

# TESTING GROUND



## **A SINGLE-FAMILY HOME OPERATES AS A CONCEPTUAL TESTING GROUND FOR A YOUNG FIRM INTENT ON EXPLORING SECTIONAL DYNAMICS ON COMPLEX SITES.**

**PROJECT** THE RIVER HOUSE, HUTTONVILLE, ONTARIO  
**ARCHITECTS** AGATHOM CO.  
**TEXT** GABRIEL FAIN  
**PHOTOS** MICHAEL AWAD

The River House is located in an unlikely place for contemporary architecture about an hour west of Toronto in the suburban community of Huttonville. Designed by husband-and-wife team Adam Thom and Katja Aga Sachse Thom of Agathom Co., this house for a couple and a child represents an important experiment and conceptual testing ground for the young firm as they develop a body of work primarily focused on single-family dwellings. Although the River House is not without its flaws, it does establish a set of key themes which play a generative role in the firm's

ongoing work. These include the relationship between landscape and building, the celebration of circulation, and the sculpting and layering of spaces in section.

Agathom is perhaps best known for Molly's Cabin—a well-publicized project that displays their understanding of how a building can be carefully calibrated to a difficult site. Similarly, the River House makes a strong gesture towards its naturally sloping and wooded terrain while being sensitive to an existing creek on the southern edge of the property. Even if the irregular

wedge shape of the house was dictated largely by local zoning restrictions, the architects manage to take control of the design at key moments by framing the landscape and making it integral to the experience within.

But as a whole, the design parti of the River House seems to be highly driven by formal games. This inherent sense of playfulness does come at the expense of total conceptual clarity. Take the highly articulated front elevation with its second-floor setback. Here, the combination of wood, stucco, glass and concrete appear misplaced and in direct contrast to the more contextual cedar-clad south elevation. Equally confusing is the manner in which the low profile of the building is broken only once with an L-shaped concrete tower—oddly registering elements of a chimney that was removed in an early design stage. Perhaps more consequential in terms of inhabitation is the interior, which is defined





largely through diagonal walls and stairs. This creates an interesting dynamic, yet is highly problematic as the geometry creates a number of strange corner conditions. The garage, for example, squeezes into the body of the house and abruptly protrudes into the study. On the second floor this results in an unusual entrance to the child's bedroom and an awkward triangular-shaped closet.

For all of these formal weaknesses, however, there are many elements of the design that demonstrate an exceptional degree of rigour and thought. The manner in which the architects reinterpret the notion of movement through the domestic realm is clearly developed and represents a recurring motif in their work. The interior of the house is defined as a series of complex circulation paths which both flow around diagonal walls and shift in section to create a kind of artificial interior topography. The entrance is

described by the architects as a "tornado"—an almost Piranesian double-height space where multiple paths converge and diverge. A bridge on the second floor between the master bedroom and the child's bedroom completes the sequence and offers views back towards the entrance space below and out into the distant landscape.

At the River House, the architects also begin to make a notable effort to enhance the inhabitant's sensorial experience of the house, again through the manipulation of the sectional plane. For example, windows do not simply function as openings, but rather as conceptual devices designed to create everchanging relationships between the viewer and the exterior ground plane. A key moment occurs in the sunken kitchen where the landscape curiously appears at eye level. The architects seem to take advantage of this relationship by inserting a vertical piece of glass at the end of a long counter in order to provide glimps-

**OPPOSITE** BEAUTIFULLY TEXTURED CONCRETE WALLS ARE ACHIEVED THROUGH THE USE OF ARTFULLY CONSTRUCTED PLYWOOD FORMWORK. **CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE** THE BRIDGE OVERLOOKING THE DOUBLE-HEIGHT STUDY IS ONE OF MANY FORMAL GESTURES INTENDED TO DEVELOP VISUAL CONNECTIONS WITHIN THE INTERIOR SPACES AND TO THE LANDSCAPE BEYOND; JATOBA PANNELLING, STONE TILES AND SITE-CAST CONCRETE DEFINE THE HOME'S INTERIOR MATERIAL PALETTE; THE CONFLATION OF ANGLED SURFACES COMPRISING THE DOUBLE-HEIGHT ENTRY IS DESCRIBED BY THE ARCHITECTS AS A "TORNADO."

es of those approaching the house.

The exploration of the tactile realm also complements these formal strategies. One of the most exciting features of the design is a finely crafted jatoba staircase which rises to the second floor between two walls of exposed poured-in-place concrete—something very few residential



architects today would dare to try. Recalling the material poetics of Brutalist architecture, the imprint of the plywood formwork used for pouring is clearly registered on the wall surfaces. The experience of walking up this staircase, illuminated by a small opening to the north, seems to heighten the transition from the public realm to the private spaces of the house.

It is important to note that all of these strategies are now being refined in Agathom's current work. In a residential project at the base of an enormous hill in Toronto's High Park—referred to as the Reverse Ravine House—the architects have taken their sectional experiments in response to the terrain one step further by adding a secret passage to the basement on one level, the top of which doubles as a countertop on the half-level above. There is certainly no shortage of diagonal walls and stairs in Agathom's work. But in another house renovation underway in Peterborough, the use of non-orthogonal geometry begins to work in service of their overall design parti. Here, a new timber roof gently tilts away from the existing suburban house to create a dramatic aperture that lets light in. It will be interesting to see how the firm will develop these earthwork/roofwork themes in later work—particularly how they will be applied to typologies other than single-family dwellings.

What is commendable in the River House is Agathom's embrace of the contradictions and slippages which occur between what is perceived in reality and the logic that drives architectural intentions. The preoccupation with most young firms is the need to justify every single design move. Agathom seems to be fearless in this respect, and have demonstrated that they take enormous risks in all of their buildings. Adam and Katja represent a model of a young architectural practice that seeks to re-examine, study and refine key principles at play in each of their works, and in so doing, arrive at better design solutions in subsequent projects. **CA**

*Gabriel Fain is an intern architect at Kuwabara Payne McKenna Blumberg Architects. He is currently completing a Master of Architecture degree at the University of Toronto.*

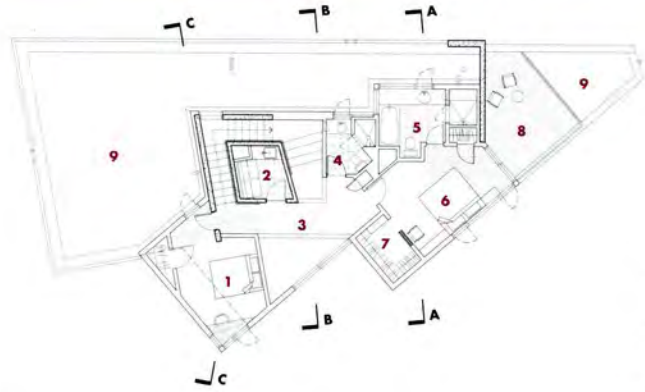


**RIGHT, TOP TO BOTTOM** THE FRONT OF THE HOME REGISTERS A LOW PROFILE TO THE STREET, BUT IS PUNCTUATED BY AN I-SHAPED TOWER; WINDOWS IN THE SUNKEN KITCHEN CAPTURE HORIZONTAL VIEWS OF THE EXTERIOR LANDSCAPE AT EYE LEVEL; TIGHT TRIANGULAR-SHAPED SPACES RESULT FROM THE ODD GEOMETRIES OF THE PLAN.



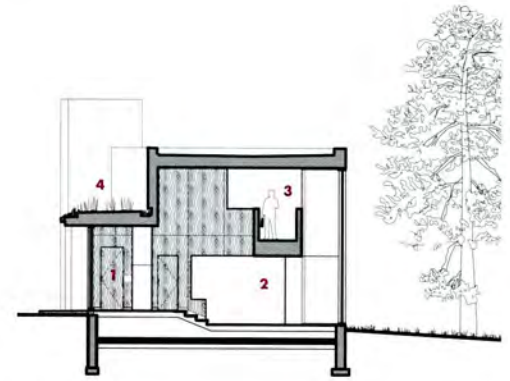


**LEFT** THE CEDAR-CLAD SOUTH ELEVATION IS AN ABRUPT CONTRAST TO THE CONCRETE AND STUCCO DEFINING THE NORTH ELEVATION OF THE HOME.



- 1 BEDROOM
- 2 LAUNDRY
- 3 BRIDGE
- 4 BATH
- 5 MASTER BATH
- 6 MASTER BEDROOM
- 7 CLOSET
- 8 SUN DECK
- 9 GRASS ROOF

**SECOND FLOOR**

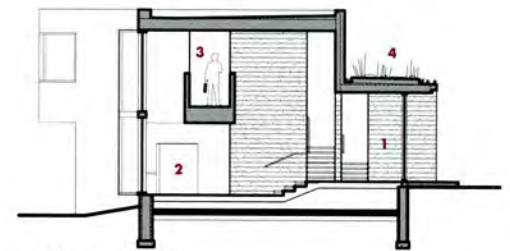


**SECTION C**

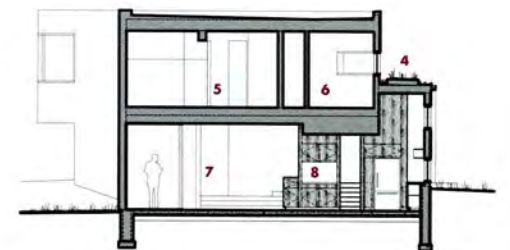


**GROUND FLOOR**

- 1 ENTRANCE
- 2 KITCHEN
- 3 LIVING ROOM
- 4 DINING ROOM
- 5 STUDY
- 6 POWDER ROOM
- 7 VESTIBULE
- 8 FURNACE ROOM
- 9 GARAGE
- 10 DRIVE
- 11 FRONT GARDEN
- 12 RAISED GARDEN
- 13 RAVINE
- 14 CREEK



**SECTION B**



**SECTION A**

- 1 ENTRY
- 2 STUDY
- 3 BRIDGE
- 4 GRASS ROOF
- 5 MASTER BEDROOM
- 6 MASTER BATH
- 7 DINING
- 8 KITCHEN

0 10'

**CLIENT** MICHELLE PETTIRNEWLAND FAMILY  
**ARCHITECT TEAM** KATJA AGA, SACHSE THOM, ADAM THOM  
**STRUCTURAL** HAICROW YOLLES  
**MECHANICAL** HYDRONIC HEATING INC.  
**LANDSCAPE/GRASS ROOF** NATVIK DESIGN INC.  
**INTERIORS** AGATHOM CO.  
**MILLWORK** GIBSON GREENWOOD  
**CONTRACTOR** DUFFY + ASSOCIATES  
**AREA** 2,497 FT<sup>2</sup>  
**BUDGET** WITHHELD  
**COMPLETION** SPRING 2010