

# Oasis architecture

You wouldn't know it from the street, but behind a veil of black zinc and dark grey concrete block sits an urban sanctuary of glass, wood, water and light.



Above\_ An exterior sheath of black zinc, dark grey concrete block and dark grey stucco conveys the façade of a home that seems inaccessible, and barely hints at the treasures that lies behind. Right\_ Zuckerman believes that great architecture allows you to show your life, and his life is on display in the double-height, light filled main living area. Opposite\_ Skylights above a wide strip of glass running through the second floor bring light deep into the core of the box, and glass walls for the master bedroom emphasize the importance of light and openness throughout the house.

**By Peter Sobchak**  
Photos by Ben Rahn/  
A-Frame



**To some, the residential areas of Milan are characterized by inaccessible façades and homes that have turned their backs to the street.** But to Toronto-based developer Ken Zuckerman, these are just walls that separate you from a glorious world of courtyards and gardens that residents enjoy and tourists rarely see. “Unless they know someone who can get them through the gates,” says Zuckerman. “Many people think Milan is an ugly city, but getting beyond the gates, you begin to experience what residents experience.”



Once beyond the walls, residents and visitors are treated to a glorious courtyard, custom pool and gardens. A piece by Canadian artist Ken Lum can be seen on the back wall of the main living area.

This theme of a home as an oasis within the confines of a bustling metropolis is one Zuckerman tries to bring to many of his developments, but it took an old Barton Myers project off Bay Street in Toronto's tony Yorkville district to allow him the fullest expression of his philosophy for a home of his own.

The structure itself was a white box designed by Myers in 1985 for graphic design firm Gottschalk & Ash, but it was the relationship between the building and the lot, the clean lines of a box enmeshed with a gem of a courtyard, that Zuckerman fell in love with. He immediately saw the potential for what is arguably now one of the best contemporary homes in the city. At 75-feet wide by 60-feet deep, this was not a typical lot. The aging, ill-kept structure was built out almost to the lot lines and Zuckerman cannily understood that if the building was demolished, he would not get the same setback allowances as the structure currently has.

So Zuckerman worked with Michael Taylor, partner at Taylor\_Smyth Architects, Toronto, taking the "tired" building back to its bones. "Anything that kept it from being a box was eventually removed," says Taylor. "We took it back to its essence."

One of the best features of the building is that it faces west towards a side yard with access to plenty of sunlight. Zuckerman wanted to capitalize on this by emphasizing the changing seasons and the play of light as it moves through the space.

The architects infused the house with an indoor/outdoor permeability by using an abundance of glass, concrete floors, open walls and skylights. A clever garage door-like opening exposes the indoor living areas to the courtyard, and Zuckerman's car collection is revealed to the courtyard through a glass wall at the back of the adjoining garage. This courtyard is really the beating heart of the house. It's ethereal pool, ipe wood deck and playful all-weather furniture evoke a Milan-esque sense of wonder that greets visitors lucky enough to get beyond the street. In fact, Taylor was married in this backyard, "the first of many good parties in the house," says Zuckerman.

Back inside, a stair made of blackened steel leads to three ensuite bed-

rooms on the second floor, the jewel of which is the master bedroom, a glass box overlooking the two-storey main space. "I wanted to make the space open, but I still think people want to be in a room," says Zuckerman, so the team devised a curtain system that encloses the room at will. To highlight the oasis feel of the bedroom, it's the only room on the second floor where wood is used in the floor.

In addition to being a developer, Zuckerman is an avid collector of modern art and design. His impressive collection includes pieces by The Sanchez Brothers, Canadians Ken Lum, John Scott and Evan Penny and furniture and lighting by Ron Arad, Ingo Maurer, Vernon Panton and Gio Ponte.

Much of Zuckerman's collection has spent its life in storage, so he specifically wanted the opportunity to display them in this house, for example a large globe light by Arad, which hangs over the main room. In some cases, Taylor "built around" the art and furniture, creating spaces in which it can be displayed. A glass bench designed by Ingo Maurer, more a piece of Pointillist light art than furniture, required special wiring to be displayed on the second floor, and a lamp designed by Panton rests in its own niche under a skylight.

With all the art, it is easy to liken the house to a gallery, which Taylor freely does. "It's a clean flexible space that shows its bones and shares a sense that the better galleries have, like clean walls, no mouldings, and drywall coming right to the floor," he says.

This is not the first project Zuckerman and Taylor have worked on together. In fact, they've collaborated on four projects over the past 10 years, with future ones in the works including a single family residence, a loft addition to a building on Dupont Street behind Taylor\_Smyth's office, and a majestic Georgian house in Toronto's Forest Hill that Zuckerman says "hadn't been touched in 40 years."

With these projects, Zuckerman continues his philosophy for contemporary home design. "Contemporary doesn't have to mean cold or minimalistic. It can be warm and provide a great backdrop to wonderful things." □