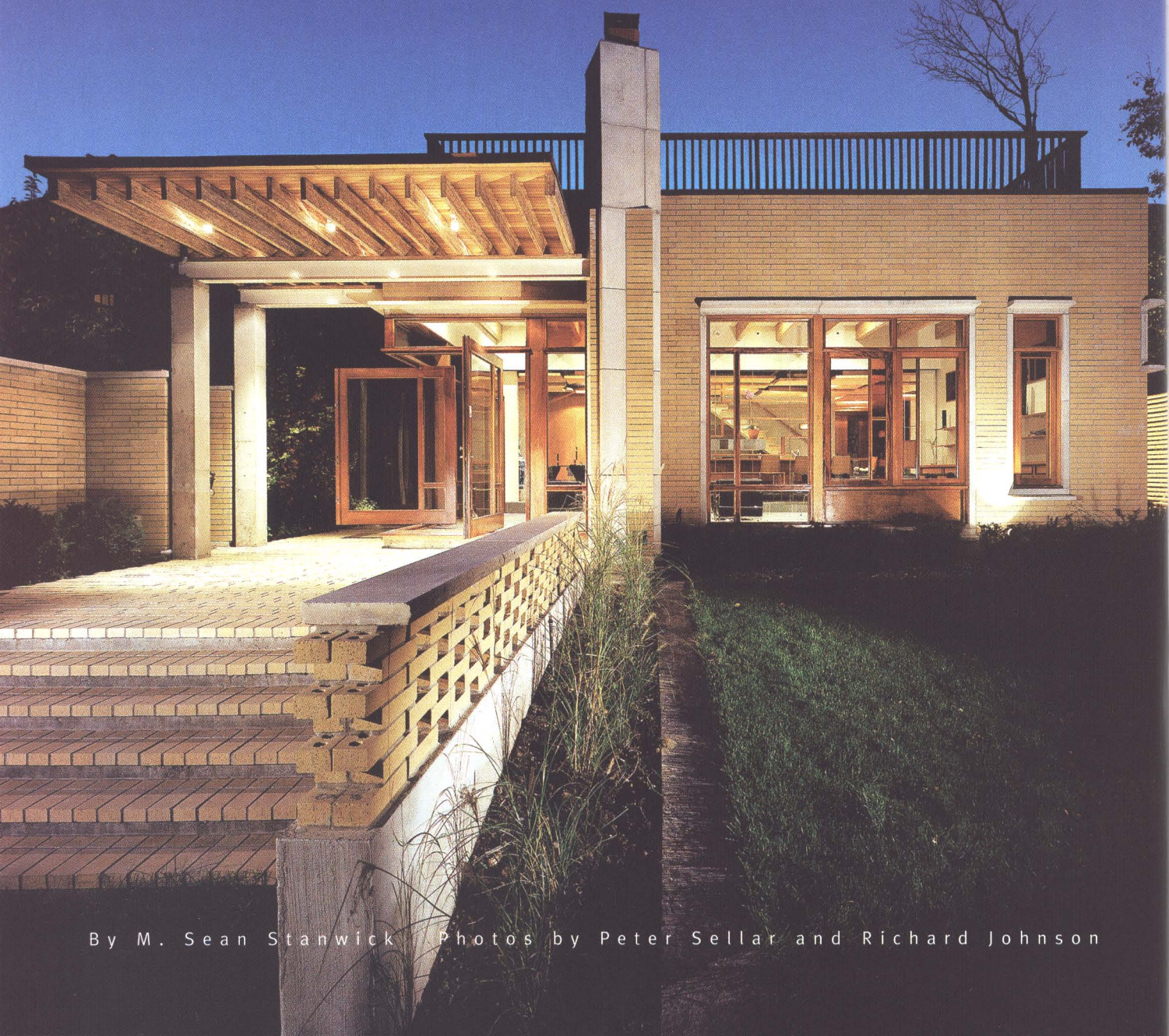


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An expatriate South African couple gave architect Julian Jacobs free rein to design a modern, light-filled home on their heavily treed ravine lot in Toronto.



By M. Sean Stanwick Photos by Peter Sellar and Richard Johnson

When a house is rich with cultural allusion, inventive themes and playful witticisms, it's hard to know where to begin. Designed by Toronto architect Julian Jacobs, the Pamensky residence dances to the rhythmic tune of a modernist jazz composition, highlighted by whimsical solos of improvisation and design innovation.

A variation on a popular maxim might read, 'Behind every great building is an equally great client,' and to Jacobs' delight, Naomi and Victor Pamensky proved this to be true. "We started with an exceptional client who wanted an original, modern house with an openness of spirit and originality," says Jacobs. Apart from a few practical requests - like a ground floor master suite, and a prominent kitchen - the expatriate South African couple gave Jacobs the unthinkable: a generous budget and virtually free reign on the design.

The 3,500-square-foot house is located on a heavily treed, narrow strip of land. It backs onto a ravine, in an upscale urban residential neighbourhood in Toronto's Old Forest Hill. Taken with its beauty, the Pamenskys bought the land, fully intending to build on the ravine slope. Unfortunately, city by-laws and zoning restrictions prevented this and virtually dictated the building's footprint.

Undaunted by municipal limitations, Jacobs rose to the challenge with a fluidity of space that combines natural materials and a considered appreciation for modernist styling. "The vast majority of new houses going up today

are Georgian or Victorian copies. People feel comfortable in these homes because they're familiar. They remind them of their childhood. What are they afraid of? The preconception that Modernism is cold and sterile," he comments.

As the architect of many of Toronto's award-winning modern buildings, he says nothing could be farther from the truth. "Traditional houses are extremely limited from a design standpoint," says Jacobs. "The elevation dictates a certain layout to the interior. They are all the same. Here is the great promise of Modernism. It is limited only by the limitations of the human body and the technical capability of the materials."

Normally, the traditional home is arranged as a sequence of spaces starting with a front foyer feeding the living and dining rooms and then through to the kitchen at the rear. Because of their culture, however, South Africans view the rear of the house as its front - due to the desire for privacy - while the front is reserved for servicing.

To recreate this South African domestic living arrangement, the typical house plan was discarded and the layout retooled. Jacob's solution was to divide the house into two halves. The garage, storage and service spaces are in the front half of the house, directly facing the street, while the rear portion is treated as one grand volume, containing the living and dining rooms, and the kitchen.

Also on the ground floor is the master bedroom and en suite. Upstairs are three bedrooms, a family room, a study, and a large walkout deck.



The mahogany living room doors pivot on offset hinges and, when open, the corner dissolves.



Architect, Julian Jacobs, functionally divided the great room by raising the kitchen one step. All the kitchen millwork is made of cherry wood, stained to match the mahogany windows and doors.

Though not willing to turn his back on the street entirely, Jacobs infused the front elevation with the same geometries and materials used on the inside, and provided a porte-cochère. It is proportionally respectful of the neighbouring houses, but provides only a hint of the richness of volume that lies within.

To further emphasize this functional division, Jacobs created The Light Chasm: a three-storey sky-lit stairwell with a full-height window at one end decorated with sections of coloured art glass. With natural and coloured light dancing across the cathedral-like masonry wall and cherry wood niches, the effect is nothing short of spiritual. Jacobs frequently uses light as a design feature. "The chasm replaces an inner door," he says. "It's like a force field that you pass through as you enter the main living space."

While the light chasm is indeed ephemeral in its own right, nothing can prepare you for the experience of entering the great room. The centrepiece, a brick and concrete hearth with a Zebrawood coffee table, extends its arms outward in a pinwheel fashion to help animate the grandeur of the room.

As the eye moves about, it is drawn to the expansive panorama created by the mahogany living room doors. In their closed position, they function as large picture win-



All the major furnishings and built-ins were custom designed by Interior Associates, a division of Julian Jacobs Architects.



The centrepiece of the living room is a brick and concrete hearth, with a Zebrawood coffee table.



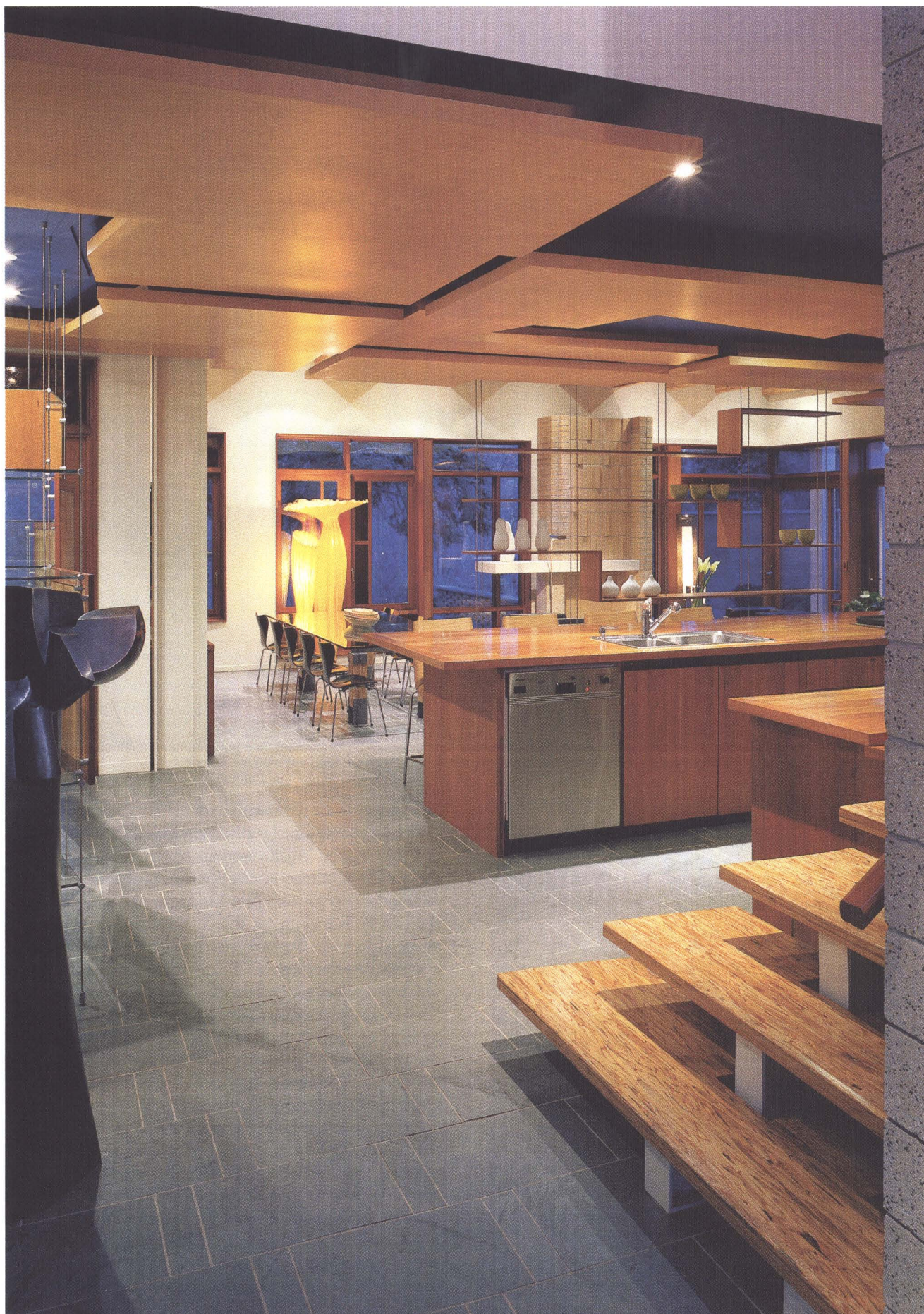
The Light Chasm: A three-storey sky-lit stairwell with a full-height window and sections of coloured art glass.

dows flooding the room with natural light, and more importantly, creating a visual connection with the verdant ravine and rear terrace. Again, sections of art glass combine with the lush floral garden to create a canvas of colour.

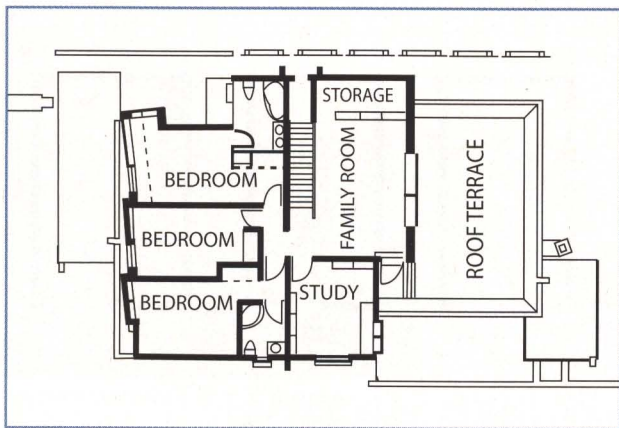
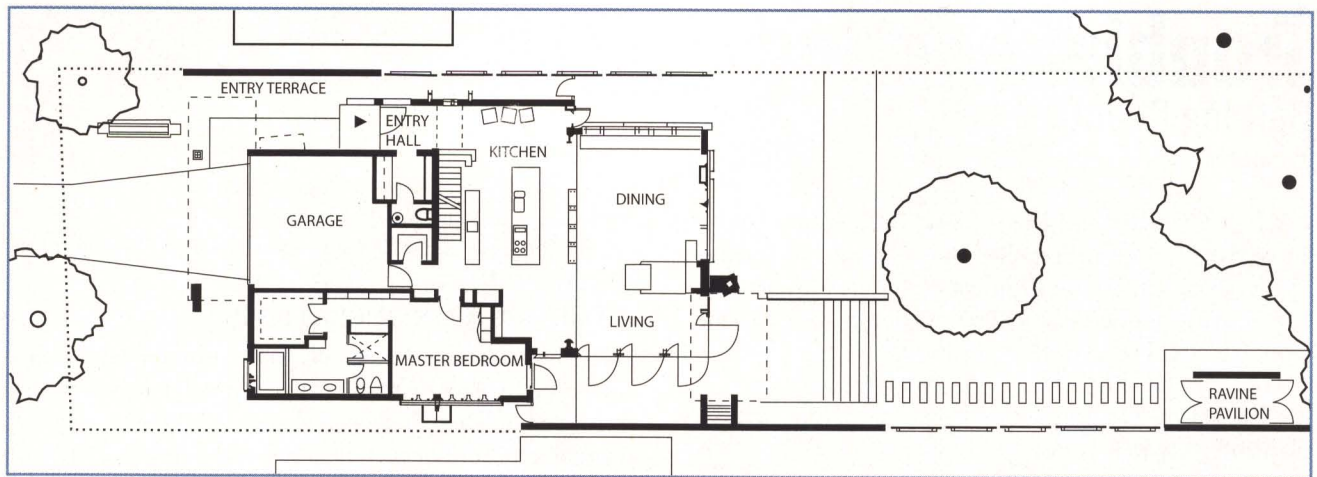
The doors pivot on offset hinges and the full length of the two walls meeting at the corner dissolves. Seemingly unsupported, the entire corner hovers in the absence of any visible structure. A detail believed to be globally unique, says Jacobs, the sensation of an imminent roof collapse passes as the splendour of the space takes hold.

"It's very important that the house should engage with the landscape," says Jacobs. "We wanted to blur the distinction between inside and outside as much as possible." Casually nicknamed The House of Six Terraces, almost every room in the house has access to some form of outdoor space. Even the entry foyer is framed by a concrete fishbone detail that spans both inside and out. Left exposed to the natural elements outside, the cast-in-place cantilevered ribs are reversed and glazed on the inside.

The range of materials is rich in execution. Natural concrete, copper flashings and dark mahogany window and doorframes complement a yellowish brick exterior. This same brick is also used for the rear terrace; its steps and garden walls co-join the house and site. Parallel Strand



The ceiling, dubbed the Azores Islands, appears to be an improvisational collage of maple panels over a rich blue underlay.



Lumber (PSL), usually reserved for hidden construction, is varnished to a high gloss and used in a variety of unconventional ways: from the coffered ceiling to furniture legs, to stair treads carried on steel stringers. The cantilevered bottom tread is discretely supported on a $\frac{1}{2}$ " thick piece of glass. It is an easy stretch for the imagination to see that the heavily patterned grain of the PSL beautifully emulates tall grasses of the African savannah. The floors throughout the house are water heated, consisting of natural slate everywhere except the bedrooms, where a custom designed sisal carpet furthers the African theme.

Apart from LeCorbusier leather chairs and Knoll zebra-wood stools and Arnie Jacobsen dining chairs, all the major furnishings and built-ins were custom designed by Interior Associates, a division of Julian Jacobs Architects. In a gesture mimicking African wildlife, the dining room table rests on sandblasted steel feet notched to resemble those of an elephant.

Using a number of subtle devices, Jacobs functionally divided the great room by raising the kitchen one step. This creates an *étagère* and transforms the act of food preparation into a theatrical event. All the kitchen millwork, including the butcher-block countertops, are made of cherry wood and stained to match the mahogany windows and doors. The ceiling, dubbed the Azores Islands, appears at first glance to be an improvisational collage of maple panels over a rich blue underlay. Closer inspection reveals a calculated series of cuts and layers, carved away to

allow for targeted spot lighting. On the edge of the kitchen stage, four cherry wood shelves, placed at varying heights, are suspended on delicate stainless steel rods and blend in so well that they almost disappear.

In the absence of a design roadmap for modern, appropriate houses in the 21st century, Jacobs' mandate was to return to first principles and develop a living architecture. In defiance of the naysayers who claim that modernism and warmth make poor dance partners, the Pamensky residence is as much a resolution of structure and materiality and light as it is a personal space for its owners. It is a place where the rigidity of modernism and the random fluidity of improvisation all dance to the same tune.

The house was awarded the 2002 Ontario Association of Architects Award for Architecture in the Residential Category.

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The front elevation is infused with the same geometries and materials used on the inside. It provides only a hint of the richness of volume that lies within.