

# *Passport to Country Properties*



## Adaptable Soul

Text by SCOTT ROBSON

**I**t is a rare structure that not only fulfills but truly embodies its purpose, and it is a rare architect who is able to blur the line between form and function so that the two mesh organically. Since 1996, Sloan Architects of Millbrook, N.Y., has been doing just that.

*Above, an interior at the Village Center at the Anderson Center for Autism.*





*Above, Michael and Alexandra Sloan in their office in Millbrook, N.Y., in a photo by Walter Kidd.*

Led by Alexandra and Michael Sloan, the eight-person firm has been the go-to source for area institutions, families and individuals seeking creative and diligent design work. In the last 14 years, the firm has developed a reputation for long-term, socially responsible projects.

Unlike some other firms, Sloan Architects does not specialize in a specific style of architecture. The firm has undertaken projects at institutions such as Vassar College, as well as numerous residential projects.

Among these smaller projects, Sloan Architects once designed a home theater for actor Liam Neeson. "Mr. Neeson liked that we had designed a movie theater at Vassar, and we were already in-tune with the acoustics," Mr. Sloan recalled. "So he approached us."

"We choose as a firm to be diversified," Mr. Sloan said. "It's more interesting and challenging than focusing exclusively on, say, residential housing."

"We don't have a particular style," Mrs. Sloan added. "Our style depends on whatever the client needs and brings to the table."

In approaching any particular project, Sloan Architects is extremely conscious of the site's context, both geographically speaking and in terms of local design culture and history. "Every time, we work on a dialogue with the client, and come up with a design appropriate to the site," Mr. Sloan said.

"We're not a cookie-cutter firm," Mrs.

Sloan said with a laugh. "If a client is willing to take a chance on us, we have the flexibility and the research skills to meet any need."

"It's really a back-and-forth dialogue process," according to Mr. Sloan. "There are no standard design features in our firm. With every project, we're working to meet

the client's needs precisely."

"We don't pretend we know it all," Mrs. Sloan said. "We listen to our clients, and we collaborate with them throughout the entire process. We don't try to impose our thoughts on the clients. In the end, it's really gratifying to us, and to the clients."

The firm's commitment to authentic and



*Above, an interior scene at the Village Center at the Anderson Center for Autism.*



original design is one of its core values. "It has everything to do with the details and how they relate to the client," said Mr. Sloan. "Every little joint is important to us. That ethic extends even to our AutoCAD drafting program. We have the raw program, without the architectural design package."

"Why? So that we can't rely on standard details, so that we can't drag and drop from a menu. Each time, we do it all from scratch," he said.

Among the firm's recent projects is a major campus redesign for the Anderson Center for Autism. The Anderson Center is a residential facility in the Hudson Valley region of New York that provides the highest quality of educational, cultural, and recreational support to those afflicted with autism.

"We've been working with the school since 2004," Mrs. Sloan said. "Initially, they contacted us because they wanted to get rid of the traditionally institutional dormitories."

"We have worked with the board and the surrounding community to create a village, so to speak," Mrs. Sloan added. "We've designed a space with plenty of walking paths, and we've kept all the traffic at the center's periphery, using key buildings to anchor the site."

"Our initial concept sprung from the notion that these students don't necessarily have the privileges that many other kids have," Mr. Sloan said. "As a result, many of the students at Anderson are on campus most of the time. We created a village that duplicates the experiences others can have a little more freely."

"It's in the style of a classic new England village," he added. "We have the village center, a spacious town green, and plenty of the familiar architectural cues."

"It took a whole year to redesign the campus," Mrs. Sloan recalled. "In 2005 we started construction. We tore down some of the old dorms and created new dormitories that more closely resemble actual houses, to enhance the feel of community."

"The Village Center at Anderson is an important hybrid structure," Mrs. Sloan continued. "Functionally, it is half dedicated to an operations center, half dedicated to student services and family centers. These centers are a little like hospitality suites; they are equipped with a kitchenette, a family room, and so on. That way, visiting families can spend time with students outside of the dormitories and still be comfortable."

"In terms of architecture, we looked at the local materials and tried to incorporate them into the Village Center," Mr. Sloan said. "It was our goal to duplicate the architectural language of Hyde Park: stucco, copper, stonework."



*Above, a view of the Village Center at the Anderson Center for Autism.*

"We've built a contemporary structure, but we used authentic and traditional materials. It's not a veneer of stone; it's a solid six inches of stone. It's not imitation stucco. It's real stucco," he emphasized.

"It's not a new structure, but we wanted to imbue it with a sense of history and permanence for the students," Mr. Sloan said.

Another project at the Anderson Center is Malcolm Hall, located on the same axis as the Village Center. Formerly a dormitory, the building itself is being preserved because of its historic and classical design. "We're in the process of adding onto it and turning it into an administrative center," Mrs. Sloan said. "Instead of having the children live in an institutional building, we're housing the administration there. It's great for offices," she said.

The Anderson Center was a totally new type of project for Sloan Architects. "We never designed anything quite like that before," Mr. Sloan said. "We had two lead-ins that helped us get and perform the job. The firm has done a lot of work on college campuses, notably for Vassar, and we've worked on a number of childcare centers."

"Child care centers have fairly similar requirements to a school for special needs students. The children, and the students, need a degree of observation," he noted. "So we were not just designing to meet New York State building codes, but also to meet state regulatory agency requirements for various childcare offices."

"We were campus type architects, but we were also familiar with the institutional regulations. It was really a perfect match for their needs," he said. ▶





Top, the residence known as Copperheads. Above, a temple and headquarters design in Flushing, Queens, for the China Buddhist Association of New York.



From the experience gained at the Anderson Center, Sloan Architects recently acquired a new project at the Camphill Village just outside of Copake, N.Y. The Camphill Village is an intentional and thriving community for adults with developmental disabilities, co-workers, and their children. The Camphill philosophy emphasizes the dignity, integrity, and societal worth of all individuals.

"Camphill and the Anderson Center required two totally different approaches," Mrs. Sloan said.

"Caring for the adults at Camphill is a different process entirely," she explained. "Anderson is a little more corporate in terms of organization, with institutional management. At Camphill, the staff lives at the facility. It's holistic in every sense. The staff, the management, the residents are all one extended family."



*Above and top, the College Center at Vassar College, designed by Sloan Architects.*

Camphill extends that holistic experience to agriculture and environmental consciousness. "They're very organic, with their own farms and CSA programs, as well as some very important environmental initiatives," Mrs. Sloan said.

"As a result their project was very different from what we've done previously," Mr. Anderson said. "We just finished 18 months master planning with them, and we're looking forward to moving to the next phase."

For a project of this scale, Sloan Architects develops long-term plans incrementally. "We're looking to begin the first real phase of the project, which will encompass maybe the first five years of what we've set out to do, out of twenty-five years," he said.

"We look at the big picture, over a very long timeline," Mr. Sloan explained.

Over the years, Sloan Architects have quite naturally developed an affinity for working with socially conscious organizations and institutions. "We enjoy working for them," Mr. Sloan said. ►





*A private home in Ancram, N.Y., designed by Sloan Architects.*

The firm's work has included a number of projects for charitable and philanthropic institutions, as well as a current project for the China Buddhist Association of New York. "The Buddhist association was looking for a firm to redesign their temple and headquarters, and they heard of us from an engineer. They looked at the Anderson Center, and they liked what they saw," Mr. Sloan explained.

"If you do what you do well, it's like self-marketing without actually marketing," Mr. Sloan said.

Sloan Architects' philosophy of success being its own virtue is of particular importance today, in an era of greenwashed marketing. "Everybody's into green architecture today," Mr. Sloan observed wryly. "We believe in smart architecture that is naturally efficient. We don't just go in and throw some solar panels onto a building so we can claim to be green for our Web site."

"We explain to our clients that it's about having the right insulation, having the right window opening and using the right materials. It's funny, because people will look at a very efficient building and say 'That doesn't look green,'" Mr. Sloan noted. "Green is on the inside. It's not always visible."

"We don't believe in green as a labeling scheme," he said.

To learn more, see the Web site at [www.sloanarch.com](http://www.sloanarch.com).

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