



# An Architect's Place in the City

Robert Siegel enters a new phase of his career with a modernist home

BY SARA LIN

**A**S A PARTNER IN noted design firm Gwathmey Siegel & Associates, architect Robert Siegel is known for creating sleek, modern structures including Morgan Stanley's headquarters and the U.S. Mission to the United Nations. But at the end of each workday, Mr. Siegel retreats to a high rise in a sleepy part of Battery Park City.

"It's not a very noteworthy building," said Mr. Siegel, an avid sailor who chose the building for its proximity to the Hudson River, steps away. "You have to close your eyes when you go through the lobby and out the elevator in the hall until you get to the apartment."

After a four-month renovation completed last year, Mr. Siegel's 1,600-square-foot two-bedroom apartment hews to the strict classic modernist design practiced by his firm. Combining two next-door apartments, Mr. Siegel expanded his living room, made space for a dining table and created a master suite.

The architect's longtime passion for Le Corbusier is in evidence: Cube-shaped black leather sofa chairs by the French architect are clustered in front of one of his large red and green wall murals. Hanging against one wall is a framed black-and-white picture of Le Corbusier on his first trip to New York.

"When we were students, he was a very important guy. He's certainly important to our firm," Mr. Siegel said. In the corners, mushroom-shaped table lamps from the Bauhaus period sit beneath a bank of windows overlooking the Hudson and Statue of Liberty. Except for the murals, the apartment, with its cream marble floors, is mostly devoid of color.

The expansion has been useful, as Mr. Siegel's workdays in New York—he has a weekend home in Bedford, N.Y.—are lengthening. Charles Gwathmey, his longtime partner, died in August. Now 70 years old, Mr. Siegel is repositioning his firm of 45 architects to go on without its most charismatic spokesman in a recession. "Charlie was a terrific personality and a wonderful spokesperson," Mr. Siegel said. "The whole idea is: 'How do we remake the world's perception of what we are.'"

He's encouraging top associates to step into the spotlight. The firm has enough projects to



Cube-shaped sofas, chairs and a mural by Le Corbusier dominate the living area, left, reflecting Mr. Siegel's longtime passion for the architect; Mr. Siegel and his wife in the living room. 'Going back to the apartment during this period has been a godsend to me,' he said.

keep busy for the next 18 months, including two New York hotels, large private residences in Aspen, Colo., and St. Barts and a museum in Sacramento, Calif. The challenge will be to keep the work coming, Mr. Siegel said.

While many other firms have closed upon the death of a well-known founder, "I don't think [Mr. Siegel is] one to give up," says Thomas Phifer, an architect who worked at the firm from 1980 to 1985.

The child of a schoolteacher and an epidemiologist, Mr. Siegel attended an arts and music high school in Manhattan, where he met Mr. Gwathmey. They met again after graduate school and teamed up to start their own firm in 1968.

For more than 40 years, the two principals worked opposite each other at a large table. "For 12 hours a day they stared at each other and did everything together. I'm a close friend of Bob's, but I could never achieve the type of intimacy [Messrs. Siegel and Gwathmey] did," says architect Ted Liebman, a longtime friend.

For years, the Siegels used a one-bedroom in Battery Park, bought in 1997, as their weekday residence, leaving every weekend for their five-acre horse farm in Bedford. Last year, the Siegels purchased the apartment next door for

\$1 million and spent \$500,000 combining and redoing the units. A renovated two-bedroom, two-bathroom condo without water views in a building nearby is listed for \$1.49 million.

Though his wife Hazel is a textile designer and teaches at Pratt Institute, Mr. Siegel directed the redo, installing built-ins and lowering the ceiling in some places. "She lets me do what I like, then offers her criticisms," Mr. Siegel said.

On a recent Monday, Mr. Siegel, dressed in gray slacks, a striped shirt and a blue tie, came home for a lunch of poached salmon and tea sandwiches served on his favorite dinnerware—black-and-white plates he designed 25 years ago. But before he sat down, he adjusted the white linen place mat on the table, making it line up more precisely with the setting on the other side.

"This was really a paradigm shift for me, realizing that my partner, who's been this big healthy guy his whole life, wasn't going to be there anymore," Mr. Siegel said. "Going back to the apartment during this period has been a godsend to me. It's been restful."

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