

Silvery limestone cladding brightens the long, low-slung, formerly gloomy street-side façade of the house. To fashion the handsome privacy screens, architect Paul Raff loosely wove together slats of recycled Douglas fir, fastening them with steel clips painted black.

Photo: Ben Rahn/A-Frame

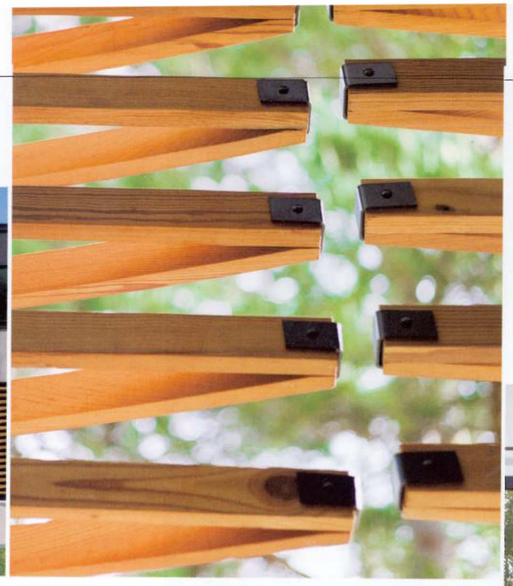
A CLEAR ADVANTAGE

A TORONTO ARCHITECT TRANSFORMED A BRUTALIST-STYLE HOUSE TO BRING IN THE LIGHT, THE LANDSCAPE AND 21ST-CENTURY DESIGN PRINCIPLES.

BY JOHN BENTLEY MAYS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BEN RAHN/A-FRAME AND STEVE TSAI





Above: Natural light filters through the woven screens, which can be swung open or, for privacy from the street, kept shut.

Photos: Steve Tsai

When a New York businessman and his family went house-hunting in Toronto's upscale Bridle Path district a few years ago, they found a place with spaciousness their midtown Manhattan apartment could never give them. But all was not perfection.

The two-level dwelling the couple eventually bought as a second residence—it was basically an oblong box with two short wings—had been designed around 1990 in a brutalist style already well past its best-by date. (This structure was set down, in turn, atop the rubble of an earlier house, perhaps from the 1960s, said to have been crafted by the well-known Toronto modernist John B. Parkin.)

The rough, poker-faced, institutional aesthetic of high-sixties brutalism had been, by 1990, watered down from full strength for domestic consumption, but the general sense of the home was still gruff and factory-like. The long, low street-side façade frowned like a bunker, and views over the garden at the rear were partially blocked by unnecessarily opaque walls. The large skylights sloping at 45 degrees—forms that were stylish when installed in, say, public swimming pools and libraries circa 1970—were tired-looking, outmoded. Energy leaked through the poorly insulated skin and through every pore. Viewed from whatever angle, this house badly needed an overhaul to make it habitable, efficient by today's standards, and contemporary in look and feel.

But if the building itself presented numerous problems, at least one aspect of the site was a gift from the past: its lovely two-acre environment. Designed and planted by landscape architect Janet Rosenberg when the brutalist house was put up, the garden features a broad lawn framed by dense stands of mature flowering shrubs and trees. Even without the beds of annuals and smaller perennials one might expect to find here—the owners have not gotten around to laying them down—the luxurious garden creates an atmosphere of calm and refuge, and provides visual and acoustic insulation from

An expanse of glass panels connects the high-ceilinged, graciously proportioned living room to the garden, designed and laid out in the 1990s by landscape architect Janet Rosenberg. A broad array of clerestory windows over the living room invites light from the western sky.

Photo: Ben Rahn/A-Frame

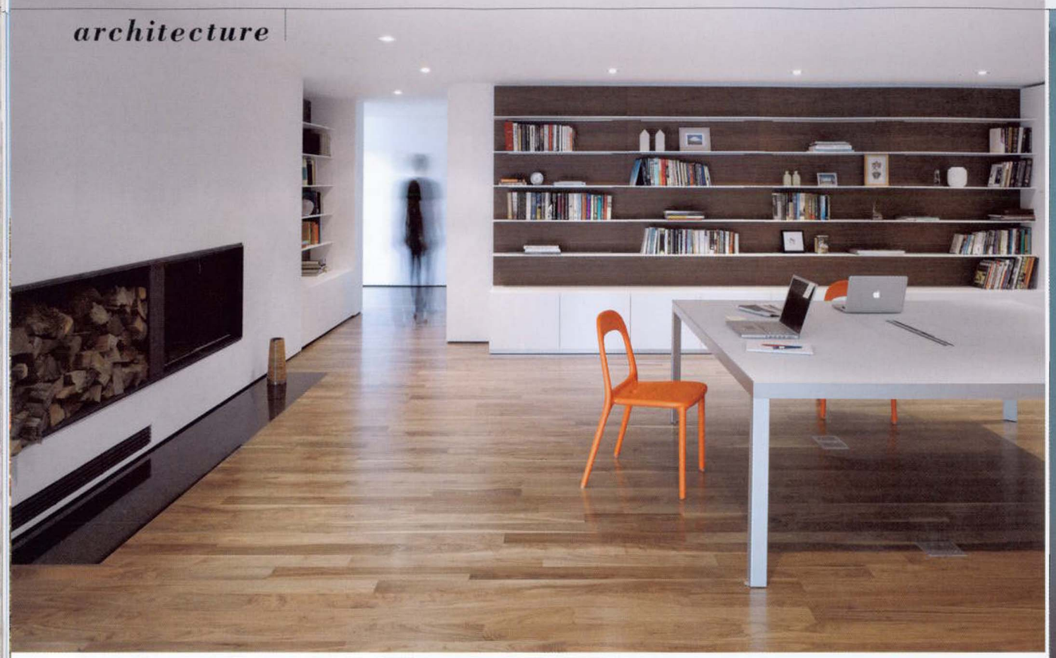


Toronto, Ont.

The building was transformed into an 11,000-square-foot garden pavilion. It's a fresh interpretation of the grand modern home in a more free, more fluent architectural language.

The luxurious walnut flooring flows out of the well-defined dining room, living room and study to form an internal stream of space running parallel to the glass wall. The wall's elements can be slid aside, creating a garden door 32 feet wide.

Photo: Ben Rahn/A-Frame



the busy street that runs by the house, from the neighbours and from the pulse of metropolis.

The job of refreshing the woefully inadequate structure, and of knitting it anew to the garden, fell to Toronto artist and architect Paul Raff, who has christened the deft, subtle result Echo House. Over the past few years, Raff has transformed the grumpily modernist building into an 11,000-square-foot garden pavilion well tailored for an active family of four, and produced a fresh interpretation of the grand-manner modern home in a more free, more fluent architectural language of the 21st century.

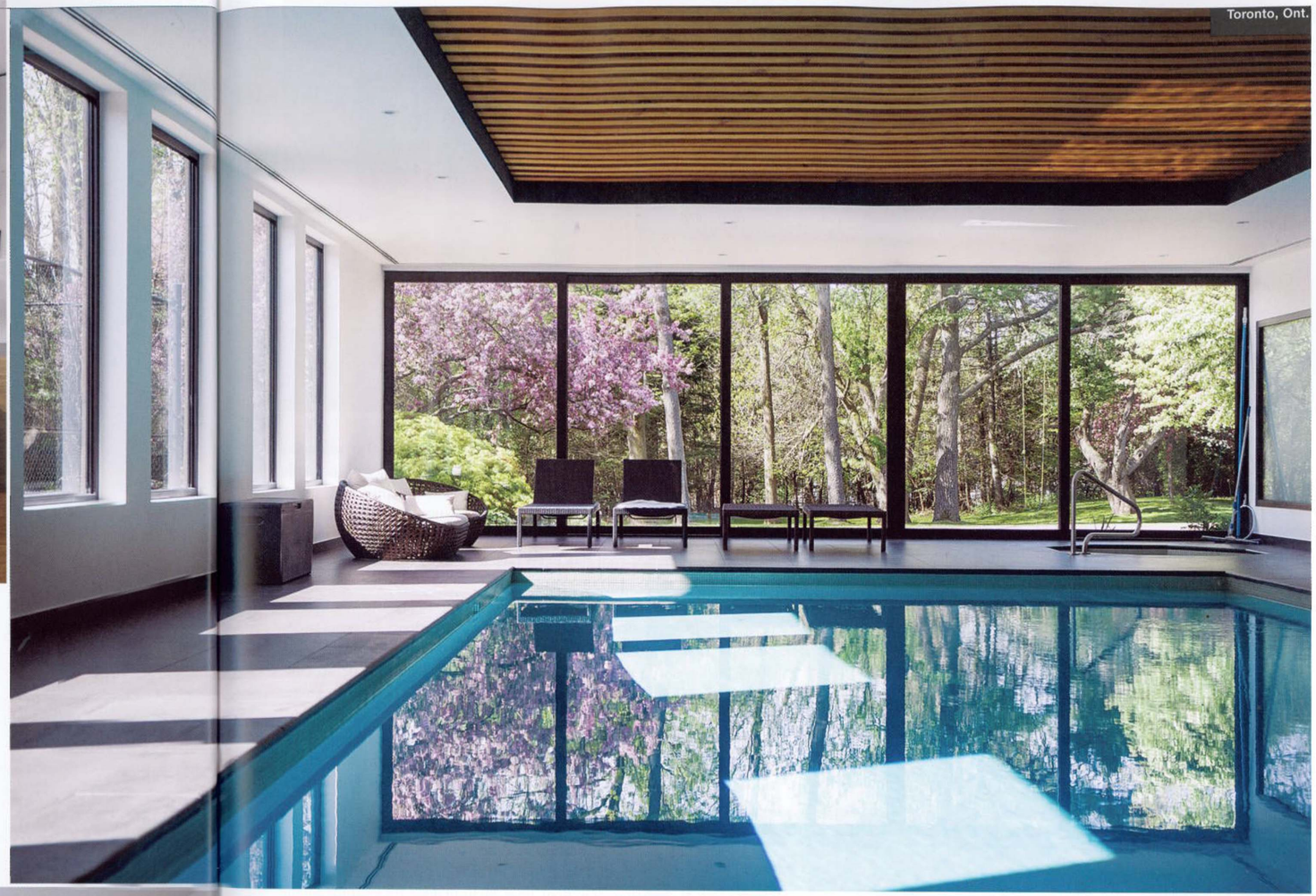
In the original structure, for example, the garden could be seen through a glass wall, but this membrane was inoperable, and impermeable except for a small door off the kitchen. Now, in good weather, the owners can welcome the outdoors in by rolling away the glass walls of the wing that houses the austere kitchen and a lounge-like area. They can also dine, relax by the fireplace in the living room, or work in the study as if they were in the garden, since the communal rooms are separated from it only by large panes of glass (almost eight feet square) that slide aside to create an unobstructed aperture 32 feet wide. (The total expanse of glass measures 70 feet in width.)

Even when the glass panels are shut, nature is still present to sight and sense because views out the west-facing rear of the house are comprehending, inclusive. High, broad windows over the living room open past the treetops toward the sky, letting in afternoon light that brightens the frostily white-walled interior and the flooring of walnut and ceramic tile. In ways it was not before, Echo House seems at peace with its garden site under the Toronto sky.

The interior layout of space follows a familiar pattern, with bedrooms for the children and a large master bedroom suite on the upper storey and the



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Opposite, top: There are few dead ends in Echo House. Like the other principal rooms on the lower storey, the study opens toward the glass wall facing the garden, and it also opens inward. Raff avoids doors on this level, preferring to allow the uninterrupted flow of space to space.
Photo: Ben Rahn/A-Frame

Opposite, bottom: Instead of following venerable modernist practice and letting the heavy wooden dining table swim in undifferentiated space, the architect has established for it a pulled-in, intimate setting, a traditional room.
Photo: Ben Rahn/A-Frame

Above: In the original house, the swimming pool wing was largely shut off from the landscaped grounds. Now, swimmers and poolside loungers can enjoy untrammelled views of the garden as it changes from season to season.
Photo: Steve Tsai







more public areas down below, on the garden level. Instead of arraying the ground-floor territory according to an orthodox open-plan concept—no partitions, no change of ceiling height, nothing to indicate a change in program from spot to spot—Raff has made each place distinctive. The dining table has been given its own intimate room, for example. To emphasize the living room's centrality, its roof has been raised so high it disappears from peripheral vision.

Such gathering and definition of spaces according to program is a welcome divergence from classical residential modernism's tendency to lay out wide-open, prairie-like interiors. But this gesture is not a return to Victorian dicing of the inside into so many discrete, rigidly separated compartments. One side of each ground-level area—the kitchen, dining room, living room, study, even the indoor swimming pool—opens toward the landscaped grounds. The walls are further lightened by dark horizontal reveals at the base, which make the white partitions seem to float an inch off the floor. Running alongside the rooms and the glass wall at the rear is a clear ribbon of flooring that subtly links the rooms, choreographing movement among them as a necessary passage by the inescapable garden.

A legacy from an earlier stratum of Echo House's history, which Raff allowed to survive, is the building's only discordant note: the staircase that swirls up from the living room floor, near the front door. It's a bauble wildly out of visual sync with the restrained, retiring atmosphere of the project as a whole. Raff is known for his keen engagements with stairs, intervals, crevices, connections—how they work, what can be done with them—and it would surely have been interesting to see an important staircase custom-designed by him for this building.

That said, there is a notable staircase in Echo House. It's the elegantly simple, straight flight of steps that connects the kitchen and the painting studio—a new, well-windowed tree house encased in recycled wood and perched on one wing of the dwelling. In one of his several artistic interventions, Raff has strongly marked the foot of this stair with a handsome, open-worked steel screen patterned on traditional Chinese abstract ornamentation.

In contrast to the transparent rear, the building turns a semi-opaque face toward the street and the city. The essential geometry of the 142-foot-long, low-slung façade has been retained, though Raff has lightened its formerly dour

Opposite, top: The longest sightline within the house extends from the large, highly efficient kitchen, along the glass garden wall, to the custom-made steel gates of the pool area. *Kitchen, bulthaup b3 by bulthaup.*

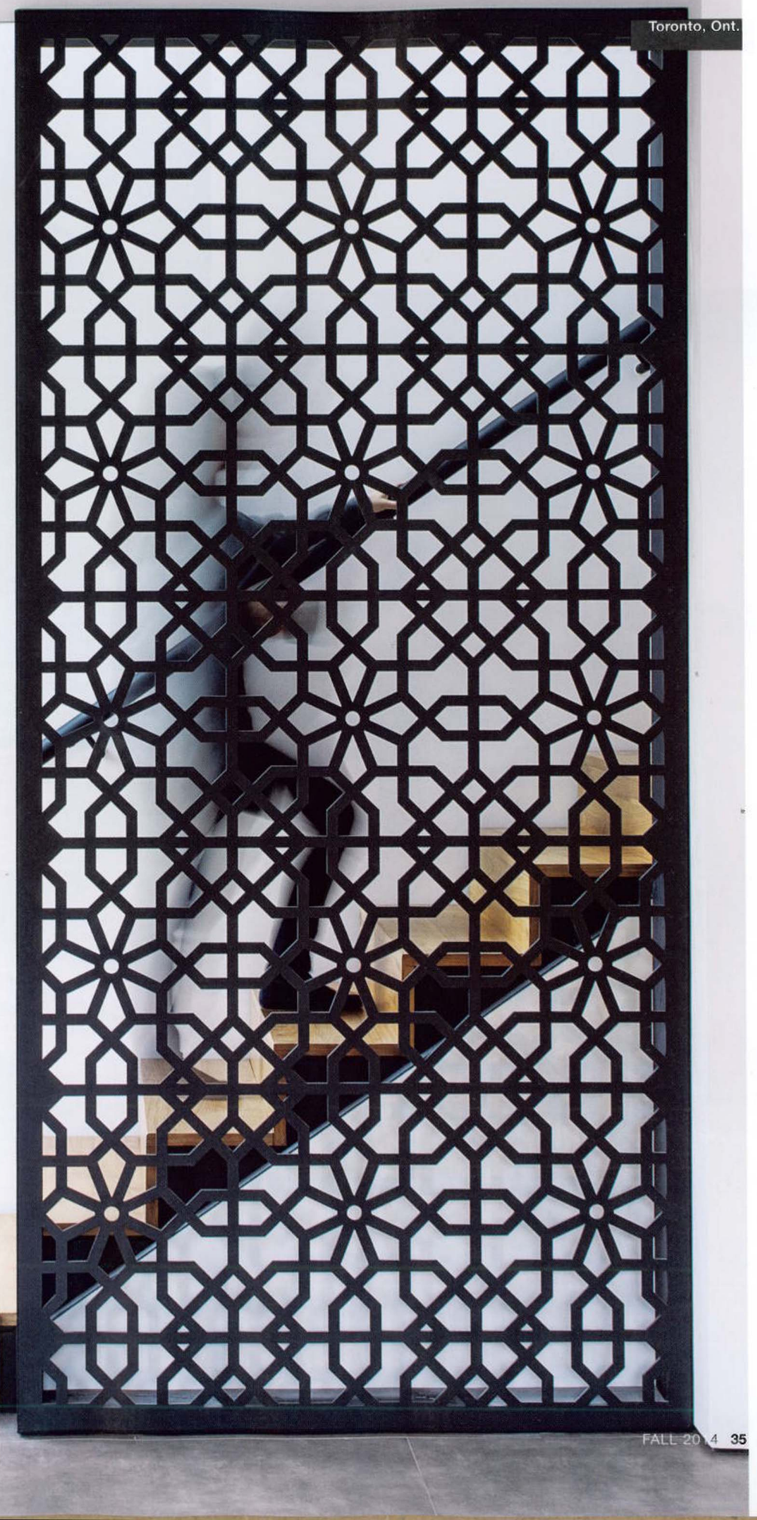
Photos, left: Ben Rahn/A-Frame; right, Steve Tsai

Opposite, bottom: Originally a one-storey wing, the architect's revised extension of the box-shaped house now contains the kitchen and lounge at the garden level and, above it, a painting studio. The cladding, like the screens at the front, is made of reclaimed Douglas fir.

Photo: Ben Rahn/A-Frame

This page: Designed by Raff for the foot of the staircase linking the kitchen and the studio, this open-worked steel partition was inspired by the abstract geometries of classic Far Eastern craft.

Photo: Steve Tsai







Below: A clear glass parapet encloses the decks of the second-storey bedroom suites *(right)* and the walkway that connects them. The lawn and the garden spread out below this transparent barrier. A dry pool of grey rocks counterpoints the warm wood finish of the studio.

Photos: Ben Rahn/A-Frame



Toronto, Ont.



appearance by cladding the exterior surface with silvery Algonquin limestone, and replacing the angled skylights above it with wide clerestory windows.

In another artistic move, Raff has filled in the deep, grotto-like cavities in the façade with gates loosely woven from slats of reclaimed Douglas fir and held together by blackened steel clips and clamps. These gates, or screens, which can be swung open, stand outside the windows of guest rooms, admitting filtered light while blocking sightlines from the street. Here and elsewhere, Raff has used this quietly sensuous combination of warm timber and dark metal joinery—inspired, the architect says, by fine Korean woodcraft—to accent the predominantly minimal, history-free scheme.

Raff's most sweeping revision of the original house, however, is also the most nearly invisible: his creation of a physical envelope with muscular energy efficiency. To that end, he stripped the structure back to its fundamental concrete and brick stays and braces, then re-insulated, re-clad and refinished every surface. He put in new high-performance heating and air-conditioning systems, eliminated 15 heat-wasting skylights (while letting in more light from the garden through lateral windows) and replaced all the glass with up-to-date sustainable glazing. Assessing the benefits of these moves, Raff admits, "will take years." But by his engineer's guess and his own best estimate, Echo House should be "40 per cent" less costly to heat and cool than the unreconstructed mansion.

Especially if Echo House lives up to its energy goals, the project promises to be Raff's most highly regarded work so far in the field of contemporary residential architecture. This instance of the adaptation and creative reuse of existing assets will also be interesting to ecologically minded architects and persons without portfolio, and to every observer alert to the endlessly mutating history of the important family home in Toronto and other great North American cities. ●

For floor plans, see page 94

Above, left: The curving concrete terrace at the rear of Echo House was built in the 1990s, when the earlier dwelling went up. Nowadays, it provides a transition from the rectilinear rigour of Raff's architectural scheme to Rosenberg's serene densely treed garden.

Photo: Steve Tsai

Above, right: Lit up and seen from the garden at twilight, the home expresses the modernist strictness and anti-naturalism that the architect has developed and refined, refreshing these qualities to make a 21st-century dwelling.

Photo: Ben Rahn/A-Frame

A Clear Advantage

THIS MODERN HOME DOESN'T FOLLOW AN OPEN-CONCEPT PLAN. THE ROOMS HAVE DISTINCT SEPARATIONS BUT ARE OPEN, VIA A GLASS WALL, TO THE GARDENS. (P. 26)

Architecture: **Paul Raff Studio**

Location: **Toronto, Ont.**









