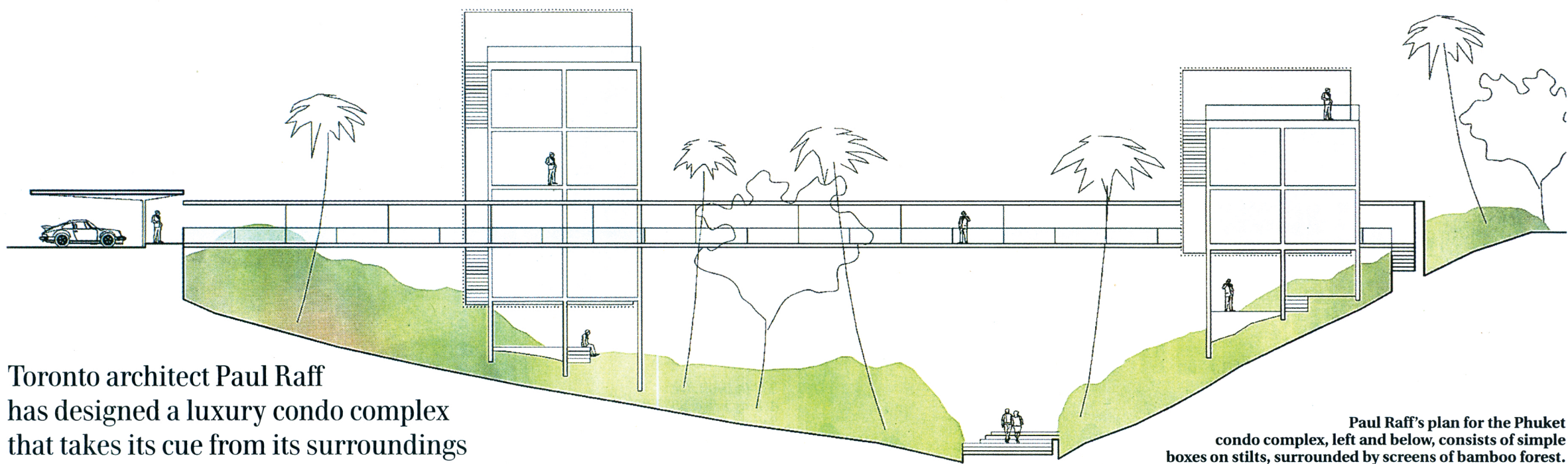


## ARCHITECTURE



Toronto architect Paul Raff has designed a luxury condo complex that takes its cue from its surroundings

Paul Raff's plan for the Phuket condo complex, left and below, consists of simple boxes on stilts, surrounded by screens of bamboo forest.

# Modern tree houses in a lush landscape



**JOHN BENTLEY MAYS**  
THE PERFECT HOUSE

The Thai resort island of Phuket is, by all accounts, every frost-nipped Canadian's dream of paradise come true: a glowingly warm expanse of lush jungle and towering trees, all of it ringed by some of the world's most glorious beaches.

Yet Phuket's tourism and real estate industry — now back to near-normal levels of activity following the 2004 tsunami — faces a problem common to all scenic tourist havens. It has to do with how best to accommodate the many people who want to visit or live in such an exclusive, enchanting area without blocking views, bulldozing the exquisite forests to add more roads and parking lots, or otherwise jeopardizing the very things that make the place attractive.

Such was the challenge facing Toronto architect Paul Raff some 18 months ago when he was invited to Thailand by a group of Asian investors and asked to design a luxury condo complex in a steep-sided, west-facing ravine on Phuket's famous Kamala Bay.

"It was a dramatic and difficult site, and the view was everything," Mr. Raff recalls.

"The investors asked me to propose what size and configuration the construction would be, and even to propose some ideas about actual use. In addition to housing, would this be a good place for a night club? A restaurant? Even a shopping mall?"

"I very quickly had the feeling for what I wanted to do as soon as I walked over the ground, through the virgin forest of coconut, giant palms and banyan trees. I got the idea of the simplest forms — simple boxes lifted off the ground on stilts. It will feel like you live in a modern jungle tree house by the ocean."

Mr. Raff maintained this elegant, economical vision throughout the design process. The very beautiful result is a ravine colony of 17 small buildings that enclose 48 units priced to sell from roughly \$350,000 to \$6-million.

Each of these perched, dispersed buildings is wrapped above and below by screens of bamboo, providing a canopy over the shady garden at the base, and, on high, protecting the rooftop terrace from the relentless tropical sun and the downpours of the rainy season.

The seaward sides are sheathed in floor-to-ceiling glass, but the landward side of each structure is draped with bamboo lattice, ensuring privacy for those living



downhill from neighbours enjoying the magnificent and much-coveted ocean views.

But as lovely as the individual buildings are, the strong poetry of this project lies in the handling and disposition of the whole site to serve residents best. People who go to Phuket want the sense of seclusion, the nearness to wild, green

nature and the sea, for example. But they also like their cars. (The Kamala Bay area is well-known for its nightlife and restaurants.)

In his design, Mr. Raff dealt forthrightly with the parking issue, while protecting, as much as he could, the integrity of the natural setting.

The covered parking area has

been dropped behind an existing wall at the top of the incline, largely out of sight from the houses and the beach below.

Mr. Raff then provided a way of moving from car to residence that is surely the most charming feature of the whole scheme. It involves light walkways suspended above the forest floor — meaning, in ef-

fect, that nobody's feet need ever touch the ground between car trips — unless, of course, one wants to descend by a gentle path through the jungle to the swimming pool on the site, or to the beach below.

The visual pleasure of this design lies largely in its material play of horizontal passageways and vertical walls and stilts, and the delicacy of its touch on the ground and jungle floor. And there is also the refined, sensitive simplicity of the architect's approach to the peculiar requirements of building in a place everyone has an interest in keeping as unspoiled as possible.

The people who live and vacation on Phuket cannot take its reputation for natural magnificence for granted.

For centuries, almost the only people who paid attention to Phuket's coastal areas were, Mr. Raff says, "nomadic Muslim fishermen, who came ashore to bury their dead, but otherwise had no real base on land."

About 25 years ago, however, high-end tourism arrived on the island in a big way, along with an international airport that today offers direct flights to and from Hong Kong, Osaka and, in the high season, Europe.

Paul Raff's design is one instance of how architecture can meet development pressure head on, but with grace and fine intelligence.

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