

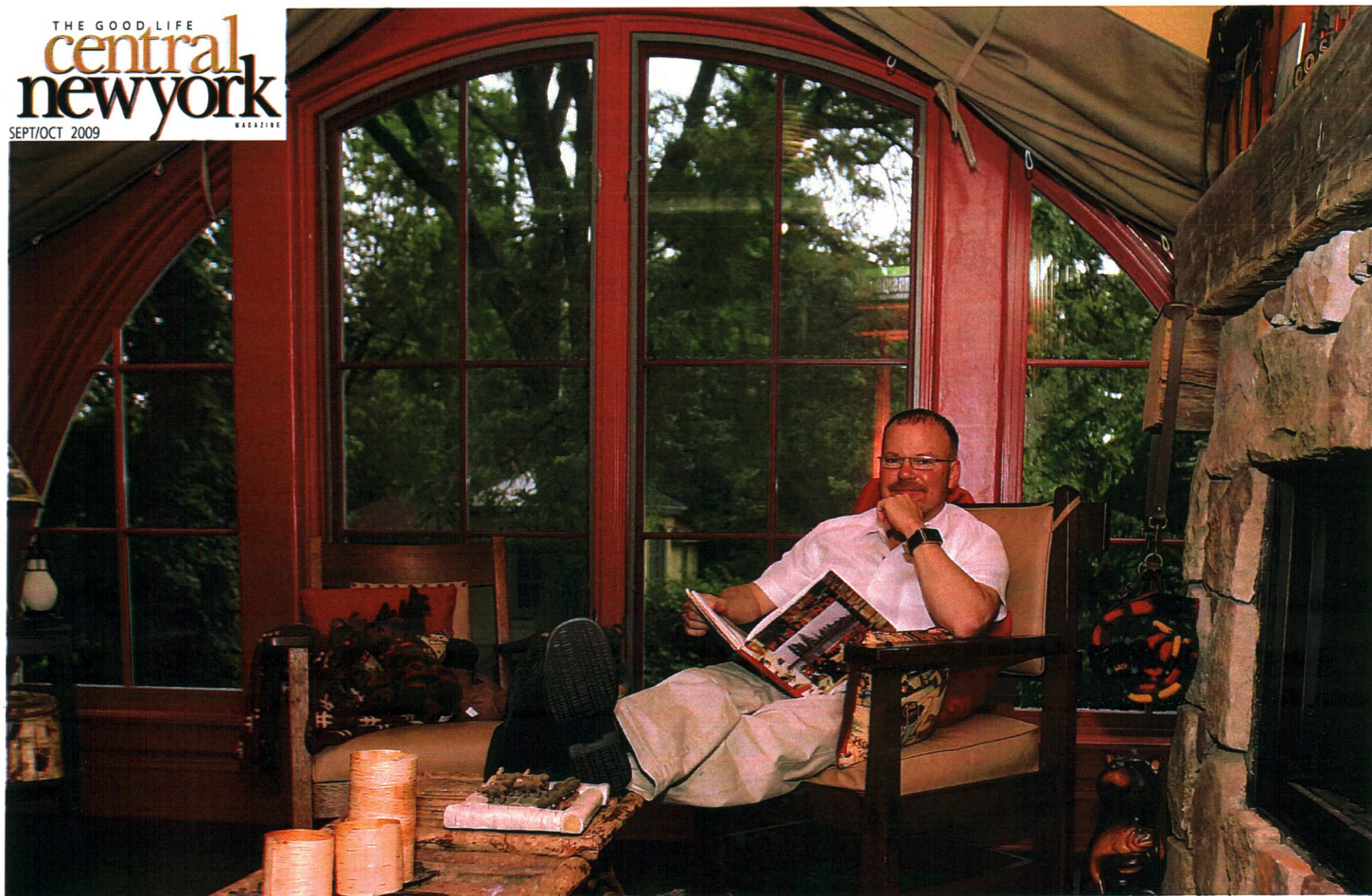
THE GOOD LIFE
central
newyork



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ANDY **RAMSGARD**

The Michelangelo of Skaneateles



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Text by Barbara Stith

Skaneateles architect Andy Ramsgard's work space is a cramped cubicle barely wide enough to hold his paper-strewn desk. A sliver of Skaneateles Lake is framed in his window. The view, from the second floor of a building that also houses a village gift shop, is nice enough, but it hardly compares to the views many of his clients enjoy.

Ramsgard's office seems a bit at odds with the spacious, elegant homes he creates, but then, Ramsgard combines disparate elements in his work and his life. He's an architect in a village of 2,600 people, but his clientele includes former Vice President Dick Cheney and members of the Saudi royal family; a guy who doesn't like the limelight but met Nicole Kidman and Matthew Broderick on a movie set; a family man who creates multimillion-dollar homes for others but

can't imagine ever selling his own 1933 bungalow.

Ramsgard, 43, always knew he wanted work that allowed him to express his creativity. He traces his interest in architecture back to his family's move to the Indian Springs subdivision near Baldwinsville when he was in kindergarten. Watching his family's home and all of the neighboring houses being built left a lasting impression.

But Ramsgard thought his career would take him to New York or Los Angeles or Europe. Instead, the Bishop Ludden graduate ended up — after getting a two-year degree in architecture from Alfred State, followed by a bachelor's degree in architecture from the University of Buffalo and graduate work at the University of Barcelona — working in Skaneateles. That's where he plans to stay.



"Behind the Eight Ball" is the theme of this room in Andy Ramsgard's Skaneateles home. Ramsgard says the painting above the fireplace started as a decoration for a 2008 New Year's Eve Party, but survived the party "to become an expression of our family's determination to overcome life's obstacles." In 2008, Sherie Ramsgard became a breast cancer survivor.

"Once you come to Skaneateles, you can't go anywhere else," he says. "It's the most beautiful place in the world."

Ramsgard's work has had a dramatic influence on the way Skaneateles looks. Two of his commercial projects — the upscale Italian restaurant Rosalie's Cucina and the Mirbeau Inn & Spa — replaced low-slung, midcentury construction and changed the appearance of the western edge of the village. He's designed most of the recent major projects in the village center: the combination hotel and storefront at the corner of Jordan and Fennell streets, with its pocket park and fountain, and the conversion of an aging, former funeral home into handsome, landscaped condominiums, to name only a few. His residential

work ranges from restoring historic elements of some of the village's oldest homes to designing new lakefront houses in styles that include Arts and Crafts, French country, lodge, traditional and contemporary.

When Ramsgard's business was just beginning to take off, former Skaneateles town Supervisor Bill Pavlus told him he had a significant responsibility. "You'll have a big impact on what the community looks like and how it sees itself," Pavlus told him. The words stuck with Ramsgard. "When I do my job well," he says, "people don't remember what was there before."

Some of Ramsgard's work — such as the Tuscan-influenced look of Rosalie's, or the Provençal inspirations of Mirbeau — have drawn critics who say the styles are at odds with traditional architecture in Skaneateles.

Holland Gregg, president of the Citizens to Preserve the Character of Skaneateles, a development watchdog group, acknowledges that criticism yet counts himself among Ramsgard's admirers. Although Mirbeau and Rosalie's "clearly draw their design elements from outside of Central New York," Gregg says, they work as escapist tourist enterprises. The out-of-town customers they draw are good for the area, and the fact the buildings are tucked behind trees and berms mitigates their impact, Gregg says.

"I thought I had a great concept, but he took it to a level I didn't imagine."

And although the group has had issues with some of Ramsgard's projects, Gregg says, those issues have been related to size, scope or environmental impacts, but rarely the design.

"He is an artist in his craft, and his customers have the feeling that he is doing something truly unique and personal for them," Gregg says.

Ramsgard's designs often incorporate classic design elements, but with a contemporary twist. One of the lakefront homes he designed, for example, is clad in traditional cedar-shake shingles but boasts a bowed, windowed front that resembles a steamship, taking advantage of a spectacular view. Another features a perfectly symmetrical, dormered home with two distinctly different treatments on each end: on one, a porch with a gable roof and a broad, straight staircase; on the other, a porch with a pagoda roof and a curved staircase.

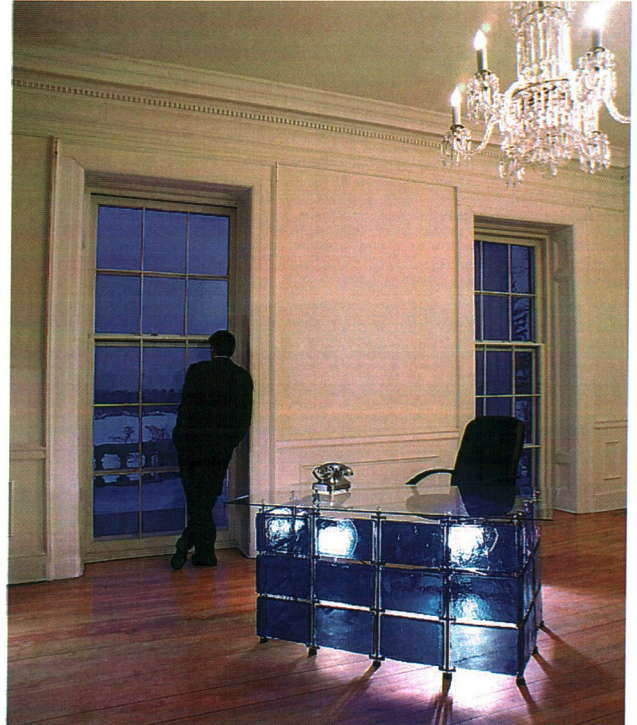
He likes separate outbuildings: garages, boathouses, guest cottages, potting sheds. "I like to break down buildings into a compound, like an indigenous farm," he says. "It gives the character that it was built over time."

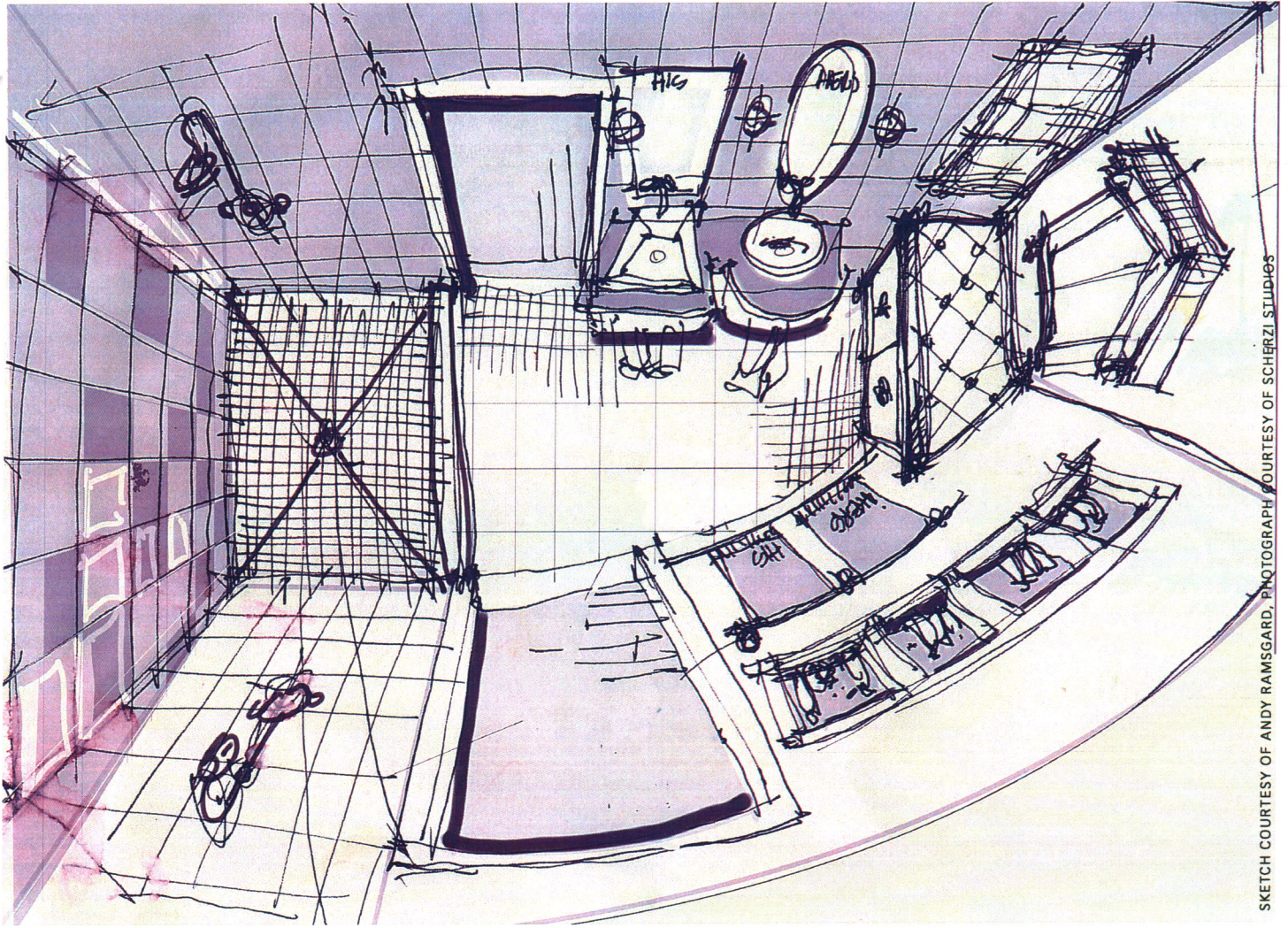
Ramsgard's work often focuses on the smallest details: a bell from Nepal tucked in an exterior wall of a lakefront home with Asian influences, antique carved wood panels transformed into a headboard in a master bedroom, a guitar-shaped kitchen island to pay homage to a homeowner's love of music.

Is it typical for an architect to get involved in

Xander Blue, Ramsgard's furniture company, displays its wares through ironic imagery.

BELOW, the blue desk photo is reminiscent of a photograph of President Kennedy; BOTTOM, the glass table shot evokes "The Last Supper."





the design of a kitchen island?

No, Ramsgard acknowledges. "I pride myself on not being a typical architect," he says.

Photographer Jim Scherzi, who often works with Ramsgard, vouches for that statement. Scherzi has never known an architect who sketches as much as Ramsgard — a habit that prompted Scherzi to nickname him Michelangelo. On one project, Scherzi watched as a client described the house he envisioned and Ramsgard listened, pencil in hand. By the time the client was finished talking, Ramsgard had sketched a house to show him.

"I'm not sure that when people think of architects they think of



Ramsgard's sketch of a bathroom design, featuring his-and-her sinks, and the finished bathroom, which is in his Skaneateles home.

"I pride myself on not being a typical architect."



Andy Ramsgard and his family, from left, daughter Ruby, 8; son Rex, 11, and wife Sherie, sit on the porch of their home in Skaneateles.

artists, but Andy's really an artist," says Dr. Robert Kiltz, who has worked on projects with Ramsgard over the past decade. Kiltz imagined opening up the center of a commercial building he owns in Skaneateles to show off its three-floor interior. Instead, Ramsgard came up with a design that opened up the sides of each floor, revealing the multistory walls.

"I thought I had a great concept, but he took it to a level I didn't imagine," Kiltz says.

When he's not working on projects for clients, Ramsgard works on ideas for his own home, located just a few blocks from the village center. "It's a hobby," he explains. "My hobby is architecture."

The house he shares with his wife, Sherie, and their two children, Rex Xander, 10, and Ruby Blue, 8, is dense with detail. No room has escaped his imaginative touch: from the tiny bathroom that honors Sherie's profession as a psychiatric nurse



UPPER RIGHT, The kitchen in Ramsgard's home.

LOWER RIGHT, a Red Sox-themed bedroom in Ramsgard's home.





Andy Ramsgard designed kitchen in Phil Romano's Skaneateles home.

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF SCHERZI STUDIOS

with a collection of first aid kits, an eye chart, and mortars and pestles, to the basement that re-creates a New York City subway station with graffiti-covered walls and a mosaic Times Square sign.

The master bedroom recalls Sherie's hometown of Lake Placid, with birch timbers cut from family property, a custom-made canvas tent that functions as a curtain, and a canoe suspended from the ceiling. Rex's bedroom is a tribute to Fenway Park, complete with a bed perched atop a re-creation of the Green Monster left field wall.

"Every room is a tiny mini vacation," Ramsgard says. "It's about enjoying the space where you are."

Rosalie's Cucina, the first restaurant that Ramsgard designed, also helped launch his firm. Auburn native and celebrated restaurateur Phil Romano, who had worked with Ramsgard on a house project, wanted him to design a restaurant for his sister, Rosalie. Romano already had purchased the site — the 18th-century frame building where Ramsgard's firm now is located — but neighborhood opposition forced its relocation. Ramsgard bought the building from Romano, and the restaurant moved to the village edge.

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The kitchen in Phil Romano's Dallas home is another Andy Ramsgard design. The table seats 12.

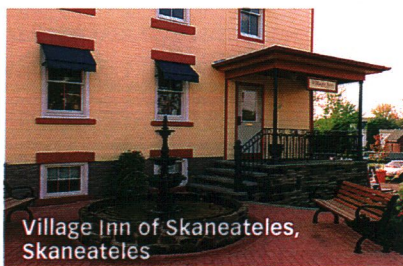
A PORTFOLIO OF RAMSGARD DESIGNS



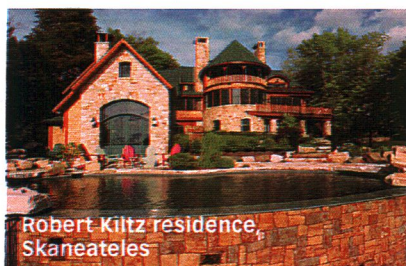
Phil Romano residence, Skaneateles



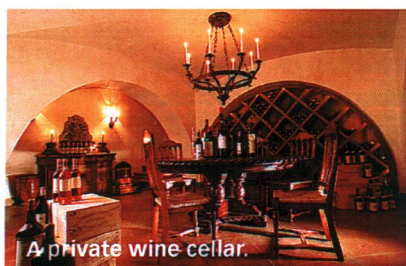
Mirbeau Inn & Spa, Skaneateles



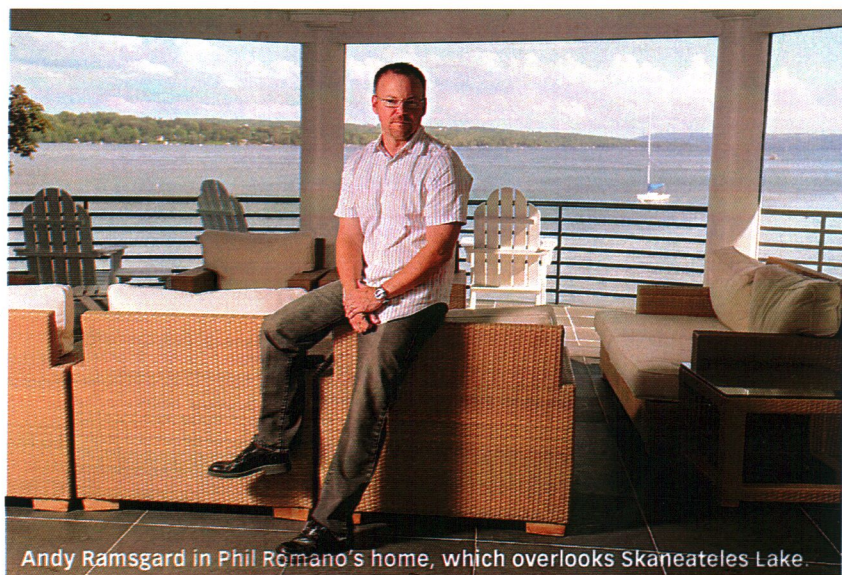
Village Inn of Skaneateles, Skaneateles



Robert Kiltz residence, Skaneateles



A private wine cellar.



Andy Ramsgard in Phil Romano's home, which overlooks Skaneateles Lake.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP) JENNIFER MEYERS, C.W. MCKEEN, COURTESY OF SCHERZI STUDIOS, MIKE GREENLAR, COURTESY OF SCHERZI STUDIOS

Ramsgard has since designed a number of homes for Romano — four in Dallas, two in Skaneateles, two in Palm Beach, Fla. It was on one of the Dallas projects that Ramsgard met a neighbor of Romano's, a man dressed in jeans and a polo shirt who came knocking on the door one Saturday afternoon, imploring Romano to get him an appointment with his barber.

That's how Ramsgard met Dick Cheney — on the day before George W. Bush would announce him as his running mate, and when Cheney, who would be on every television network the next day, was in desperate need of a trim. Ramsgard's firm would later do some design work for the former vice president's private residence.

It's Ramsgard's sideline — his furniture design company, named Xander Blue, after his children — that has brought him into celebrity circles. His tables desks and bars combine hand-cast, stained-glass blocks and stainless steel frames, resulting in one of Ramsgard's favorite combinations, high tech

IN THE WORKS

Here are some upcoming and recently completed projects for Andy Ramsgard:

- ◆ A proposal for a five-part book series for Rizzoli Publications. Each book in the series will relate to various elements of architecture and design.
- ◆ Creating a glass bar for a scene in a new Queen Latifah movie that will be released by Fox Searchlight Pictures.
- ◆ Designing the renovated interiors of the newly opened Hotel Clarence in Seneca Falls. The hotel is named for the character of Clarence, an angel in the 1946 movie "It's A Wonderful Life."
- ◆ Designing Magnus Ridge Winery, a green winery on the west side of Seneca Lake near Watkins Glenn.
- ◆ Designing a mixed-use building in a cultural area for residential shopping, office space and a courthouse on the west side of Dallas, across from the Trinity River.

and handmade. The Saudi royal family purchased some of his pieces. The furniture also was featured in the 2004 movie "The Stepford Wives"; Ramsgard met Kidman and Broderick on the set.

"I don't push very hard for those kinds of things," he says. "If they come, they come."

Taking on so many projects, and so many projects of different kinds, energizes Ramsgard. The more projects he works on at one time, he explains, the richer the content of all of them. And the more projects he completes, the more he wants to do. "It's like an addiction," he says. "It's so much fun to create things."

Andy Ramsgard puts the finishing touches on a massive armoire that was custom-built for a client.



Ramsgard's sketch of his home in Skaneateles and the home, a 1933 bungalow.



SKETCH COURTESY OF ANDY RAMSGARD

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF SCHERZI STUDIOS