

# About face

In oh-so-traditional Forest Hill, Julian Jacobs turned a house away from busy Spadina toward the tree-lined ravine. The result is unapologetically urban pastoral

**THINK FOREST HILL. A SURREAL LANDSCAPE** where, in defiance of history and geography, Loire Valley châteaux and Tudor manors keep close company. Think empty nesters in Forest Hill, and the picture shifts a bit, perhaps to compact Regency- or Georgian-style condos.

The newest house on Spadina stands these stereotypes on their head. Bracketed by two mild-mannered Tudors, it hails from another world, an unapologetic homage to right angles and cantilevers that is beholden to no century before the 20th. Modestly it turns its back on the street, but what a complex and subtle back: the garage door composed of glass and wood rectangles; the driveway a mosaic of brick, stone and concrete; the recessed entrance Japanese in the elegance of its restraint. And unlike its neighbours, here the living-dining room lies at the farthest remove from the street, addressing the ravine; the owners consider that the front of the house.

The designer of this topsy-turvy creation is Julian Jacobs, a Toronto architect better known for his commercial projects—a Royal Bank branch at Yonge and Orchardview and the Ellesmere Community Recreational Centre—than his houses. As a boy growing up in Montreal, he planned to be an artist, and he still talks about his métier in painterly terms of light, metaphor and expression.

While other architects rail at affluent Torontonians' liking for a pastiche of past styles, Jacobs sees the problem as part of a larger crisis in modern architecture. People, he notes, have accepted contemporary design in the commercial realm, but they overwhelmingly reject it when it comes to the domestic sphere. Asking himself what it is that people love about living in traditional architecture, he answers, "Richness, charm and natural materials." By forgoing plastic and steel in favour of wood, stone and brick

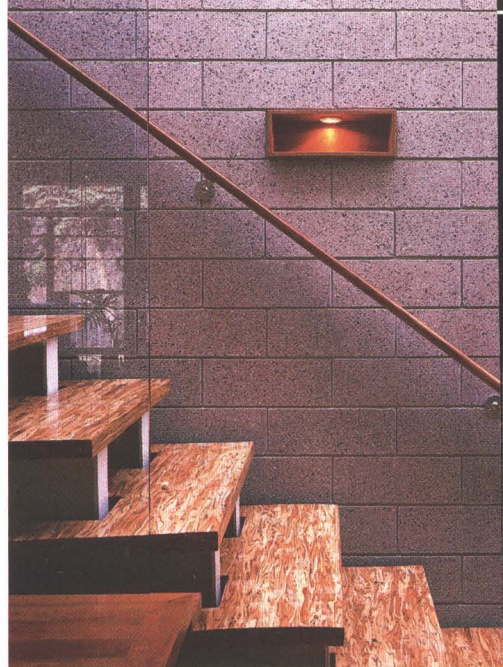
and focusing on the "living, organic" qualities of those materials, Jacobs is confident he can build modern houses that will not only endure but, more important, be lovable.

**JACOBS CAME BY HIS CLIENTS FOR THE** Forest Hill house through a set of coincidences. One day in 1998, an architect acquaintance mentioned some older cousins of his—a pair of grandparents, the husband in his 70s, the wife in her 60s—who had been searching for a compatible designer for over a year. Discouraged but methodical, they had obtained a list at the U of T library of architects who had received the Governor General's Award. Jacobs had won one in 1994 for Emery Yard in North York—a maintenance building with a brick and steel façade he describes as "tectonic"—the only public works yard, he believes, to be so honoured. The acquaintance thought he might make a good fit with his cousins.

Jacobs met the wife first, and their rapport was immediate. She showed him pictures of the award-winning house the couple had built in Johannesburg in the 1960s, designed by a disciple of Louis Kahn. He showed her pictures of his work. Each found in the other a modernist with a spiritual bent.

She explained that after they moved to Toronto from South Africa in the '70s, they had brought up their four children in a Forest Hill townhouse. Now, with the children grown and gone, she wanted to upsize rather than downsize—not as paradoxical as it sounds, because they have 16 grandchildren, all of whom visit frequently. She had talked her initially lukewarm husband into buying a tear-down house for its lot, a 50-by-270-foot

**Jacobs, who speaks in painterly terms of light and metaphor, designed an homage to right angles and cantilevers: stairs that climb to the second floor; the house's backyard, now its front yard; and the entrance that opens onto the kitchen**









**DESIGN** continued

office. Jacobs came to think of it as a house with a hotel or a coach house on top. Concentrating his efforts on the show-stopping floor below, he designed a big, untrammelled space where nothing interrupts the long vista from the main staircase to the ravine. The first area you enter in the open plan is the kitchen, which looks more like an expanse of gleaming wooden furniture than a place to prepare food. Not a hanging cupboard in sight—everything is hidden in cherry consoles. As befits its central status, the kitchen is one step above the living-dining area. There's a walk-in pantry, pots and pans and the two ovens and dishwashers necessary to keep a kosher kitchen.

In the lower space, all eyes go to the fireplace. The hearth, Jacobs has decided, is one essential element of a house, and here he's designed a tall, slim beauty backed by blond bricks. Although he calls *Falling Water*—Frank Lloyd Wright's famously cantilevered (and, for a time, crumbling) house—*Falling Mortar*, Jacobs admires the tension and danger a cantilever brings to a structure. For the fireplace, he mixes the promise of warmth and comfort with the drama of three cantilevers, one a concrete mantel that extends exaggeratedly beyond the fireplace at one side, and two more, in concrete and wood, that stretch directly in front of the hearth, serving as a coffee table.

In another effort to marry outside and in, Jacobs used foot-long blond bricks from Winnipeg ("Their clay is better") and concrete blocks on the interior and exterior. Blue-grey slate floors were chosen for their low maintenance and because the house already had plenty of wood, mostly cherry and mahogany. For the rafters in the living-dining room and the oversized stair treads, Jacobs added a jazzy variation: a compressed wood product called PSL (parallel strand lumber). Its rich stripes echo the more costly zebra wood used in the Planck chairs in the kitchen.

Furnishing the house was not easy: it demanded lowish pieces that wouldn't compete with the garden. In the end, the clients went with classic pieces they bought 30 years ago in South Africa: a black leather and chrome Corbusier loveseat and chairs and Arne Jacobsen's simple, functional Chair 3107 in black wood and chrome. Two Jacobs-designed glass-topped dining tables—one long and rectangular, one smaller and round—contribute to the room's airiness, along with a scarcity of rugs and total absence of window coverings. So does the insistent motif of the right angle, from the rectangular

blocks of slate on the floor to the wooden rafters in the ceiling. Every so often, Jacobs softens his strict geometry with something slightly offset, like the glass-and-wood *étagère* he designed (which he called the *Dancing Cabinets*), its delicate compartments obliquely positioned so the shelves and the objects they hold advance and retreat from the wall. Overall, however, the effect is spare and pure.

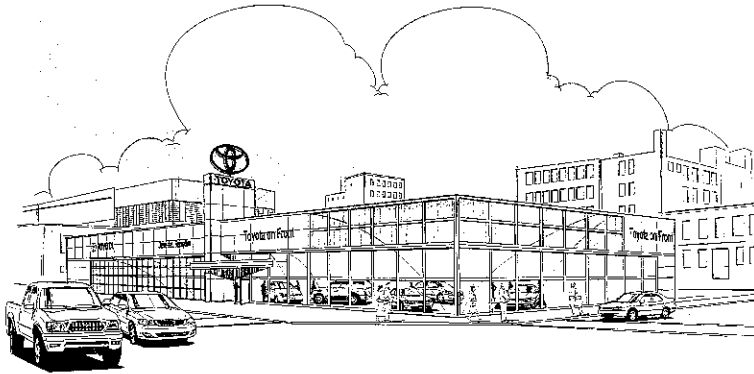
When asked what his house communicates about him, the husband thinks about it for a minute. "Attractive without being showy," he decides. "A good vehicle for living. It hasn't got cornices and all kinds of ornamentation—we're not that sort of people."

That's not to say Jacobs hasn't lavished details on this house. The place embodies his campaign to prove that "modern" and "charm" are not mutually exclusive. A brick wall doesn't end in a straight line; the bricks in alternate rows protrude, for a sawtoothed effect. The wood for a fence is set on the diagonal and becomes "the diamond rail fence." A fish bone-shaped concrete pier at the entrance says, in Jacobs' imagination, "Use me! Rest your purse or your gloves here." Talking about his explorations into the nature of wood, brick and concrete, Jacobs can verge on the mystical. He likens himself to Gepetto, the carver who loved his puppet Pinocchio so much that he wanted it to come alive, and insists of his materials, "Everything here knows it's part of this house!"

The most personal touch in Jacobs' portrait is what he calls the Adam and Eve statue, a nod to his clients and their marriage. Supporting the southern end of the garage's canopy like the caryatids of ancient Greece, two stylized, interlocking forms embrace. The male is rough concrete, the female lightly sandblasted. Jacobs says he painted her toes, but really he inscribed the house numbers at the bottom of the smoother form.

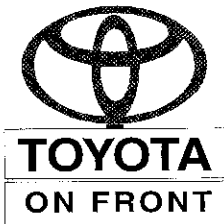
He still has a few door pulls to design, but his clients have been living in the house (beginning when it was under construction) for a year and had a housewarming party for about 140 guests this summer. How did their friends react? Well, says the wife, the South African ones appreciated it more, "because they're used to good architecture." The couple notices that whether it's 140 for a party, a score of children and grandchildren or just the two of them, the house always seems the right size. More than content with his flat-roofed house on the edge of the woods, the husband wishes only that their bedroom could have been a bit bigger. But, he quotes his grandmother, "perfection's for the next world." ■

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ribbon that unfurls down into a ravine, ending at the Beltway. But no architect seemed to get it when she talked about what she wanted: a house where you could see the trees from every window, where the kitchen would be the main room but not look like a kitchen; a place with a certain energy and light, a house "with a soul." Jacobs got it.

Next he had to pass muster with the husband, a lawyer turned businessman. His first requirement, he told Jacobs, was a front door big enough for a wheelchair—an unexpected wish from a fit, active man but in keeping with his pragmatism ("If you prepare for war," he quotes a Roman general, "you won't have war"). He also wanted the master bedroom on the first floor so they would have a complete apartment on one level; abundant cupboards and bookshelves, because he despises clutter; and a garden that was "part and parcel of the house."

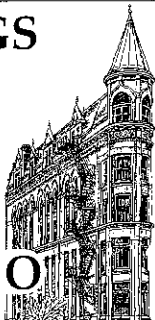
Like his wife, he felt comfortable with Jacobs. Once they had agreed on their architect, the husband took an interest in practical aspects, worrying about a flat roof's potential for leaks (Jacobs assured him he would have the best flat roof money could buy) and supporting the radiant floor heating that makes for a warm, unstuffy house (the heating extends to the driveway, where it melts the snow). Mostly, he says, "I had enough sense to shut up."

**TIRED OF LIVING ON A MAIN ROAD, THE** couple bought their new lot believing they could build well down into the ravine. Ironically, that plan had already been dashed by the time they met Jacobs: zoning bylaws forbade it, and they had to rebuild in line with the neighbours, close to an equally hectic street. A solution came from South Africa, where houses are frequently oriented away from the street. By siting the important rooms overlooking the ravine, they achieved the sylvan feeling they wanted.

The wish to merge indoors and outdoors was responsible for the house's most bravura touch: floor-to-ceiling windows in the living room that open completely, transforming a wall into a loggia. Mindful of Toronto's inhospitable winters, builders often overdo the garrison mentality; Jacobs' design heads in the opposite direction. Although the enthusiastic architect insisted on flinging all the walls open on a frosty winter afternoon—"You must see the effect!"—the gesture was ideally calculated for balmy days in spring, summer and autumn.

The second floor has three guest bedrooms, a family room, a study and a small

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