



HARIRI PONTARINI ARCHITECTS

The Modernist home designed by David Pontarini: uncluttered, crisply delineated, comfortable but not opulent. The exterior, right, expresses a concern for privacy and security.

# A modern house, quick and focused

## The Perfect House

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This is the tale of a construction executive and his wife, who both loved Modernism.

For years, they attempted to change their Toronto dwelling into a classic Modern American house, with flowing spatial transitions and strong formal clarity. They hung large, abstract colour-field paintings on the walls. They put in stringently squared-off chairs, tables and sofas. They worked with an interior-decorating palette running to slate greys and earthy tans, blacks and whites — all meant to pull the interior into steady continuity. None of it really succeeded.

So eventually, and wisely, they stopped trying to persuade their stubborn house to become something it wasn't, and set about finding someone to build them a perfect Modern house from scratch. While interviewing prospective designers, the strong-minded couple never swerved from certain bottom-line expectations. That their new home be thoroughly Modern, for example — low-maintenance, high-tech, clean-lined and uncluttered, crisply delineated, comfortable but not opulent. They wanted the architecture to express the openness and sparseness they cherished, while also nurturing a sense of privacy and intimate family life.

Nine designers later, they found in David Pontarini, of Hariri Pontarini Architects, someone who knew what they were talking about.

At 5,800 square feet above ground, the quietly dramatic house Mr. Pontarini has done on a cul-de-sac in suburban York Mills

is hardly vast. Yet within the space available to him, the architect has effectively reinterpreted the 20th-century architectural ideals most admired by his clients.

If architecture can have speed — and Modernist design always suggests velocity, at least to this observer — the interior of Mr. Pontarini's house is quick and focused, like a trained sprinter. Which should not surprise us: The house's spatial sequences have been determined, in good Modernist fashion, less by ideas about social hierarchy (or impressing somebody) than by the family's actual life, preferences and styles of movement.

These very active, fitness-conscious people wanted, and got, a gym in the basement, gleaming with machines and weights, and an area for practising golf swings. But Mr. Pontarini has also integrated his clients' interests into his scheme at more subtle, symbolic levels.

The spartan furnishings in their

spacious, high-ceilinged living/dining area at the core of the building invite one to light briefly, not linger long. Even in the home office, which is distinguished from the soaring, villa-like central space by gliding partitions and a small, precise change of scale, the visual styling suggests fast, efficient activity. From almost any point on the main floor, vision is swept up to the mezzanine, away through a high portal into an adjoining area, along clear sightlines guided by angular cuts in floor and ceiling, and by unromantic, flat planes of rock, brick and glowing wood. More sedentary folk, especially those who collect old things, would likely have directed their architect to put in cozy nooks and cluttery dens for the leisurely enjoyment of their possessions. Not the non-stop Moderns who occupy Mr. Pontarini's house.

The swiftness of these interior treatments contrasts sharply, intentionally with the house's asymmetrical front exterior. Nothing about

the structure invites. Everything expresses the family's marked concern for privacy and security. The narrow, long horizontal slot-window under the flat roofline defends the house against prying eyes.

Severe escarpments of limestone, windowless doors and planes clad in oxidizing copper and stacks of rough red brick combine to suggest fortification. The principal entry is as forbidding as a warehouse door.

But inside and out, Mr. Pontarini's design is unified by the high seriousness we would expect in a house crafted under the influence of the American Modernist program. The house's formality, of course, is aesthetic, not dogmatic or theoretical. Long past are the days when a Modern house had to argue forcefully for its very right to exist. That said, Mr. Pontarini has kept traditional Modernist gravity at the centre of his essay in metal, stone, brick, light and shadow. Post-Modernist gaming and irony

are wholly absent here. The dwelling's sumptuousness lies, not in its ornamentation, but entirely in its stolid materials and in the architect's logical ordering of space and line.

Frank Lloyd Wright used to say he killed the dining room. To give the genius of American Modernism full credit, you might add that he also killed the living room, and went some distance toward doing in the kitchen. The point of all that room-slaying was to end the old dice-up of the house into so many strictly designated boxes, and establish fluid spaces that endorse, rather than obstruct, the dynamic reality of the occupants' lives. While recalling Modernist style and attitude, David Pontarini's excellent house in York Mills suggests a way forward into a new century for the expert spatial and material passages that were so admirable about the Modernist project.

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