

III ARCHITECTURE

A beautiful synthesis of home and nature

Adam and Katja Thom have designed a house that responds to an unusual site



JOHN BENTLEY MAYS
THE PERFECT HOUSE

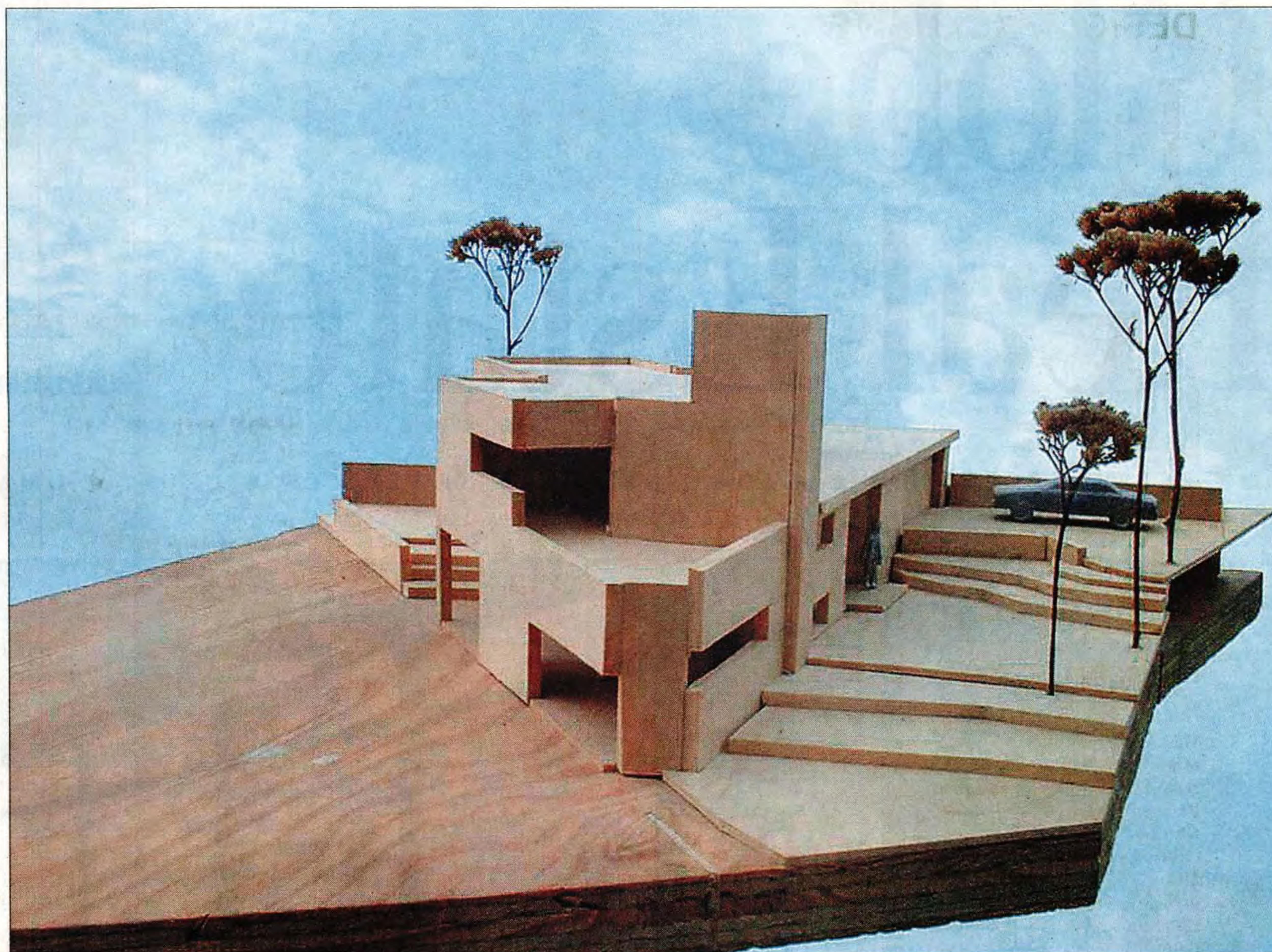
Some things that make Southern Ontario's countryside beautiful also make many a rural spot a trial to build a house on. I am thinking of the numerous rivers and the countless tiny streams that flow across the rolling landscape, steep water-sculpted slopes and the marshes nestled between tall shoulders of hill.

One common and quite acceptable architectural response to the country's clefts and rills, of course, is to build above it all, straight out from the crest of the hill, creating a cantilevered overlook above the treetops with impressive views of what's all around and below. Another approach — more difficult, but potentially just as rewarding to the artistic eye — is to go deep into the green, dealing with the poor soils and high water tables of the bottomlands in order to achieve a pleasing sense of immersion in nature.

I recently came across an example of this latter line of attack that promises to bear exceptionally fine architectural fruit. The imaginative designers of the project are Adam Thom and Katja Aga Sachse Thom, partners in both life and business. Last week, I visited their client's building site, an irregular swatch of land on a rural edge of Brampton.

On the face of it, this tract seems to offer more problems than opportunities for creative design. A good portion of the property is thickly wooded hillside. A little creek bed, mindfully protected by local environmental officials, runs slantwise across the site, restricting the flat area available for construction. The ground that's left to build on is low and moist and even marshy — which may be wonderful for Ontario forest trees and lush undergrowth, but is forbidding if what's wanted is a basement.

The Thoms' solution to these manifold inconveniences is a wedge of housing that responds with verve and remarkable empathy to its conditions (and has no basement). First of all these conditions are the matter of local history. Challenged by Brampton city officials to come up with a design that accorded with traditional building styles in the area, the Thoms scouted out the neighbourhood — the site is near the old mill town of



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A wood and cardboard model of the planned Brampton home shows the tiered construction that mimics the undulating land surrounding it.

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Huttonville — and found a fine old flat-roofed, formerly water-powered woollen factory composed of stone and concrete, chimneys and blocky volumes. Thus was born the sturdy material palette of the house, its unambiguous surfaces of stucco and concrete. And in the long, flat horizontal planes and tall concrete tower of the Thoms'

house, there are yet other recollections of the factory, and of the tradition of Modernist residential design that has drawn heavily upon the formal simplicity and clarity of industrial plants.

But apart from these few features, the residence designed by the Thoms has little in common with the classic Modernist house, its plainly rational layout and emphasis on right angles.

This expressively poetic house opens and shuts according to the view that is available and desirable, framing each with precisely sculpted architectural apertures, terraces, thresholds. The structure rises up and turns a long, blind side to the ranch-style in the next lot, for example, while opening generously to the little stream and a patch of

marsh, and to the wooded hillside that rises at the back of the property.

There will be no lawns: The forest floor is welcome to come up to the variously opened and closed edges of the building. From the public road that curves by and slightly above the site, the grassed roof of the house will make the whole composition seem knit deeply into the green surge and tangle of the bottomland.

On the inside, the various parts of the house step up or step down in response to the changing levels of the site, and to accent the shifts in use from one section of the house to another.

Instead of being enclosed by squared-off rooms, the living areas are marked by walls that seem to

flex and tense along diagonal lines, diverging and colliding in a kind of free structural play. The whole interior is less an open-plan arrangement, with a simple flow-through of space — though the Thoms have clearly learned from the elegant geometry of Modernist residential planning — rather than a system of spatial valves, subtly directing and defining the mood and atmosphere of the house at every moment.

Construction is due to begin this fall, with expected completion next summer. It will be interesting to see the finished artwork, and see how well Katja and Adam Thom realize the beautiful promises of their plans and models.

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