

Globe Real Estate

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ARCHITECTURE

Landscape and light on the Bridle Path

A thoughtful renovation in Toronto's
most exclusive neighbourhood **PAGE 2**



Architect and artist Paul Raff transformed a grim 1970s structure by opening it to light and air and the beauties of a 2-acre lot designed by landscape architect Janet Rosenberg. BEN RAHN/A-FRAME

From grumpily Modernist to contemporary cool

Paul Raff transforms a Bridle Path home with glass, ceramics, warm wood and classic joinery



The back of the house is lined with windows so nature is never far from sight. The goal of Echo house is to be at peace with its environment. STEVE TSAI



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History has not been kind, by and large, to the modernist villas in Toronto's ultra-affluent Bridle Path residential district.

Some have been knocked down to make way for frivolous story-book chateaux. Others merely languish. Only one (that I know of) has undergone a thoroughgoing, effective restoration to its original mid-20th century stylishness.

And then there is a certain grand-manner modern family home, put up on a two-acre Bridle Path lot about 20 years ago, that has been neither wholly swept away nor simply restored to its native state. Rather, it has become the occasion for an 11,000-square-foot project known as Echo House, which was recently completed by Toronto artist and architect Paul Raff.

The basic setting of this very large single-family house could hardly be more lovely. Designed and planted in the early 1990s by landscape architect Janet Rosenberg, the back garden features a broad lawn thickly framed by trees that flower in the spring and put on a good show of colour in the fall. Even without the beds of abundant annuals and perennials one might expect here, the gardens, both fore and aft, create an atmosphere of calm and refuge, of insulation from the pulse of the metropolis.

The house Mr. Raff was given to revise turned out to be more problematic. Though constructed around the same time the landscaping was done, it harkened back to a kind of brutalist modernism that had been fashionable

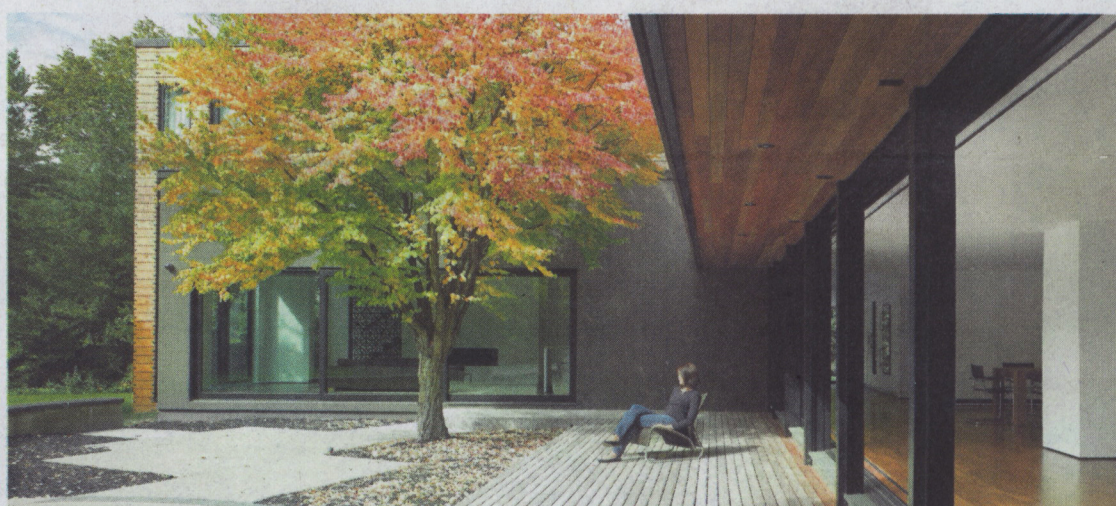
in the 1960s and 1970s, but is little admired today. The streetside façade was a glowering bunker-like affair, and views over the rear garden were largely blocked by opaque walls.

Mr. Raff's strategy of renewal has involved radically opening up this unpromising house to light and air, and freshening the formerly dour 142-foot front façade. The result is a spacious garden pavilion beautifully tailored for an active family whose members live most of the time in New York City and who regard their Bridle Path estate as a holiday home.

In good weather, they can welcome the outdoors in by rolling away the glass walls of the austere Bulthaup kitchen and the sitting room, which give onto the garden at the rear. They can also dine, relax by the fireplace or work in the study while being very close to the garden, since the communal rooms are separated from it only by large panes of transparent glass (almost eight feet by eight feet square) that slide aside to create an aperture 32 feet wide.

But even when the walls are pulled to and shut, nature is still present to sight, because the views out the back of the house are so comprehending, inclusive. As I sat with Mr. Raff on the edge of the garden one serene recent afternoon, strong summer sunlight slanted through the clear walls, brightening the frostily white-walled interior and heightening the effect of luxurious hardwood and ceramic tile flooring. Echo House seemed at peace with its environment – urbane and forthrightly contemporary, as it should be, given its place in a 21st-century city; yet harmoniously in tune with its garden site and the sky.

Around at the front, the residence turns a sharply less transparent, but similarly sophisticated, face toward the curbside garden and the street. The sense of the old façade – long, low-slung – has been retained,



The back garden is framed by trees, previously the view of the garden was blocked by opaque walls. BEN RAHN



Metalwork inside was inspired by Korean woodcraft. STEVE TSAI



The exterior wood cladding. BEN RAHN



A breezy children's bedroom. BEN RAHN

though Mr. Raff has lightened its formerly ponderous visage by cladding the exterior with silvery Algonquin limestone and stacking clerestory windows on top of it.

He has also filled in the cave-like openings in the façade with interesting privacy screens made from reclaimed Douglas fir and held together by blackened steel clips. This attractive combination of warm timber and metal joinery

– inspired, the architect told me, by fine Korean woodcraft – appears elsewhere to accent the predominantly black and white character of the scheme.

Mr. Raff has fashioned an eloquent contemporary dwelling from the bones of a grumpily modernist one, sparing the usable portions of the old structure and introducing new elements that add up to a coherent, excellent piece of architecture.



Mr. Raff's renewal of the home focused on opening the house up to light while sparing the usable portions of the old structure. PHOTOS BY BEN RAHN