

A new book by Chatham and New York City architect George Ranalli shows award-winning examples of buildings and industrial products whose design vocabulary has roots in a longer craft tradition in design and architecture.

In Situ

By Rich Kraham

In a new, lavishly illustrated book entitled *In Situ*, architect George Ranalli, who owns a home on Hudson Avenue in Chatham, sums up his theoretical positions on architectural projects that he has been involved in here, in New York City, and around the world. These include large urban projects, additions, renovations to major landmark buildings, interiors, new constructions and houses in the landscape. Ranalli explains that the title of his book is from the Latin meaning “in place,” and he stresses that buildings become iconic, not because some “starchitect” has created a stunning form plopped down on a site, but because the building fits and “responds lovingly to the specificities of place.” Apparently, a host of architectural critics feel the same way. Former New York Times critic Paul Goldberger, in discussing a Ranalli project in Rhode Island to convert a school into condos, wrote: “For all its modernity, this project is an architectural experience worthy of Newport, and it connects us again to the architectural traditions of this unusual city.” Ada Louise Huxtable, an architectural critic with the Wall Street Journal, wrote that Ranalli’s Saratoga Avenue Community Center in Brooklyn “deserves to have its presence shouted from the rooftops as a seriously fine demonstration of the art of architecture.”

Sources of inspiration

In writing about his work, Ranalli said that much of the architecture he observed in the 1980s and 1990s seemed unsatisfactory. “In visiting many revered modern buildings, I came away feeling unsympathetic and disappointed. This compelled me to revisit my understanding of architecture’s symbolic, formal, and social nature, beginning with the work of several architects who had found a way to relate to the urban and landscape context without either sacrificing originality or mimicking context.” Among the architects Ranalli began to re-evaluate were H. H. Richardson (his disciples designed the Chatham Union Depot railroad station), Louis Sullivan, and Frank Lloyd Wright. “All these architects had designed works linked to the specifics of place through a style of composition that was casual – almost picturesque – yet rigorously clear in organization and form,” he wrote. Ranalli claims that Chatham’s Cady Hall on Main Street, with its configuration of big windows and two story hall, was influential in the Saratoga Center design. He also likes the Masonic Building at Park Row and Main Street [west side], “the big red brick box with the brick corbel cornice at the top.”

Total design

In a search for this more relevant level of detail, context and texture, Ranalli often designs cabinetwork, accessories and furniture as an extension to his building and interior designs. “These objects are intimately connected to the larger-scale ideas of their environment, and enable me to fulfill a project to the most intimate level of detail. My work includes many furniture designs for apartments, lofts, and office interiors.” Michael Sorkin, an architectural writer and a colleague of Ranalli writes that masterpieces of urbanity – New York, Rome, Sienna, are indispensable references for Ranalli.

“Ranalli sees building as a kind of urbanism, a supple structure of organization for movement and repose, for privacy and society, for the experience of a rich variety of spatial and material patterns and densities.”

“Having known him for well over three decades, I can say he is very much a man about town and we’ve strolled and sipped cappuccinos and taken in the life of many great urban places together. I was somewhat abashed a few years ago when he acquired a country place [Chatham]. Of course, he has a family and does dote on the domestic and its rituals and summer in the city can be nasty and he does like to drive and kids need sunshine and fresh air. But mowing the lawn? The unvarnished quietude? The simple life? Nothing to be seen but trees? “George,” I asked him one Monday when he was just returned, “how can you stand it?”

“It’s on the main drag. It’s in the town. There’s an excellent café down the street!” Small details, such as those, matter. ☞

Below: Ranalli’s book complete with clamshell case in a vibrant red – has the gravitas of treasured bible.



Top and middle: The Saratoga Avenue Community Center is one of Ranalli’s most heralded works. It integrated the space between a 16-story slab-housing block – a barren, windswept space – with a building that better related to the existing fabric of the block and a nearby park. “Although the size of the new Community Center was relatively small, it was possible to use the new structure to heal the wound the superblock had created in the city and to enhance the presence of Saratoga Park,” wrote Ranalli.

Above and right: The Callender Schoolhouse, a National Historic Landmark in Newport, Rhode Island, “was reborn when the client commissioned a renovation to convert it into housing. The project incorporates the exterior restoration of the elegant Italianate schoolhouse with the creation of six apartments.”



The Fashion Center, a 23-storey Romanesque Revival structure in New York’s historic Garment District. A genealogical investigation revealed that a prominent American Architect, Henry Ives Cobb, designed the building in 1924, although subsequent changes had left it beyond recognition. By restoring the portico, previously sealed-off behind large glass doors, Ranalli revived the distinctive appeal of a refreshing passageway from the public street.



Ace Frehley, of the rock group Kiss, wanted a house in the Connecticut countryside that expressed his need for a dwelling that would provide some respite from waking up to find fans pressing their noses against his windows.



K-Loft in Chelsea, New York City. Living room, dining room and kitchen as seen from the entry to the master bedroom



Ranalli designs tables and other furniture to go along with his interior designs.



Lock-it lever handle designed by Ranalli.



Stair hall in one of the Newport, Rhode Island Callender Schoolhouse apartments looking up toward the third floor.