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RENOVATION



Designers Jason Halter and Anita Matusevics go double-deep to rework a traditional Toronto home for modern family needs by erasing walls and traditional boundaries.

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Jason Halter stands in the basement of his Rathnelly home. He and Anita Matusevics made room for their family in the traditionally styled house by, among other things, excavating a bright, two-level basement.

J.P. MOCZULSKI FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

ARCHITECTURE



WOW HOME

River House applies spatial brilliance to robust materials for a brand new interpretation of the country retreat. John Bentley Mays gives architect Adam Thom's latest creation his highest marks



JOHN BENTLEY MAYS
THE PERFECT HOUSE

jbmays@globeandmail.com

For architects since the time of Palladio, the rural villa has been a prime site for trying out new artistic strategies and testing design theories in real-world situations. The most memorable results of this ongoing, centuries-old experimentation are often modest in size and bearing: Palladio's country seats, for example, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House in Illinois, and Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye. What makes these projects stand out is not grandeur and opulence, but the quality of intense, robust architectural imagination they embody.

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River House, left, designed by architect Adam Thom. The use of rugged concrete on the interior combined with the volume's raking angles and turning geometry create great variety and interest. MICHAEL AWAD

FROM PAGE 1 » MAYS

'A poetic wedge of housing'

» River House, in the Toronto suburb of Brampton, is among the newest contributions to the long, fruitful tradition of modern villa design, and it is surely one of the most excellent new Toronto-area homes I have ever reviewed in this column. Crafted by Adam Thom and Katja Aga Sachse Thom, partners in both life and art, this small, brilliant residence for a couple and one child combines a strong material palette – poured-in-place concrete, untreated cedar cladding on the exterior, handsome jatoba flooring throughout – with refined, gracious livability in a rough, lovely pocket of Ontario countryside.

On the face of it, the tract that River House stands on seemed to offer more problems than opportunities for creative design. A good portion of the property is thickly wooded hillside. A little stream, mindfully protected by local environmental officials, runs slantwise across the site, and a roadway bounds the lot on its southern edge, all of it sharply restricting the area available for construction.

The Thoms' solution to these inconveniences is a poetic wedge of housing that handily fills its irregular, difficult place in the landscape, and that responds with remarkable empathy to its natural and artificial conditions, including the history of its location. Challenged by Brampton city officials to come up with a plan that recalled local building styles, the Thoms scouted out the neighbourhood and found an old flat-roofed woollen factory, water-powered in its day, composed of stone and concrete, chimneys and blocky volumes.

Thus were born certain features of River House – its long, low-slung profile, its tall concrete tower punching skyward and the rugged concrete treatments on the interior. But the raking angles and turning geometry of the volume, which lend great variety and interest to the transitions



River House, designed by architect Adam Thom. Above, the home deftly fits an irregular geography. Far left, the kitchen opens like an aperture on the thickly wooded hillside.

PHOTOS BY MICHAEL AWAD

and rooms within, are the designers' own creations.

This external surface of the house opens and shuts according to the views that are available and desirable. Each of these views is framed by precisely sculpted architectural apertures, terraces, thresholds. The windows in the living room and dining room welcome in the verdant forest floor at the back of the building, while the windows on the street side limit what's allowed to enter.

The structure turns a blind

side to the ranch-style home in the next lot, and hides it behind tall grasses. The landscaping plans, which have not yet been executed, call for extensive plantings of native species, knitting the composition 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 in order 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 lightly bounded by walls that seem to flex and tense along diagonal lines, diverging and colliding in a kind of measured structural play.

The interior is less an open-plan arrangement, with a simple flow-through of space – though the Thoms have clearly learned from the rational schemes of modernist residential planning – than a system of spatial valves that subtly differentiate and define the moods and atmospheres in-



side the building.

The stairway up to the second level, for instance, passes between two walls of concrete that were poured into horizontal plank and plywood forms. The concrete surface has registered every knot and imperfection in the moulds, lending visual excitement to the ordinary act of walking up steps.

At the top of the staircase, the space opens up on a sort of bridge, with overlooks of the foyer below and the forest beyond – a sociable corridor that links the couple's suite and the child's small room. (None of the dedicated areas in the house is large; the Thoms have chosen, instead, to emphasize the zones of transition, by making each a dramatic passageway.)

The beauty of River House operates at several scales and through several material textures, from the expanse of cedar cladding at the rear down to the jatoba coverings of the air-conditioning vents. Despite the variety and intensity of moves both without and within, however, the house coheres splendidly, and projects a very fresh vision of what the modern house can be.