

American style

BY MARY SHUSTACK

When “Decorating The Way I See It” by Markham Roberts was published by Vendome Press in 2014, *Vogue* selected it as one of the top-five interior design books for fall.

Roberts, the New York-based interior designer and author of the book, was called, “a master of timeless American style” in the review.

WAG got a glimpse into his world in early April, when Roberts participated in “Art of Design,” the Bruce Museum’s annual panel discussion held at Greenwich Country Club.

Roberts, born in Indianapolis, Indiana, would graduate from Brown University before coming to New York and starting his design career with the legendary Mark Hampton. He would launch his namesake firm in 1997, one that has found him not only garnering some high-profile work – the re-vamping of Oscar de la Renta’s Tortuga Bay Hotel in Punta Cana, Dominican Republic, for example – but also industry recognition, including being named to the prestigious Architectural Digest AD100 list of top architects and designers since 2014.

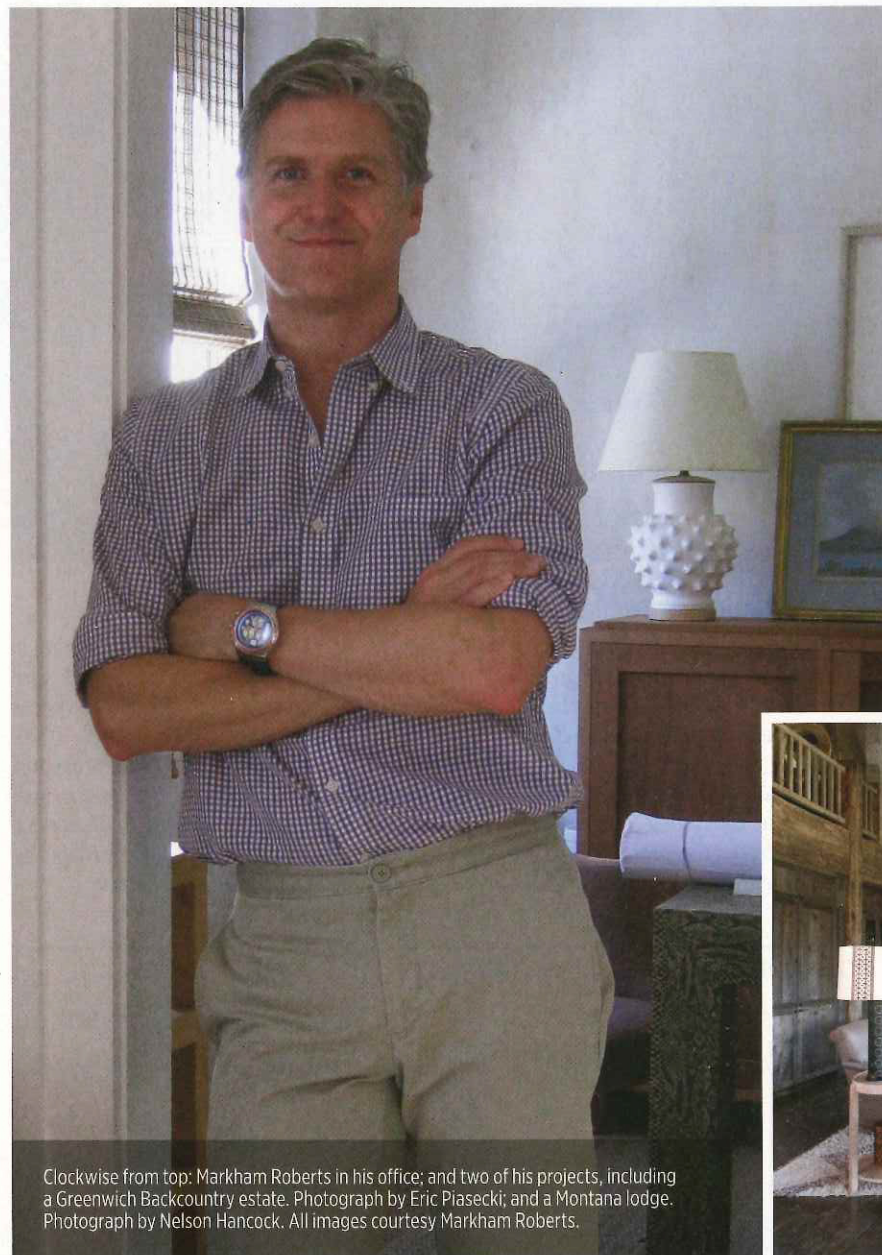
At the panel, Roberts said inspiration is everywhere, from nature to travel.

“In a creative business, I think you keep your mind open.”

We wanted to hear more, so we followed up with Roberts after the panel, when he was kind enough to share a bit more of his story – including a trip on the Nile – with WAG:

The panelists at the Bruce Museum’s fifth annual “Art of Design” event each represented a different aspect of working within the broadest definition of design. Yours was perhaps the most traditional, in that you have carved out a successful career in interior design. You spoke about a lifelong interest in design – sharing how, at age 10, you even met with your mother’s decorator to design your own room – and would go on to work with the legendary Mark Hampton. Can you share a bit about your background, influences and what truly brought you to the world of design?

“Though I never knew specifically that I wanted to be a decorator until I began working for Mark Hampton and was actually doing it, in hindsight it should have been obvious. I was always interested in museums and architecture and design. I loved movies with beautiful houses, and I had a great appreciation for antiques and art. I studied art his-



Clockwise from top: Markham Roberts in his office; and two of his projects, including a Greenwich Backcountry estate. Photograph by Eric Piasecki; and a Montana lodge. Photograph by Nelson Hancock. All images courtesy Markham Roberts.



tory and architecture at university, and moved to New York after to figure out what I wanted to do. It was by chance and a mutual friend that I met Mark Hampton and, when he offered me a job, I gladly took it and quickly realized what I loved doing.”

How do you approach that delicate balance between pleasing a client and doing work that’s rewarding to you?

“As a decorator, you have to remember that it is your client’s house and not yours. That said, clients come to me because they are familiar with my work or reputation and they understand that I have a lot of experience and knowledge informing the design I come up with for them. I explain at the outset that I will always be honest about why I think something works or doesn’t. I have strong opinions and I think very carefully and specifically about each job, so if a

client has an idea that is different from mine, I try to understand what drives their idea so that together we can decide to incorporate it, adapt it or scrap it.

“I can only think of one time where a client made me do something I really thought wasn’t the best choice. Once completed they saw it was wrong and asked me to change it to what I had suggested. So I had a T-shirt printed up that read, ‘You’ll never hear me saying I told you so.’”

Everyone wants to hear what the latest trends are. Surely you keep up on what’s in, what’s new – but how does it affect what you actually do? Is your vision timeless or always evolving?

“I try hard to not pay attention to trends or whatever ‘what’s hot’ is, because I would rather be influenced by a client or their particular house or landscape or even a painting or piece of art they

own. I approach each job individually and the last thing I would want would be for a fad or current social media craze to guide an overall design. That is not to say I like to decorate in a vacuum. Design is cyclical and fluid, and there is no limit to inspiration that can come from everything that has gone on before and is going on now. I just try to look at things through a lens of each job and not to think of trends to copy or apply.”

Please tell us a bit about your work on Oscar de la Renta’s Tortuga Bay Hotel in Punta Cana, a high-profile project that has earned much praise. How did it come about, what were the biggest challenges – and rewards?

“Working on a beautiful tropical island was certainly not a hardship. I had known of the hotel and Oscar’s design from a few vacations in the Dominican Republic. Oscar’s wife, Annette, had

introduced me to the hotel owners and suggested me for the job to freshen up the interiors and help with an expansion. Being familiar with the de la Rentas' houses and style, (I) was happy to take on the project. Getting to work on something that was originally designed by someone you admire is a real honor on top of being an interesting exercise.

"The designs are simple but luxurious and comfortable in a way that's appropriate to the climate and the Caribbean. We used Oscar's fabrics from his collection for Lee Jofa, and we solely employed Dominican craftsmen to weave the wicker and carve the mahogany pieces that fill the rooms. The only real challenge was our time constraint of having to do it quickly as the hotel remains open off-season with guests throughout the year."

And finally, you told us in Greenwich that you often have five or six major projects underway at any time, while also mentioning the enduring influence of nature and travel on both you and your work. How do you relax? Does your schedule allow for much personal travel? What's your favorite vacation memory?

"Since I travel so much for work, I am most relaxed at home and in my garden in the Hudson Valley. I do try to take advantage of travel for work though and will often get to extend trips by a day or



Markham Roberts' work on a Carnegie Hill townhouse. Photograph by Nelson Hancock.

two to see something interesting or go some place I haven't been before. This summer I have to go to Naples, and I will make sure I get to see as much as I can of the gardens, palazzos and museums in the vicinity while I'm there.

"Most memorable was a recent trip to Egypt. I had been before, 30 years ago during college with our Egyptology professor, but this time we were a large group of friends and took two boats, called

dahabiyehs, up the Nile from Luxor to Aswan. It was like being in a time warp. There were vast stretches of the river with small agrarian and herding communities that could have been there 3,000 years ago. Drifting on the water in that relaxing way and then wowed, of course, by the sights and spectacle of the grand temples, made it a perfect trip. Those experiences will surely stay with me." **W**

For more, visit markhamroberts.com.