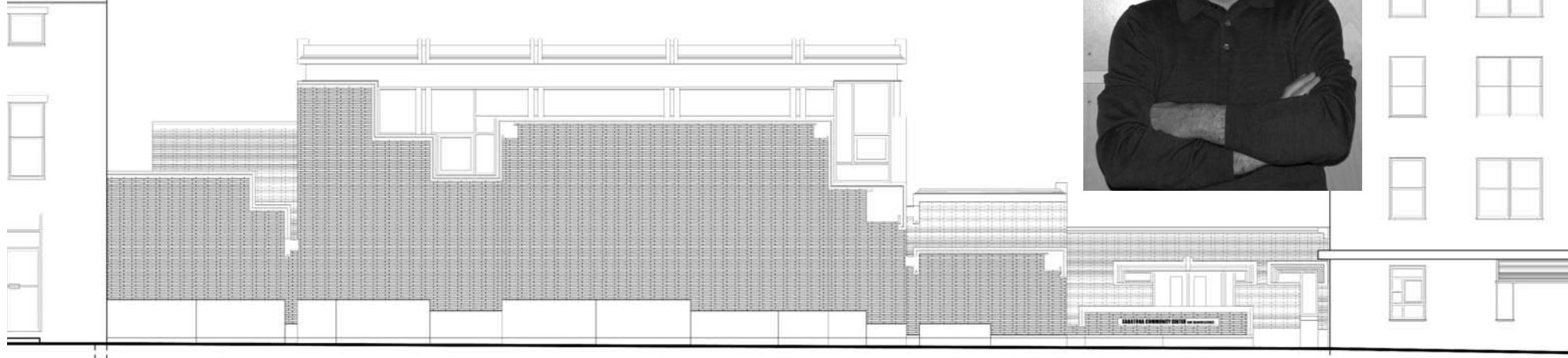
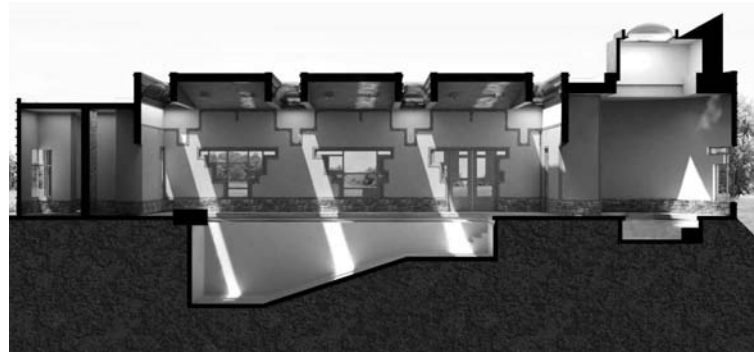


Photo by Sofia Ranalli

George Ranalli

By Rich Kraham



Above: A design for a home in the Chatham area – unbuilt. Below, a section of the pool house. The plunge pool room is done in a green plaster with pearwood.

Architect George Ranalli lives on Hudson Avenue in Chatham for a few understandable reasons. A Bronx native who also lives in Manhattan, Ranalli “needed to be near the traffic noise,” and one would assume the sirens of the rescue squad here on Moore Avenue not far away, “so he could sleep at night.”

That said, he – with wife Anne, son Rocco, and daughter Sofia – also found our countryside a respite from his busy schedule as Dean of the Bernard and Anne Spitzer School of Architecture, City College of New York, and his noted architecture firm – a practice that has been singled out for its *sui generis*, one-of-a-kind, designs.

Ada Louise Huxtable, the architecture critic, writing in the *Wall Street Journal* in May of this year, said of Ranalli:

“Obviously, not all architects have been building condos and skyscrapers; some have been working quietly under the celebrity radar in ways and in places where it matters.”

She was writing about a public building, the Saratoga Avenue Community Center in Brooklyn, that defied all the odds. Most public buildings she wrote, are done under “tight budgets, Byzantine bureaucracies, and low bid contracts guaranteeing bad design.”

The influence of Chatham

Ranalli was able to buck that trend and create a building that she called “postmodern without the bad jokes or superficial historical allusions.”

And believe it or not, Ranalli claims that Chatham’s Cady Hall on Main Street with its configuration of big windows and two story hall was influential in this design. He also liked the Masonic Building at Park Row and Main Street [west side], “the big red brick box with the brick corbel cornice at the top. It is so massive, bulky and strong looking. I also like the little red brick building on the corner of School and Hudson Avenue because of all the masonry detail. The town itself is a beautiful collection of vernacular, masonry, strong buildings. Of course some of the architectural

gems like the train station are even stronger.”

Even if you’re not a student of architecture, you can see some of the details of these buildings in the Saratoga project pictures on the next page.

It was through their daughter’s acquaintances at grammar school that they found families that had a connection to Chatham. They were invited for a visit, and Ranalli and company fell in love with the area.

“I have a trace of memory of Torrice, a town in Italy 60 kilometers south of Rome, that bears an incredible similarity to Chatham in the quality of its people, their warmth and generosity, and the physical character of a one street hilltown. The general landscape and beauty of the valley right off the Taconic on Route 203, is reminiscent,” said Ranalli.

“I love the patchwork of farms and the community buildings, the masonry, the special physical beauty of Chatham.”

“We come up here as often as we can, working around our kids’ complex schedules. We come virtually every weekend,” he remarked.

The work

Huxtable wrote: “The Saratoga Avenue Community Center manages to break just about every deadly rule of conventional public building design . . . he created a building with a distinctive and elegant presence of its own. This is, in sum, real architecture.”

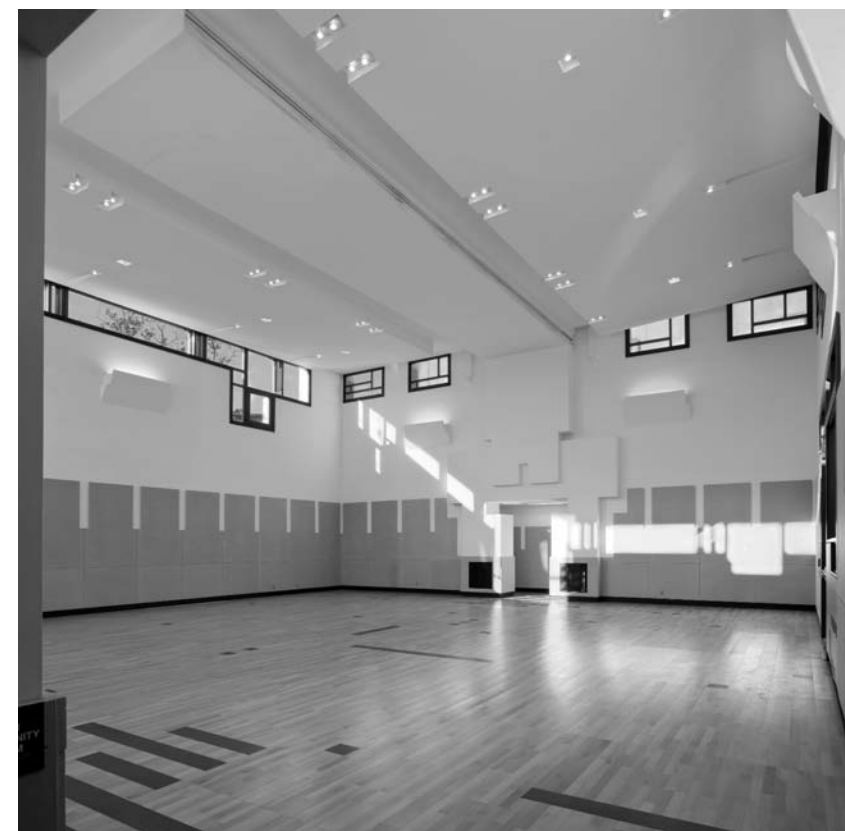
High praise indeed for the man the *New York Times* called “a New York architect’s architect.” They were referring more to his status among fellow architects for his craftsmanship and blending of modern and historical traditions than to his roots in the city.

Ranalli received his Bachelors of Architecture from Pratt Institute in Brooklyn and earned his Masters of Architecture from the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University. After graduation Ranalli studied architecture in Europe, focusing on Italy.

Ranalli’s career includes his own practice, George Ranalli, Architect, his architectural hardware line at George Ranalli Designs, and



3 Saratoga photos by Paul Warchol



fifteen teaching and critic positions at eleven educational institutions including Columbia, Cooper Union, Harvard, Rhode Island School of Design, Yale, and his current position at City College of New York.

Now mind you, all these credentials could not keep Ranalli, a real down-to-earth guy, and son Rocco, from the rides and Midway of the Chatham Fair where we caught up with him in September. It was there where we began a dialogue about his work. And it is, in our estimation, that earthiness that probably gave him the insight to create such a seminal public building that serves a much deserved population. Sure, it makes for a great portfolio piece, news generator, and a valuable monograph, but this building works best. And it makes no apologies for some of its superb decorative workmanship.

Middle ground

“I try to find a middle ground between modern architecture’s inability to age – the lack of warmth in its material palette – and a broader architectural language.”

Ranalli said his buildings and design work throughout the world are based on both the client’s program and the existing site.

According to published information, architecture critic Herbert Muschamp has highlighted Ranalli’s “display of affection for forms outside the modern traditions.”

“His ability to convert a school house into much praised condos or design a brick New York City Public Housing community center into a mahogany trimmed, highly detailed acclaimed work shows a facility with transformation that is still of a piece with the world around it.”

According to Huxtable, “Mr. Ranalli adheres to the logic of modernist practice, integrating its mechanical, material and structural realities with details drawn from earlier sources to create an integral ornament of abstract linear geometry.”

“His purpose is to move modernism into

an enriched and more deeply referenced style. The building [Saratoga] does what so much postmodernism of the 1980s failed to do – it reinterprets and transforms history into something completely and satisfyingly contemporary.”

Ranalli has taken this fresh approach to decoration to create a line of hardware and furniture, which reveals a synthesis of the highly decorative and the cleanly modern. These functional objects have become part of the permanent collections of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Denver Art Museum, and the Indianapolis Museum of Art.

He has received press mention for works as small as family bathrooms, but is equally facile designing large projects, such as the Master Plan for the City College of New York, or the Student Union Addition at Queens College.

Press coverage and critical pieces regarding Ranalli’s works are voluminous, including pieces in *The New York Times*, *Casas Internacionales*, *Architectural Record*, *Architecture*, *A+U (Architecture + Urbanism)*, *Domus*, *The New Republic* and an *ORO Single Building Series* book. His work has also appeared on Home and Garden Television.

According to published reports, while teaching at Yale, Ranalli also held the prestigious William Henry Bishop Chair of Architecture.

Of his own design ethos, Ranalli said: “I have always searched for a way to translate history into a contemporary idiom. To create work that blended with rather than opposed its environment.”

Through his designs, furniture, and completed buildings, this blend seems apparent.

It is nice to know such unpretentious genius is around us in Chatham. Hopefully, looking at the integration of forms and the precise lines in this one Brooklyn building, Chathamites will take a fresh look at the spaces and forms around them that in a small way contributed to this great design. ☺