

# FAIRFIELD COUNTY LOOK

A view into southern Fairfield County's dynamic cultural and philanthropic scene.

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Robyn Kencel

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## DESIGN

### A MATCH MADE IN HEAVEN

Architect - Designer Interview with Ira Grandberg and Robin Kencel

Photographs by ChiChi Ubiña

#### Where did you grow up?

**Ira Grandberg:** New Rochelle NY

**Robin Kencel:** Hamden, CT, just outside of New Haven

#### What influences did you have growing up that made you become a designer/architect?

**IG:** I grew up in an architecturally rich environment. My Dad was in Real Estate and took me, at an early age, to many home sites in Westchester and Fairfield Counties. My Mom was an accomplished watercolor artist whose focus was directed to country landscapes. The "spirit" of homes was in my blood from an early age.

**RK:** My mother's love of art and in creating beautiful environments made me attentive to my surroundings, whether they were inside or outside spaces. My grandfather was a furniture maker and restorer; I loved history, seeing how a piece was made and learning about early construction techniques. My first purchase was a 1920's maple desk, bought for my college dorm room. I bought the piece because of the beautiful crystal knob that was on the single drawer.



ROBIN KENCEL

203.249.2943

GREENWICH, CONNECTICUT

► [robinkencel.com](http://robinkencel.com)

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**IG:** I have had my own practice since 1974. The practice was in New York City for 22 years. We specialized in residential, historic restoration, hospitality and corporate work. In the late 90's we received a commission to design a wonderful Greenwich Estate. Many new projects in Greenwich followed. We moved our offices to Mt. Kisco, NY which was centrally located to our New England base. As it has turned out, over 90% of our work has been in Greenwich, the majority of which is residential. However, we were honored to design the new Stanwich Congregational Church which received an international design award.

**RK:** My business grew out of a passion to preserve a little bit of the architectural history in the communities where we have lived. My business began in 1989 with the renovation of a 1942 townhome in Bronxville, NY. Since 1996, we have restored three architecturally significant properties in Greenwich as well as important properties in other communities and states. The business has grown and expanded in response to client needs and focuses on three additional areas: owners representation in construction projects, interior decoration and real estate, where I am an agent affiliated with Greenwich Fine Properties, the leading real estate independent firm in Greenwich.



**What would you consider your design style?**

**IG:** As experienced problem solvers, we are facile with all architectural styles. Our diverse training has in fact created an organizational structure allowing us to enrich many of the

traditional styled projects we design where plan and circulation are the foundations of the designs. Our projects are unique to each other. We frown upon "formulaic" design.

**RK:** I would first look at the designers that I admire and influenced my thinking, including Albert Hadley, Elsie de Wolfe, John Dickinson, Frances Elkins and Billy Baldwin. I would describe my style as a mix of classicism and modernism. My ultimate goal is to create interiors that delight the senses, but never overwhelm them. The interior decoration should compliment the architecture, never competing or distracting from it. I love when I can introduce an element of unexpectedness, when it is appropriate to do so.



**How long have you been designing? Where did you study?**

**IG:** I graduated with honors in design from Columbia University School of Architecture. I have always been a facile designer and problem solver - it is the core of my being.

**RK:** My design training began in the field of kitchen and bath design, following graduate school. Though I have completed coursework at Parsons School of Design, my most valuable has come from the rich collaborative relationships with exquisitely talented professionals I have developed over 25 years. At the top of the list is Ira and Carlene Safdie, an antique dealer I have worked closely with for a number of years.



**IG:** A shelter...providing spiritual warmth and always integrated with the natural surroundings.

**RK:** To me, home is the place to rest, revitalize and refuel. It is the backdrop where life "happens." I feel a great sense of obligation to create spaces that have an underlying sense of calm and openness, so that people can comfortably fill out the space, rather than have things overwhelm them.

**Knowing that you two each have your own businesses - how often do you work together?**

**RK:** Often. Ira is one of the most brilliant, creative architects I have ever met (he hates when I say that, he's very modest). I am grateful that I have had an opportunity to work with him.



**How many projects have the two of you done together? How long have you been working together?**

**IG:** We have completed 3 major projects together and have worked together for at least 10 years.

**Tell us about this particular project – shown.**

**IG:** We took a house that had become pigeonholed between two homes and had totally lost its Estate quality and "curb appeal."



**RK:** The first time my husband saw the house, with its original sprinkler hoses throughout the three floors, he left the house and said without pause, "ABSOLUTELY NO WAY." Six months later, it was ours.

There was the obvious floor plan issues: Getting a proper kitchen and family living spaces, figuring out how to turn 6 tiny bedrooms in one wing of the house into proper family bedrooms, and where to provide garaging for the main residence (the carriage house still had the original five horse bays). Then there was the need to update all the mechanicals. Of equal importance, was how to restore the property's original sense of being an estate, lost when all but 3.6 of the original 33 acres had been sold off. Lastly, was what to do with the carriage house. Our incredible team, led by Ira, solved all of these problems.

By redesigning the arrival drive and forecourt we were able to return the home and surrounds to their original elegance. The home had an antique "servants kitchen" with no ancillary space or a garage area. By supporting the large masonry chimney with a new steel truss system we were able to eliminate the boiler flue and incinerator flue running thru the home, there by allowing us to add a new stair, new bedroom/bath areas, enlarge the small kitchen and have new open space in the cellar for garage and mud room areas. We were able to add a new recreational "floor" in what used to be the unfinished attic. The entire house was renovated while either preserving the original details or creating new replications. We also completely renovated the original carriage house into an office studio and guest apartment.





**How do you find projects that you do together?**

**IG:** We visit many home sites, evaluate the degree of restoration and renovation required to “give life” to the residence and naturally, evaluate to potential cost as it pertains to the market realities.

**RK:** Typically, it takes me at least a year to find a property with the right ingredients. Unfortunately, it is becoming more and more difficult to find historic properties with architectural significance to preserve, as many of Greenwich’s important homes have been demolished in the past two decades. Once I find something that I think has potential, Ira and I consider it carefully from a number of perspectives.



Ira Grandberg, A.I.A  
Grandberg & Associates, Architects  
[www.grandbergarchitects.com](http://www.grandbergarchitects.com)  
ph: 914-242-0033

Robin Kencel  
Greenwich Fine Properties  
Ellsworth Ford Associates  
203-249-2943  
[www.robinkencel.com](http://www.robinkencel.com)  
[www.ellsworth-ford.com](http://www.ellsworth-ford.com)