

Globe Real Estate



Georgian on a ravine

HOME OF THE WEEK, G10

What's Inside

PARK DRAWING CROWDS

John Bentley Mays G2

EYE ON AJAX

Derek Raymaker G8

Resale Homes

DONE DEALS

What they got G12-13

HUDSON MODERN

Dave LeBlanc G14-15

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ARCHITECTURE

A contemporary residence unlike any other

A Toronto couple has built what some have called one of the best homes in the world. Their secret? 'We started with the idea of "art," not the idea of "house"'



BY CAROLYN LEITCH

When two Toronto art collectors set out to build a new home that would provide a gallery for their luminous collection of glass, many of the architects they consulted suggested that they tear photographs from magazines and fill a folder with the ideas they liked.

"We couldn't do that," the homeowner says, "because we didn't want anything we'd ever seen before." Instead they found Siamak Hariiri of Toronto-based

Hariiri Pontarini Architects and challenged him to build a contemporary house that would be unlike any in the city, or even the world.

"They said 'we'd like to do something which the world might notice,' which was a pretty interesting mandate," Mr. Hariiri says.

The homeowners, who asked that their names not be used, wanted to break away from the safe designs that they feel characterize Toronto architecture.

"Because we started with the idea of 'art,' not the idea of 'house,' we felt we would get a piece of fine art," the homeowner says.

The result has so far garnered three international awards for Hariiri Pontarini.

The project began about four years ago with a search for the right landscape. The couple was willing to tear down an existing house and rebuild but, in some cases, even the surroundings didn't seem right.

"Some places felt really doomed and sad," the homeowner says.

Finally, they found a setting in the city with "wonderful energy" and a lovely stand of trees.

See HOUSE on page G4



'This was not a project where the architects handed the drawings to the contractor and said "you figure it out"'

HOUSE from page G1

Then the homeowners and Mr. Hariri retreated to a quiet inn in Northern Ontario for two days of planning.

Mr. Hariri asked the clients to set aside specifics and describe instead how they wanted to feel.

They spoke about serenity, well-being, delight and art, the architect says, "which, I think, are really interesting places to start from."

For their part, the clients had no idea what the house would look like. "We just said 'give us light, give us water, give us nesting.' We didn't tell him how because we didn't know how."

To achieve that, Mr. Hariri suggested an L-shaped design. The shorter side focuses on art, the longer is for the pool and spa, and the intersection of the two holds the main living rooms of the house.

"I always loved this idea that you could have a house start out that's thin enough that you could get light on both sides and views on both sides."

The architect describes the new building as a hybrid of home, private spa and art gallery that explores qualities of transparency, water and light — all inspired by the owners' collection of glass.

The core living space is about 6,000 square feet. But the entire home measures 17,000 square feet with the basement, the pool and the gallery.

'By using natural materials, he opens up all of these possibilities — some of which we are just discovering.'

To make the house feel intimate and cozy despite its size, Mr. Hariri kept the main living rooms and bedrooms fairly restrained in size.

He limited his palette to wood, stone, copper and water — inside and out — in order to unify the design.

These materials, combined with careful craftsmanship, create a sense of permanence, the architect believes.

Certain elements, such as a reflecting pool, are deliberately dug deep into the earth to give the impression that the house is rooted in the landscape.

Project manager Jaegap Chung spent 2½ years overseeing construction and implementing the plan, which stretched to more than 50 pages.

"Every single move was deliberate," he says. "This was not a project where the architects handed the drawings to the contractor and said 'you figure it out.'"

For example, each piece of Owen Sound ledge rock used on the exterior was numbered and placed in a mosaic.

"The complexity of drawing it and numbering it and installing it is just extraordinary," the homeowner says.

Inside the home, the clients wanted functional living areas, but they also wanted an art gallery.

During the planning, they moved from a very rectilinear design to one that included soft curves to echo the contours of their art nouveau furniture and glass. The building itself curves — almost imperceptibly — in some places.

Capturing and distributing the light was also a challenge.

Some of the posters and photographs cannot have any direct light on them at all. But the glass sculptures come to life with light behind them.

So the architects used cardboard boxes to conduct light studies. Now, light is filtered in radiant veils from the multiple angles of clerestory windows, skylights and floor-to-ceiling windows.

From the beginning, both homeowners had to agree on design decisions. When Mr. Hariri did not agree, they went with Mr. Hariri.

The homeowners believe that discipline was crucial in achieving the successful result. Compromises would have led to "wishy-washy" design.

When it came to placing the art inside the finished home, however, the owners were the curators. Mr. Hariri admits that he felt something like a twinge of regret when he had to step back, but ultimately he's gratified that they claimed that reward.

"It's nice — that means they took it. It's theirs," he says of the completed house. "It's really a nice moment. It's what you want in the end — that they love it and they enjoy it."

The homeowners, meanwhile, are content to let Mr. Hariri and his team reap the recognition the house has attracted.

The project received a citation from *Architecture* magazine in its annual home of the year awards. Architectural writer C.C. Sullivan named the house "one of the world's 12 best new buildings" for Art Info. For the stonework, the project received the 2005 Tucker Award from the U.S.-based Building Stone Institute.

While the architect receives the honours, the homeowners love the house, which they moved into last spring.

A ground-floor library, which sits flush with the earth and extends out into the landscape, is a serene place for writing.

"You still get that cabin-in-the-woods feeling from it," the homeowner says.

Sometimes the owners sit beside the indoor pool to experience the tranquility of the water surrounded by views of nature outside. In summer they can open the doors to the outside.

The connection with nature brings unexpected benefits, says the owner, pointing to a mesmerizing tableau of rippled ice over river rocks in a shallow pool.

"By using natural materials, he opens up all of these possibilities — some of which we are just discovering."

Most important for the homeowners, the setting does not overshadow the collection. "It does let the art speak."

Occasionally the homeowners have invited artists in to see their work in the new gallery. "They're gratified that we understand art and we've honoured it with the setting here."

The homeowner is also somewhat amazed that there is not a thing about the home that she would change. For his part, Mr. Hariri takes pleasure in the accolades, but he also appreciates the owners' enchantment.

"It's great that the world has noticed. That's not small," says Mr. Hariri. "And it's great that she loves her house."

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PHOTOS BY STEVEN EVANS

The far end of the master bedroom, top left, has a bowed ceiling designed to highlight glass statuary. The pool, above, is accessed directly from the sauna down a marble entrance. Below, the exterior cladding is made of individual pieces of Owen Sound ledge rock arranged in a mosaic.

