



Julian Jacobs Architects devised a plan in which the ground floor of the house is defined as stages.

A house made of stories



CITYSPACE: An award-winning house in Toronto's Forest Hill has poetry invested in every design move, **LISA ROCHON** writes

Any family has plenty of stories to tell about who they are, and what they desire from a home. How those stories are translated into domestic space depends on how well an architect has listened — and whether he has anything meaningful to say, through design, back to the client. Only on rare occasions does this kind of dialogue emerge — this is one of those times. And the clients and architect are still speaking.

The house in Toronto's Forest Hill neighbourhood, by Julian Jacobs Architects, has received a top award from the Ontario Association of Architects, to be presented next week at the OAA Awards 2002 in Niagara Falls.

The house belongs to a couple from Johannesburg, South Africa, parents of four children, grandparents of 14. The original house on the property they purchased on Spadina Road was a 1930s mock-Tudor lacking style or attachment to the site. It was knocked down to make room for the art of architecture.

In South African parlance, the back yard is called the front, so the house in Toronto is less about the entrance off the busy, noisy street and more about creating direct visual connections to the back-yard terraces. When they're alone, the couple lives in their 3,500-sq.-ft. home as if it were a single-storey pavilion. When their grandchildren are there for sleepovers, the house is used as a much larger two-storey with extra bedrooms and a second-floor family room with access to a roof terrace.

For his clients, Jacobs devised a seemingly effortless plan in which

the ground floor of the house is defined as stages: The first stage with the front entrance, kitchen and master bedroom is raised slightly higher than the rest; one step down another stage is defined for the living room, the hearth and formal dining. The brick terrace outside is one discreet step below the interior. It cuts generously across the back yard until, finally, a visitor walks down several steps, onto the grass and down a steep hill to the Beltline ravine below.

The house — meaning the architect and his clients — occasionally breaks with convention to experiment with some unusual materials. To be sure, every window is framed in mahogany and there is a classic study lined in cherry. But for the ceiling beams and generous treads on the stairs, Jacobs specified a composite wood with a bizarre striped pattern called parallel strand lumber (PSL).

Jacobs has designed much of the furniture and cabinetry, even the master bed. He used thick PSL posts as legs on a table, finished them with metal feet and called it the elephant dining table. For the wall running next to the staircase, Jacobs used belden concrete block cut down to a more elegant dimension of six inches high. There are three wood-lined boxlights recessed into the stairwall.

At its most basic, architecture is meant to provide walls that stand up and a roof that doesn't leak. But architecture, powerfully considered, can actually help to free our minds. This is something that drives the work of thinking architects like Jacobs.

There are metaphors and stories

folded discreetly into the architecture at the Forest Hill house. In fact, there is a notion of poetry invested in every design move. The closet doors next to the front vestibule are opened by slots cut into the wood — Jacobs calls them offset butterfly handles. A double-height vertical window on the north elevation in front of the staircase — Jacobs calls it the stair-light chasm — brings light deep into the middle section of the house. "My rule is that the darkest area should be the lightest," says Jacobs.

The house is clad in Roman brick, the colour of yellow ochre, which is used for the fireplace as well as the outdoor terrace. A dedication to things beautiful that also function — something taught by William Morris more than a century ago — shows up in the mahogany windows that can be opened up to make one of the building's corners disappear entirely. It shows up in the cedar fence on the property's north edge. Jacobs calls it the diamond rail fence. Standard rail stock is skewed on a 45-degree angle to provide for extra structural integrity, allowing for a six-foot (instead of four) free span.

This year's jury for the OAA's Architectural Excellence awards included Mark Kingwell, a University of Toronto professor of philosophy and cultural critic, John Fraser, formerly the editor of Saturday Night magazine and now the master of the University of Toronto's Massey College — one of Canada's architectural masterpieces — and myself. Over the course of a day, we enjoyed our share of differences, but consensus came quickly around the Forest Hill House. It's a house that unfolds itself naturally to the towering spruce in its backyard and the views overlooking the ravine. It's the kind of home that will endure easily from one generation to the next — to travel through and want to grow old in.

lrchon@globeandmail.ca