

# POST HOMES

PH1

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The quaint stone-walled cottages of the Cotswolds in England and the rambling farmhouses and armouries of Quebec have inspired Julian Jacobs as he searches for a style that reflects rural Ontario and Quebec.

**Smitten  
enough  
to take it at  
first sight?**

Some tips: Count  
to 10, read this list  
and be proactive

BY ALEXANDRA BANDON

Even the most perfect apartment may have its imperfections, though they may be hidden by nice decor or interesting architectural features.

Here are a few suggestions of what to look for while viewing a property, according to real estate brokers and recent buyers.

**Sources of noise** Investigate not only what the apartment shares a wall with — a laundry room, an elevator, an apartment with children — but also what is in the neighbourhood.

If there are bars nearby, try to visit the neighbourhood late in the evening, or on several evenings. Is there loud music? Are there many smokers standing outside talking into the early morning hours?

See SMITTEN on Page PH3

*Stonework figures prominently in his houses as architect Julian Jacobs seeks to carve out a style to define the Canadian Shield*

## Rockin' the house

BY DAVID LASKER

**W**hat could be more prototypically Ontarian than a house set dramatically on 100 hectares of the scenic Oak Ridges moraine, an hour northeast of Toronto, that conjures archetypes of the Canadian Shield and old stone farmhouses?

Yet what could be more challenging than creating a house whose forms and mass evoke these stirring associations while retaining a rigorously contemporary minimalist style?

Julian Jacobs, who designed the rambling recreational home, doesn't start the design process by asking what style the house should be. Instead, he asks, "What does the house want to become?" He designs from the inside out. The interiors and their functions determine the building envelope. Form follows function. "The only aesthetic decision I made was to have a single pitched roof, combined with decks," he says.

Still, he had ambitions beyond merely designing a comfortable and pleas-

ing-looking house. "I wanted to create a Canadian Shield design, just as Frank Lloyd Wright created a Prairie style. We have a B.C. style from Ron Thom and Arthur Erickson, and a Maritime vernacular, but no updated rural Ontario and Quebec style."

To impart the sense of timelessness and natural authenticity that distinguishes a 250-year-old farmhouse nestling in the land, he gave the house a mythical history.

The house grows out of imaginary ruins, with the wood portions burned or rotted away. Only stone walls remained. A silo fragment became a washroom core. Pieces of stone buildings became the entry block and the living-room wall. A stone wall incorporating a fireplace morphed into the kitchen's fireplace wall. A massive wall for a two-storey barn inspired the retaining wall, buried in the earth, for the swimming pool.

"Now, Herzog and de Meuron are doing things like this and getting famous for it," Mr. Jacobs says wistfully of the superstar Swiss firm whose principals shared the prestigious Pritzker Prize for Architecture in 2001. They are well

known for their Dominus Winery in California's Napa Valley that has a mortarless wall of stones encased in wire mesh.

In its "before" state, the Ontario site had a two-storey teardown clapboard house near three ponds, which Mr. Jacobs stocked with fish. He trucked in thousands of tons of sand and boulders to create a private beach. A massive rock garden and large berms make the house look settled into the landscape.

The thickness of the house's stone walls averages seven inches. The mortar was raked back three inches from the surface so that the stones appear to hang together without any mortar, hence the term "dry-laid."

These walls reflect his love of the thick stone walls in quaint cottages in the Cotswolds in England, and old farmhouses and armouries in Quebec, where he grew up. Mr. Jacobs has renovated many stone houses. Indeed, they so fascinated him they were the subject of his thesis at McGill, where he was McConnell Engineering Scholar and first in his 1974 graduating architecture class. He moved to Toronto when the Parti Québécois "shut down Que-

bec," as he puts it, and launched his eponymous, Governor-General's Award-winning firm in 1979.

Characteristically, Mr. Jacobs combined ancient and modern building techniques at the Oak Ridges site. "I was interested in dry-laid stone because it gives an impression of oldness. Yet I am also fascinated by the lightness and openness of modern buildings, which is so unlike the heaviness of stone."

For instance, (contemporary) skylights cap the circulation areas throughout the house, spilling natural light onto the (ancient) stone walls and massive, exposed pine beams and columns.

The felicitous clash of the old and new influences injects a liveliness, and even a subtle note of tension, to the interior. This ensures that a stroll through the house becomes a memorable aesthetic experience.

Another trait is the ambiguous interplay between inside and outside. Besides the ubiquitous skylights, windows are positioned to frame exterior views. The solarium-style breakfast room boasts a panoramic vista of the pond and gardens.

See JACOBS on Page PH6





At one with nature: The living room elements include wood ceiling beams and floors and the same stone used through the house. Large windows and greenery help reinforce the interplay of interior and exterior.

# Rambling with the landscape

JACOBS

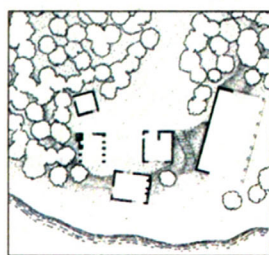
Continued from Page PH1

A glance at the floor plan reveals yet another design principle: All the rooms are rectangular, yet the spaces between them are not. This geometric shift makes the house feel more casual, as befits the wooded setting. "In a small city site, it makes sense to have right angles," Mr. Jacobs says. "On a big country site, it makes sense to be less rigid and to ramble with the landscape. Forget about the box; just let the rooms spill out. The outside becomes the result of all the fun and the excitement of what's going on inside."

The skewed plan and skylit open areas open on to what would traditionally be a long, dark corridor joining the two main parts of the house into a central, piazza-like space. This neatly resolves the problem of accommodating a dining table that can expand to seat 30 without having to dedicate a big, space-hogging dining room expressly for that purpose.

The house doesn't only ramble in plan, it rambles three-dimensionally. The main (entry, living room and dining room) pavilion descends three steps to the children's and guest bedroom wing.

The master suite occupies the entire second floor. It opens on to a private deck with a hot tub and cupola-like aerie or meditation room. "There's a spectacular view for miles around. You are completely enclosed by trees. Only birds and low-flying planes can see you," Mr. Jacobs says.



Here, too, on the second floor, is an office with its own stairway to the entry directly below so business associates can visit the owner without having to tramp through the rest of the house.

The house's lower level, partially sunk into a hill, includes the gym and the enclosed, grotto-like, year-round swimming-pool and hot tub.

Further to enhance the illusion of country living, the driveway and garage are invisible from the house. The subterranean garage accommodates all-terrain vehicles and snowmobiles as well as cars.

"The rooftop terrace and the village concept with the square or piazza dining room were not part of the client's original program," Mr. Jacobs says. "I added them and manipulated the design because of my desire to weave a rich tapestry."

If the client couple got more than they bargained for, they were certainly pleased with the result. As an encore to this happy story, they subsequently hired Mr. Jacobs to design their 10,000-square-foot manse in Toronto's tony Forest Hill district.

National Post



Above left, Mr. Jacobs's plan for the found ruins that began the design process. The irregular-shaped swimming pool, above, incorporates a hot tub in its grotto-like room, where the stone wall continues the home's theme. The house, below, is sited in front of one of three ponds, and has views that stretch for miles.



## The Gipetto principle

This country house by Julian Jacobs Architects typifies the intellectually stimulating nature of Mr. Jacobs's designs. Every detail in the residence, no matter how casual or spontaneous-looking, has a didactic purpose. "I am interested in the inseparability of the functional, the aesthetic and the cultural," he says. "There's a conceptual program behind everything you see, so that the building comes alive, makes you feel, converses with you, and reveals ideas or stories."

Mr. Jacobs calls this the Gipetto Principle, after the carpenter who made his son, Pinocchio, out of an inanimate block of wood. He ruminates on his architectural philosophy:

**Hearth and Home** The fireplace is the purest signifier of "home," and therefore a space of spiritual resource. It should not be visible from the front door. Instead, I like to gently torque people, turning them as they move through the space toward the fireplace. The hearth is also the rallying point of the house, the fulcrum of social engagement. In this large country house, there are three fireplace spaces: the kitchen, the living room and the master bedroom. In the kitchen, the fireplace carries greater significance by also being used for cooking.

**Light** The darkest space — typically a stairwell or hall — becomes one of the lightest spaces. No space deserves to have nega-

tive connotations. This is analogous to the Christian belief that you help the person with the least advantage. I use natural lighting to make walking up the stairs like rising to heaven or Nirvana — the Stairway to Heaven — through space that is dematerialized and made atmospheric by sunlight. In this house, the rooms are connected by means of two grand spaces: the main skylit hall (the dominant feature of the house) and the central skylit stair. Unlike the rooms, these spaces are completely roofed in glass, and they are trapezoidal. This geometric anomaly makes the house plan feel more relaxed and allows the house to follow the contours of the landscape more easily.

**Sublime Ordinariness** The Buddha talked about being plain, unaggressive and un-ostentatious. I am excited by the idea of ordinariness, of non-strident design, of architecture that looks like it was designed without architects.

**Canadian Shield style** Just as Frank Lloyd Wright sought to create an American style, later called the Prairie style, this house's geographic milieu led me to search for a Canadian Shield style: fresh, big-boned, outdoorsy, indigenous, generous and slightly wild yet serene. This house was inspired by the local materials, the landscape, the sunlight and weather. This, I hope, makes the design seem authentic and inevitable.

David Lasker, National Post

## Architect looks back to the future

JULIAN JACOBS

Ancient courtyard homes could help solve density issues

By Fred Langan

Architects are dreamers; engineers with a soul. They make their living with commercial projects and sometimes turn out a house or an office tower they hope will change the world, like Moshe Safdie's building block Habitat 67 or the stark black towers of Mies van der Rohe.

Julian Jacobs's latest dream is pretty close to reality. He wants to build affordable housing in downtown Toronto based on an idea that is thousands of years old: courtyard houses as the Greeks and Romans built them. Look at a street plan of Pompeii and you'll see the houses are built in tight clusters of courtyards.

Actually, the idea predates the

Greeks and Romans.

"When man first settled one of the earliest forms of housing was the courtyard house," Mr. Jacobs says over the boardroom table at his design office in midtown Toronto. "But the town house became popular in England and Europe, so the row house has become the dominant low-rise multi-family house."

He thinks he could change that with his "court garden home." The courtyard concept allows houses to be built in tight clusters, but with some green space between them. The houses face the street and a private internal courtyard. A garage opens to the lane or street.

Instead of a building surrounded by landscape, this concept is a landscape — the courtyard — surrounded by the building.

"There is always a south facing courtyard. That is important to the enjoyment of the building and also for energy efficiency," Mr. Jacobs says. "There is no front yard, so that saves a lot of space. Front yards in most buildings are decorative, and don't really serve a purpose. Side yards are a waste of space."

There is a proposal to build a demonstration unit at Washington and Huron streets in the heart of the University of Toronto campus. The design is an L-shaped bungalow attached to a two-storey coach house and garage, which creates the courtyard. The living space comes to about 1,500 square feet.

"What you have is three bedrooms or a two-bedroom home with a loft. And this coach house/loft becomes an agent of change or transformation," Mr. Jacobs says as he describes the idealistic theory behind his design.

"The loft could be used for a family member, or rented out as a small apartment for a student. The use changes as their life transforms from a couple to a family to empty nesters."

These houses are designed for the middle class, people who can't find an affordable place to live in the city. The cost would be about a quarter of a million dollars.

One way to keep housing cheap is mass production. But that only makes sense if many units are built, say, 500 at a time

on a large site. Conventional construction would be used for the demo houses. Buyers would be able to customize the units, giving them luxury touches.

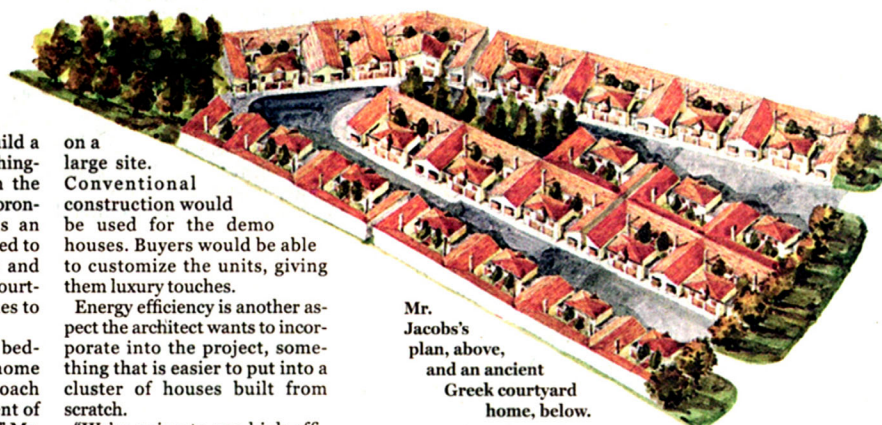
Energy efficiency is another aspect the architect wants to incorporate into the project, something that is easier to put into a cluster of houses built from scratch.

"We're going to use high efficiency heat pumps together with solar panels. Wind generation and geothermal could be used for larger projects," Mr. Jacobs says.

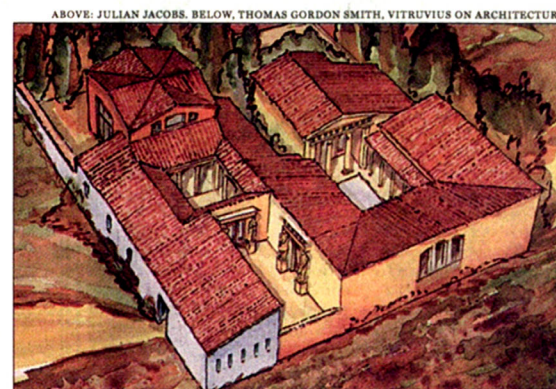
"If we go to a flat roof, we want to cover it with a special sod developed for this purpose." The sod adds to the insulation and gives the houses a unique green look. The planning for the project is advanced and construction could start as early as next spring.

"While this one is done as an affordable prototype, the size of the concept can expand in both size and luxury," Mr. Jacobs says.

National Post



Mr. Jacobs's plan, above, and an ancient Greek courtyard home, below.



ABOVE: JULIAN JACOBS. BELOW: THOMAS GORDON SMITH, VITRUVIUS ON ARCHITECTURE