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By Martha Uniacke Breen Photography by Richard Johnson, Interior Images

Modernist jazz

Julian Jacobs, creator of some of Toronto's friendliest Modernist structures, proves here that traditional-style homes have no monopoly on warmth and charm.

With its endlessly inventive themes and variations, experiments with structure, rhythm and light, and improvisational breakouts, Julian Jacobs's Modernist Toronto palace is a great piece of three-dimensional jazz. But, perhaps as an answer to the accusation that Modernism and charm are opposites, it's also a relaxed and enormously appealing family home.

Lucid, engaging, and passionate about his art, Jacobs bops about the residence pointing out its various delights and firsts. "This is the widest glass-and-steel garage door in the world," he boasts, while expounding about Modernism's promise and its crucial failure, in the main, to engage the typical North American new-house consumer.

He didn't have that problem here. The clients, transplanted South Africans, are knowledgeable and enthusiastic patrons of the Modernist tradition. Beyond certain practical considerations, such as a main-floor master suite that would remain accessible as they grew older, multiple upstairs bedrooms for visiting sons and grandkids, and a starring role for the new kitchen, the clients presented Jacobs with an architect's dream: progressive views about architecture, a generous budget and a free hand.

As the creator of some of the city's friendliest Modernist structures, Jacobs was a good choice for the project. Montreal-born and McGill-educated (top of the 1974 graduating architecture class, he points out modestly), he was involved early in his career with Halifax's striking harbourfront revitalization. He moved to Toronto when the PQ "shut down Quebec," as he puts it, and launched his eponymous firm in 1979. Today,

it has grown to include a staff of 12 architects, technologists and designers. The firm divides its time among large-scale commercial and institutional projects and smaller residential projects like this one.

A smattering of Julian Jacobs Architects' large and small projects in the Toronto area includes Mississauga's South Common Library and Community Centre; Bell ExpressVu's headquarters and Technological Campus; several Royal Bank branches (including one on Yonge just above Eglinton, whose concrete cornices flare like the spreading branches of neighbouring mature trees); and an Ontario Association of Architects Award-winning stone residence in Uxbridge, Ont., that Jacobs describes as "Canadian Shield Regional." All exemplify his credo that architecture should, like all art, constantly extend boundaries and embody a sense of the human spirit, especially of the occupants.

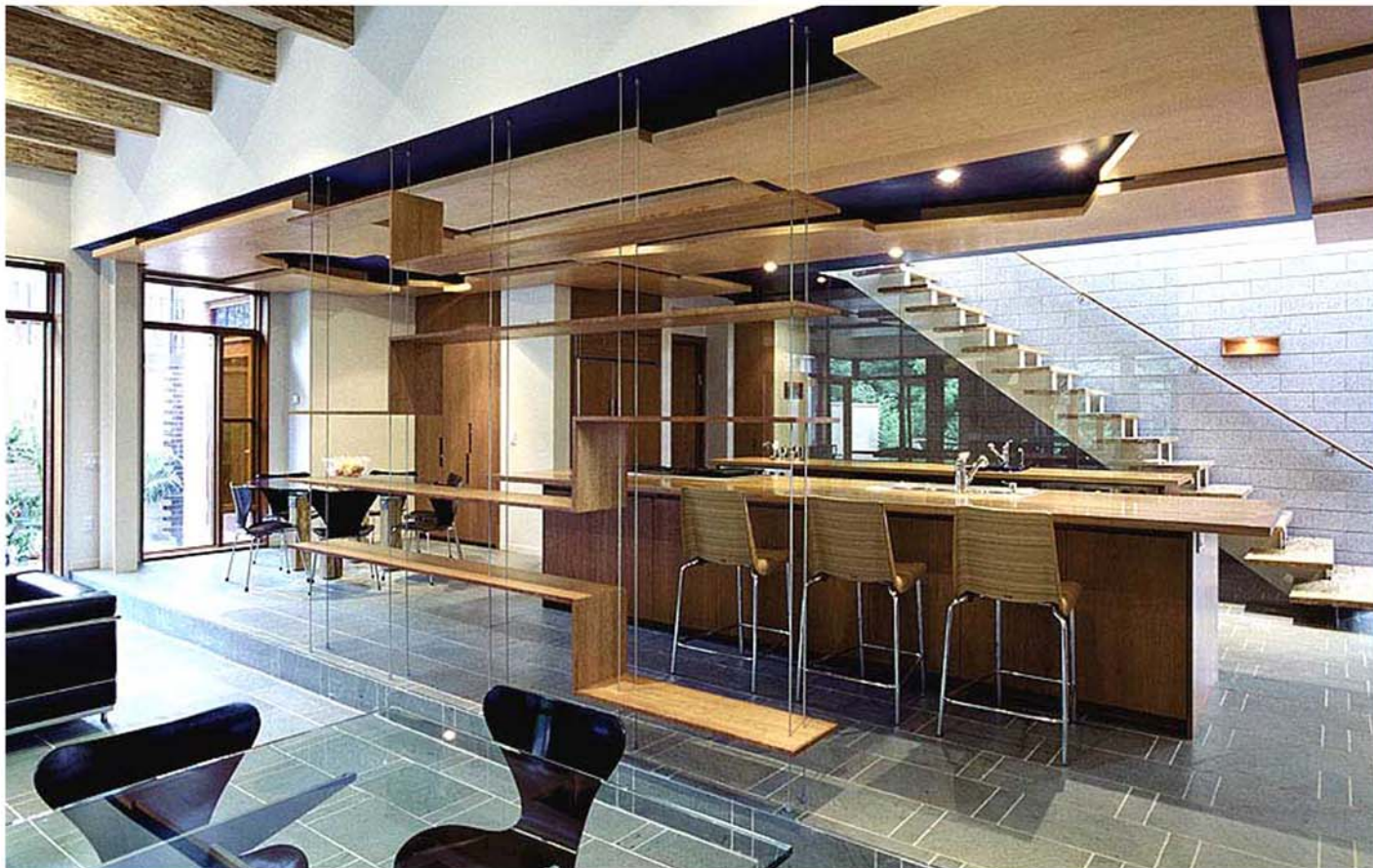
"The crisis of Modernism is its failure to be commercial; people invariably view it as cold and sterile," he says. "The vast, vast majority of new houses going up today are traditional Georgian or Victorian copies. People feel comfortable in these homes because they're familiar.

They remind them of their childhood; they have charm and detail. But traditional houses are extremely limited from a design standpoint. The elevation dictates a certain layout to the interior, and they are all exactly the same.

"Here is the great promise of Modernism. It is limited only by the limitations of the human body – the heights of stair risers, for example – and by the properties of materials and structures."



Above: The fireplace expresses several of the themes in Jacobs's design. The massive concrete hearth cants out into a partially suspended, low table of concrete and urethane-coated parallel-strand lumber. Also, a three-dimensional composition of rectangles and squares rises in the brick chimney above the hearth.



Above: The owners are dedicated cooks and wanted the kitchen to take centre stage. Jacobs set it a step above the living room, which it faces, and installed a beam that stretches, proscenium-like, across the width of the house. Jacob designed the custom millwork (beds, cabinetry, shelving, table).

Open, soaring and bright, the house is a sparkling rebuttal to the cold-and-sterile naysayers of Modernism. Arresting details, warm textures and soothing colours infuse the house from top to bottom.

The home opens with a repeating motif that reappears in countless ways throughout: right angles, used decoratively as well as structurally. There are countless expressions of this simple shape everywhere: large and small, open, extended, zigzagging and enclosed into squares and rectangles. There are right angles in the pattern of rectangles on the slate floor and in the pattern of the broadloom in the bedrooms. The path along which one is directed by the architecture, both within and outside the house, continually turns at right angles. There are right angles in the mullions of the doors and windows, and in the grid of the concrete block interior walls, punctuated at intervals by similar-sized blocks of cherrywood. The right angles are so ubiquitous and varied that the rare occasions when straight lines give way to round ones – such as the round breakfast table, or the arc that bisects a pattern of brick and asphalt rectangles and squares on the driveway – stand out as if spotlighted.

From the sidewalk, the garage door that dominates the façade is a satisfyingly regular composition of repeating lines, rectangular wood insets and corrugated glass windows. The walkway takes a right angle around the garage, then turns again to the front door. A massive concrete sidewall of horizontal ribs on a vertical spine shelters the door, then continues, identical but reversed and glazed, just inside.

The right-angle motifs continue visually and directionally right into the house: slate floor, tall, framed window dead ahead, right turn to the main space inside.

Then, just as the rhythm is firmly established, there's a bright salvo: the "light chasm," as Jacobs describes the stairwell, where the roof cuts away two floors above and casts a shaft of light where the vestibule meets the main living space. The light creates a purely visual, but quite palpable, division. "It replaces an inner door, in a way. It's like a force field."

Jacobs often uses light as a three-dimensional force. Its emotional and practical effects fascinate him, and his rooms rarely receive light from less than two exposures. "It's amazing, the effect this has. It changes the entire feeling of a room."

Even in this open space, each dedicated area (the kitchen, the breakfast room, the dining area) receives direct light from several directions and has its own separate glass door to the outside.

The other great unifying theme is the home's relationship to the outside. "It's very important that a house should 'engage' with the landscape," Jacobs says. "We had a beautiful lot on a ravine, and we wanted to blur the distinction between interior and exterior as much as possible."

The owners originally wanted to set the house farther back on the site, so that it overlooked the ravine more closely. Unfortunately, city zoning laws provide strict rules about the front and back boundaries of houses, which pretty much dictated the footprint of the home. So Jacobs improvised: Along with setting the front door back from the front garage façade, he extended the rear of the house in feeling, if not fact. The same yellow brick used for the exterior of the house extends onto the terrace at one side of the garden. Yellow brick walls extend down along the back as well, marrying them to the brick walls of the house. And in place of walls, he designed large, pivoting glass doors that line almost all the back and south side of the main floor. The doors frame the landscape when shut and virtually disappear when open, making the conjunction between inside and out a literal one.

(These doors are so light-friendly that they betrayed what may be the only drawback to the design. While interviewing Jacobs here, we had to continually shift our seats to keep the low-hanging winter sun from shining into our eyes.)

Just as jazz escaped the conventions of classical and contemporary pop music by using those conventions in new ways, the house abounds in original uses for familiar materials and shapes. One striking example

is the use of parallel-strand lumber, a humble, engineered wood product that can be stronger than steel and is generally hidden in trusses and other structural underpinnings.

Here, though, its mottled, man-made grain (like the edge of plywood except thicker) is celebrated: in exposed beams, furniture legs and, most strikingly, in the stair treads. Sanded smooth and coated with urethane, the PSL looks like some exotic and exclusive tropical species.

"We played with three main principles in the design of the building," Jacobs says. "The first was the idea of massiveness, solidity, strength. The second is the cantilever, where things are suspended in air. The third is lightness."

For massiveness, the thick stairs made of parallel-strand lumber, the concrete and brick walls, and the solidly square furnishings provide a backbeat against which the other two components play. Some of the forms the concrete takes are as sculptural as they are structural. At the southwest corner of the garage sits an angular supporting post called Adam and Eve, with Eve holding up the house and Adam holding up Eve.

A planter by the front walkway features brick arranged in a corbeil pattern, whereby the brick courses step outward on both sides in a vase shape, with a concrete lining that extends past the brick as if extruded by a giant machine. "Things like this make you think about the material; it's a way of experiencing the architecture," Jacobs says.

At times, the house seems to play fast and loose with the laws of physics. The principle of the cantilever adds suspense, figuratively and literally. The most dramatic illustration is at the corner of the living room where two pivoting doors open without frames, leaving a seemingly unsupported, naked corner overhanging the patio. Actually, the roof overhang connects to a supporting post outside, but the effect is disorienting. Will the house fall down, one worries.

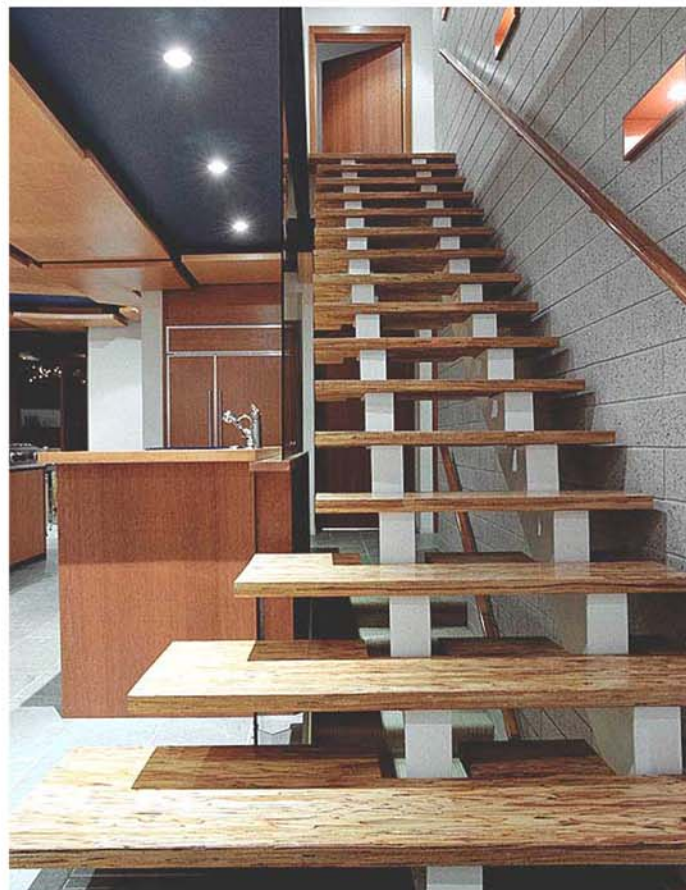
For lightness, glass and thin strands of steel dance about the more substantial materials in the house. The properties of the slender steel poles suspended between ceiling and floor, in particular, provide a shot of architectural humour. At one side of the kitchen, three cabinets hang from steel poles at an oblique angle to the right angles everywhere else. Jokingly dubbed the Dancing Cabinets, they do a little rumba in space.

A delicate, suspended wood and steel-cabled shelving unit that loosely divides the kitchen from the living room appears not so much to defy gravity as to be unaware of it.

The ceiling above the kitchen boasts another elaborate jazz metaphor, and like many of Jacobs's creations within the space, it too has a name: the Azores Islands. Placed against a backdrop of deep blue are what at first glance appear to be a random series of angular maple slabs, set at different depths and cut apart in pairs, to expose the blue ceiling above. Closer examination reveals a grid of four-by-eight panels arranged in a two-level checkerboard pattern, each divided and cut out for a practical reason. One cutaway accommodates pin lights for the task areas beneath. A large oval echoes the circular breakfast table, and, not surprisingly, an oblique rumba at one side follows the lines of the Dancing Cabinets. But viewed as a whole, it's like a wild solo above the steady rhythm of lines, masses and right angles in the design.

While Julian and I were exploring the exterior of the house, a passerby approached us from the street. In a distinctly European accent, she asked if we knew the name of the architect who designed it, and when I introduced them, she complimented him effusively.

Architecture of this type, he later observed ruefully, seems to strike a chord more readily among those born outside North America. It's a



Above: The parallel-strand lumber stair treads are exotically beautiful. The strength of this humble building product allowed Jacobs to cantilever the lower treads three feet beyond the steel risers, creating a flowing, waterfall effect. Below: One of several examples of architectural humour in the design, the corner of the house appears to float when the doors are open. Cantilevered beams, extending past the edge of the house, sustain the illusion.

