

# canadian architect

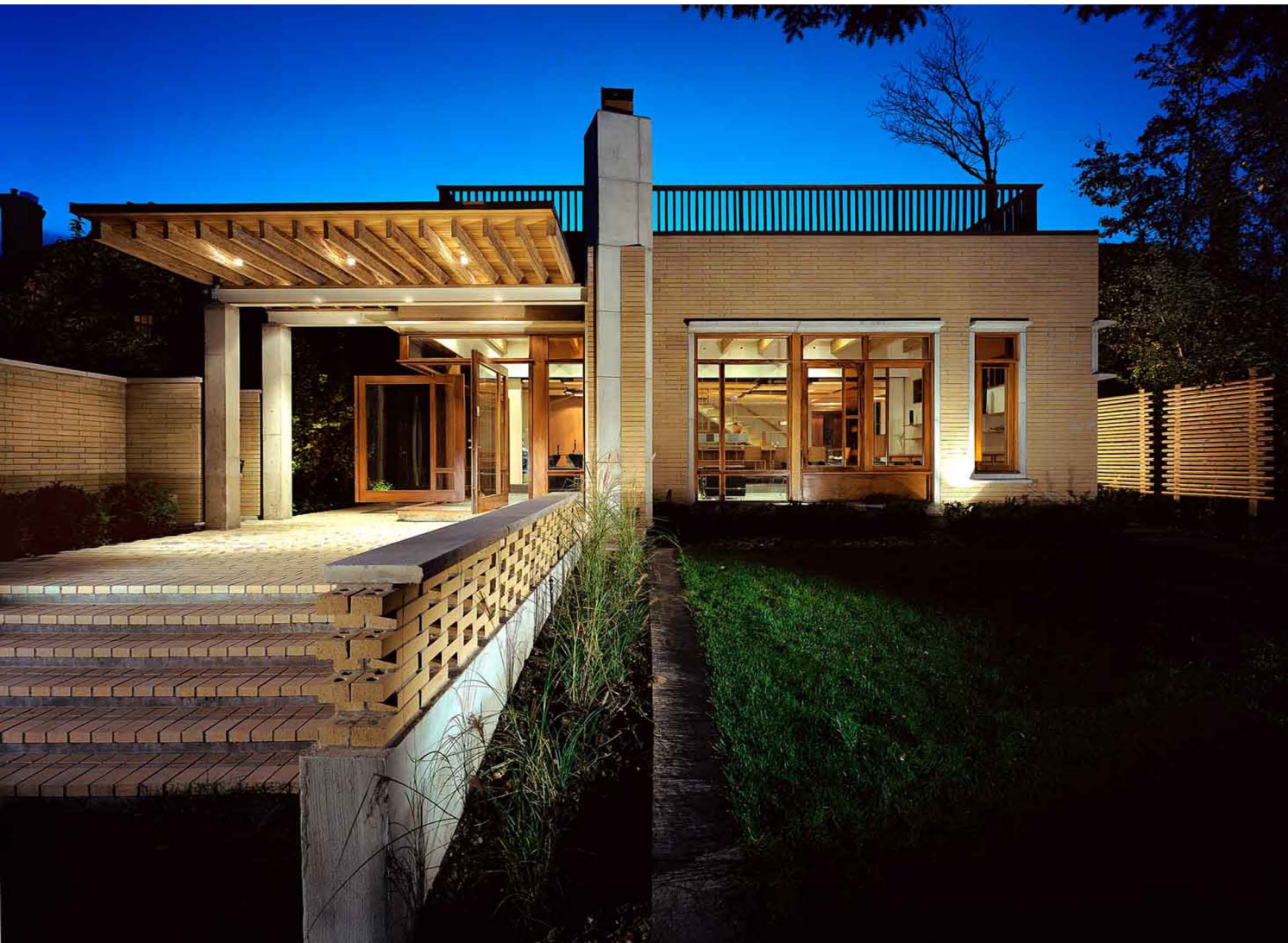
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Custom and Market Housing  
Prairie Urbanism



# About Face



In Canada, we have a consistent understanding of what constitutes the front versus the back of a house. The front is generally understood to be the public side facing the street, including the dwelling's more formal entrance, while the back is the private, more casual side, often overlooking a garden. Inside, the disposition of spaces from front to back usually involves a similar progression from more public to private, the sequence usually consisting, on the main level, of living room, dining room and kitchen. This house type is the legacy of our colonial forebears who brought to Canada the mores of Victorian England, and the Royal Corps of Engineers' convention of park lots, which evolved into regular street grids subdivided into deep, narrow lots resulting in the linear arrangement of living spaces.

This type of arrangement is generally taken for granted in Canadian market housing, but has often been challenged in custom-designed houses. In some other parts of the world, however, this particular con-

**Above: according to South African custom, the Pamensky residence's ravine façade is considered the front of the house.**

figuration is far from the norm. In South Africa, for instance, the more private side of the house, away from the street, is referred to as the front, while the street face—called the rear—functions as more of a service side. The Pamensky Residence, a new house in mid-town Toronto designed by Julian Jacobs Architects for an expatriate South African couple, reflects this tradition.

In the case of the Pamensky Residence, this is a particularly effective strategy, as the house faces a relatively busy street to the west but overlooks a verdant ravine to the east. A garage, storage spaces and a masonry wall and stair sit between the main living spaces and the street, providing an effective buffer against traffic noise. A three-storey high skylit slot at the stair—referred to by the architect as a





“chasm”—provides light deep into the heart of the house and reinforces the conceptual division between front and rear. The 3,500 square foot houses’ organization orients primary living spaces so that they not only overlook the ravine, but also enjoy direct access to outdoors.

The ground floor accommodates all primary living spaces, including living room, dining room, kitchen, master bedroom and bath. These spaces effectively address all the needs of the owners, who are empty-nesters. Additional bedrooms and living spaces on the second floor accommodate a large extended family of grown children and 14 grandchildren. In addition, the upper level also houses a study, family room and storage spaces and has access to a roof deck overlooking the ravine.

The dining and living areas are combined into one large space spanning the entire width of the house, and face directly onto the ravine side of the lot. Features include a sculptural fireplace whose hearth, mantle and chimney are conceived as a sort of three-dimensional pinwheel, a favourite Modernist device to create dynamic, animated space. Exposed structural timbers of parallel strand lumber provide the warmth of wood and are used to create a coffered effect at the ceiling.

In response to the sloping site, the adjacent kitchen is elevated one step above the living/dining area, which establishes a stage- or altar-

**Above: the kitchen overlooks the lower living/dining area, where exposed structural timber and stepped wood shelves add warmth and distinction to the large space.**

**Facing page: the southeast corner of the house boasts two pivoting mahogany doors that open onto a terrace to create an indoor-outdoor continuum.**

like relationship to the lower space, emphasizing the ritual and performative aspects of food preparation. Kitchen millwork is made of cherry, including massive butcherblock countertops. Cherry is also used for other built-in items like a dining room sideboard and a clever shelf unit used to separate the kitchen from the living/dining area. Delicately carried on slender stainless steel rods, four identical stepped wood shelves are arranged to create spaces of varying heights and configurations.

A variegated palette of wood finishes establishes a code of different uses and materials. Cabinetry and display shelving is all constructed of cherry, the structural elements and massive stair treads are of parallel strand lumber, and light-coloured maple is used to create a complex pattern of “islands” on the kitchen ceiling. Finally, mahogany is used for all the custom-made windows and doors. These almost entirely encircle the living/dining space, with large pivoting doors along the





south wall. The most dramatic moment occurs at the southeast corner, where two pivoting doors open onto a terrace, creating the illusion of dematerializing the building and creating a continuum of interior and exterior space. This opening is immediately adjacent to the massive fireplace, creating a clear tension between solid and void. This is a theme repeated throughout the house, which juxtaposes the stasis and mass of conventional load-bearing walls with the tension and drama of extensive cantilevers.

In addition to the variety of woods used, the material palette is spare but rich. Interior floors are either slate tile or carpet, warmed by radiant underfloor heating. Amber glass used sparingly in the window

glazing casts a warm glow. At the exterior, buff brick walls with concrete accents and mahogany windows and doors are supplemented with dashes of white-painted structural steel and copper flashing. Terraces and stairs are of the same brick as the walls, establishing the home's engagement with the landscape. A rear portico, garden stair and brick garden wall extend the house deep into the site, a reflection of the owners' original desire to set the house well back off the street into the well-wooded ravine, a strategy not permitted by the City.

The Pamensky Residence reveals a serious and considered approach to craft and detail, but it also embodies a number of subtle witticisms that animate the project. A massive pier supporting the





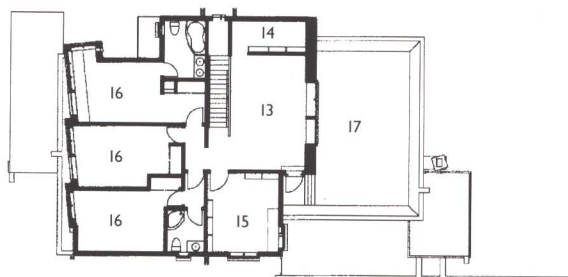


Facing page, far left: massive stair treads of parallel strand lumber lead to the second floor, which includes bedrooms, a study, family room and storage spaces.

Left: a formal entrance facing a busy street combines the mass of concrete with the lightness of a wood canopy.

Below left: extensive steel cantilevers and large pivoting doors help to dematerialize the house at the southeast corner.

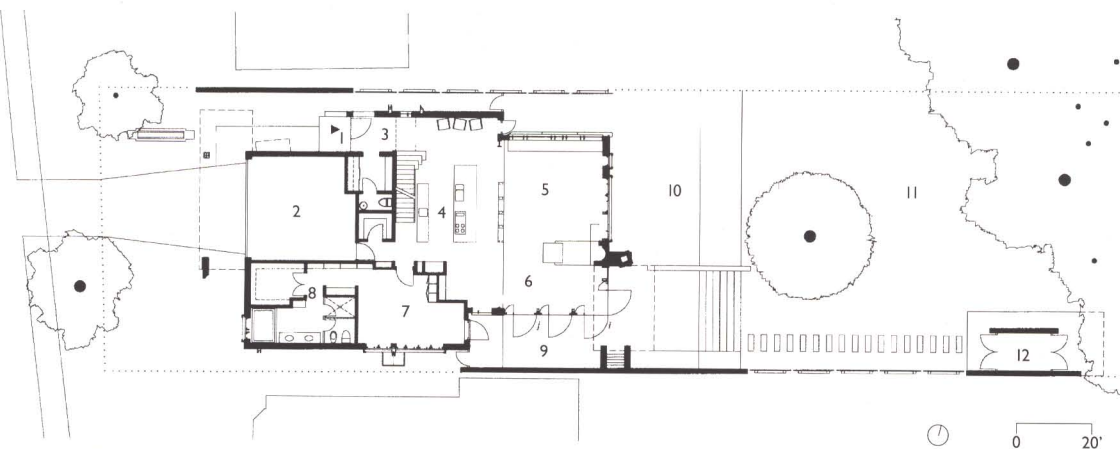
Right: the fireplace is conceived as a three-dimensional pin-wheel.



Second floor

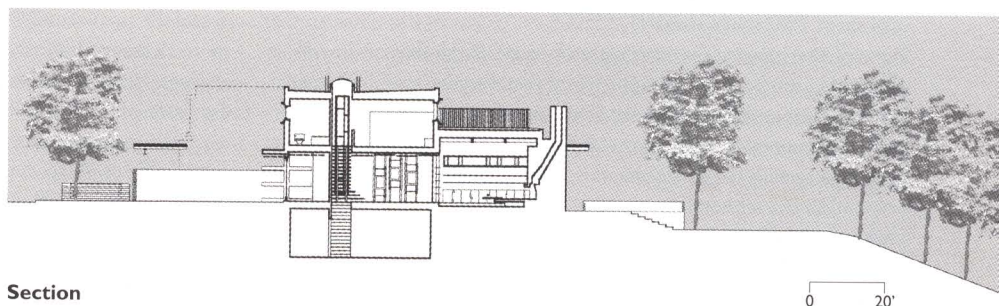


RICHARD JOHNSON



Site plan/Ground floor

- |                   |                     |
|-------------------|---------------------|
| 1. entry          | 10. grass terrace   |
| 2. garage         | 11. rear yard       |
| 3. entry hall     | 12. ravine pavilion |
| 4. kitchen        | 13. family room     |
| 5. dining         | 14. storage         |
| 6. living         | 15. study           |
| 7. master bedroom | 16. bedroom         |
| 8. master bath    | 17. roof terrace    |
| 9. terrace        |                     |



Section

street-side canopy is composed of two interlocking hunks of concrete dubbed by the architect "Adam and Eve," representing the two owners as distinct but united cornerstones of the household. And, also at the canopy, joist ends are exposed, subtly mimicking the neo-classical dentil detail on the friezes that adorn some of the houses' more traditional neighbours. While some of these gestures are so subtle as to be unnoticeable to anyone other than the architects and owners, they are the kinds of details that imbue the house with the personalized meaning and unique identity that befits a custom-designed residence. **MP**

**Clients:** Victor & Naomi Pamensky  
**Architect team:** Julian Jacobs, Gail Weininger, John Leroux, Sean Stanwick  
**Structural:** Blackwell Engineering  
**Landscape:** Patrick Bollenberghe, The MBTW Group  
**Interiors:** Julian Jacobs Architects  
**Contractor:** Ian Stewart; Andrew Fee  
**Area:** 3,500 sq. ft.  
**Budget:** withheld by request  
**Completion:** September 2001  
**Photography:** as noted