

by chris hume

Rigours of the Right Angle

Pamensky House: Julian Jacobs' acute dream design.

A family's home may be its castle, but in the case of the Pamenskys of Toronto, it's also their playground.

Designed by architect Julian Jacobs, this is the private residence reconfigured as urban oasis, not so much a modernist machine for living in as a generator of pleasure, an engine of enchantment and domestic delight. Filled with natural light, natural materials and fully connected to the ravine out back, the house was clearly created for people who like being up close and personal with nature, even if they do happen to live in the heart of Canada's largest city.

Indeed, if Victor and Naomi Pamensky were adamant about any aspect of their house, it was that it should be as open and natural as possible. The family, which comes from South Africa, immigrated to Canada in 1975. Ever since, they have been trying to recreate the feel of the houses in which they first lived. By Canadian standards, that means a back-to-front arrangement in which the "front" faces back and the "back" faces front. In other words, the house, located in Forest Hill, a busy up-town Toronto neighbourhood where the dominant styles are stockbroker Tudor, Georgian revival and contemporary cottage, is oriented away from the street toward the green space behind.

To the passer by, the house presents an almost suburban image of a two-car garage next to a pathway that leads to the front door. But Jacobs has modulated the effect through the use of high quality materials (wood, brick, and copper), sculpted concrete forms and well-crafted, up-to-date detailing.

No one would mistake Jacobs' design for something out of a builder's catalogue, either; one of the chief glories of the house is the sense that every part of it has been made by hand and carefully, lovingly, fitted into its context. Even the garage door, made of mahogany panels, has been treated as a feature worth celebrating. Given that this normally nasty,



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strictly utilitarian, element takes up a significant amount of the front façade, Jacobs' insistence on excellence isn't as extravagant as it may seem at first.

Just as striking is the architect's fondness for poured-in-place concrete. Though generally overlooked, concrete has vast potential both for its strength and unlimited plasticity. Jacobs employs it here to make a porch support and a kind of over-sized "Adam and Eve" monogram based on the form of two interlocking Es.

But the spirit of Jacobs' residence isn't fully revealed until one enters into it; here's where things get interesting. The first impression is one of openness, transparency and light. The yellow-brick exteriors give way to walls of wood and glass. A stairway to the right of the front entrance announces this is no ordinary house. Made of PSL, or parallel strand lumber, a visually striking wooden material with industrial overtones, the oversized treads form an ascending pattern of platforms, larger and more expansive than conventional stairs.

They help set the tone of relaxed elegance so characteristic of the Pamensky residence. Few other materials would have conveyed the sense of openness and experimentation as effectively as PSL. This abrupt but happy departure from the norm, from what's expected, lies at the heart of Jacobs' design. Though no one would mistake the building for anything but a house, it extends the limits of the familiar.

For outdoor ambiguity; the walls facing east and south to the green space beyond are comprised of huge panels of glass; it's hard to say quickly where the living room ends and the gardens begin. The separation is virtually invisible. These wood-framed sections can be opened and closed depending on the temperature. Because they are balanced on precisely machined steel pivots, they can be moved effortlessly.

Grey slate tiles throughout the kitchens area also heighten the happy confusion between in and out, natural and artificial. Overhead, the ceiling has become a surface of wooden plates that overlap and abut one another with tectonic abandon. Jacobs named it the "Azores Ceiling" after the islands in the Atlantic Ocean. The result, a subtle sensation of movement and playfulness, brings an unexpected layer of engagement to the interior.

Jacobs also happens to be an architect who likes to use materials to define space. The kitchen, for example, is little more than a raised area that overlooks the living room. Since both rooms are really one, there was a pressing need to differentiate the two. Jacobs accomplishes this with the most basic of means; the utilitarian spaces of food prepara-



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tion are delineated by slate tiles, as mentioned, and by being lifted one step higher than the rest of the ground floor.

In addition, there's a pair of wooden islands, one of which includes a built-in stove and sink. Constructed of cherry wood and fitted seamlessly into the room, they become design features used both to divide and connect the interior. To underline the division of space, Jacobs placed a series of wooden shelves along the edge of the kitchen area. They hang between ceiling and floor, suspended on wire and almost invisible yet with just enough substance to act as a barrier. To enliven what would otherwise be plain horizontal slabs, Jacobs has added a couple of step-up 90-degree angles to the shelves. It's a small touch, admittedly, but enough to introduce a sense of shape to the whole. Not only that, but the shapes, though rudimentary, provide a subtle counterpoint to the modernist aesthetics of the house.

Jacobs refers to it as "the rigour of the right angle" and makes no secret of the delight he derives from its application. As much as anything, the house can be understood as an extended play on 90-degree angles and the grid they form. From the interlocking concrete initials out front to the ceiling and cabinets, the right angle appears again and again.

In the hands of most architects, such modernist tendencies could easily become relentless and hard-edged. But they are softened here by Jacobs' material palette and willingness to embrace tradition. Modern architecture has had much to say about the single-family dwelling; Le Corbusier, the great innovator, famously declared that the house of the future would be a "machine for living in." That, fortunately, wasn't to be, but his insistence on letting light in and sweeping away the clutter of the past has influenced designers ever since.

Although modernism has become a dirty word in certain circles, it's important to remember that before it fell into disrepute, the aim of the movement wasn't cheapness and conformity but to make the world a better place to live. We no longer believe that architecture can save humanity, but the initial impetus to create housing that reflects actual human needs, emotional and social as well as physical, still has resonance.

By incorporating the idealism of the early modernists with a positively post-modern dislike of ideology, architectural or otherwise, Jacobs ends up with the best of both worlds: technical innovation without dogma. What that means here is a building conceived as a complement to nature, not a means to overpower it. It's true Ludwig Mies van der Rohe designed the steel-and-glass Farnsworth House in the late 1940s to show what International Style modernism could do with the family home.



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But this wholly transparent structure floating in a field was unique. Famous American architect Phillip Johnson, copied him several years later in his own house in New Canaan, but most of us don't live in the country and even if we did, would probably choose to live a less exposed life. The Pamenskys don't own a country estate, however, or even a cottage. They live in their Toronto home full-time and look to it to provide them with a setting that's close to nature and large enough to accommodate their entire extended family.

"I wanted to see trees from every part of the house," explains Naomi Pamensky. "I wanted it to be like living in the country, full of natural light and natural materials."

Until Jacobs came along, the fourth or fifth architect interviewed for the job, no one seemed to understand what the Pamenskys were after. As they made clear, their interest wasn't so much

aesthetic as spiritual; they had no preconceived notions about what the finished product would look like, only what it would feel like to live in.

"Canada is an extremely conservative country," Jacobs observes. "And typically Canadians are not interested in architecture. That means it's very tough to innovate and hard for Canadian architects to get the chances they need to compete on the world stage."

Jacobs' uptown Toronto practice employs 18 people and had designed a handful of houses before the Pamenskys appeared on the horizon. The firm's portfolio also includes a number of facilities such as the Ellesmere Community Centre in suburban Toronto. In 2002 the Pamensky residence won a Woodworks' Wood Design Award and an award of excellence from the Ontario Association of Architects.

"There's so much custom work in the house that it was a problem getting the builders and manufacturers to do what we wanted," Jacobs says. "At the same time, we wanted to design a building that showed how its aesthetics are guided by materials. I believe in expressing materials."


Certainly, the Pamensky house does that, but it goes beyond the kind of architectural conceits and theoretical concerns that have long brought a deadening sense of sameness to the built environment of North America. Though Jacobs is well aware of the issues and politics that litter the field of modern architecture, he hasn't forgotten his task; to serve his clients, not his ego. Most of all, the Pamensky house succeeds because it's what the Pamenskys wanted; they might not have known exactly where they were headed when the process started, but they knew they had arrived home when it was over. 



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