

ENTROPY

The Metropolis Observed

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In this Toronto home that Taylor Smyth Architects designed for transparency, the floor of the upstairs hallway is glass (see page 32).

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Outdoor Livin' residences

In chilly Toronto, a house takes shape around a courtyard.

At first glance the two-story black building in Toronto's Yorkville neighborhood presents little more than an ordinary renovated facade. Though unusually elegant, it offers few clues about itself. Despite being vaguely commercial, it could also be residential—or maybe an office—but it's hard to tell.

Inside it's an entirely different matter. Here the modern house is revealed as an arrangement of rooms and space organized around a small but exquisite central courtyard. Beyond that, the main feature is transparency; even corridor floors and bedroom walls are glass. It's not easy figuring out where indoor ends and outdoor begins. "The client had a vision of a place where interior and exterior space flow seamlessly," explains Toronto architect Michael Taylor, of Taylor Smyth Architects. "But he was also concerned about privacy. The site is a small downtown street with a lot of people nearby."

That client, Toronto developer Ken Zuckerman, went to Taylor looking for something contemporary but also warm. He wanted a house he could both inhabit and use as a showcase for his growing collection of art and furniture. "It started as a simple job, and it evolved," Taylor recalls. "It was an ongoing process where Ken pushed us to come up with idea after idea. We tried all sorts of different things." This looseness of approach combined with remarkable attention to detail resulted in a building that's admirably but not rigidly rational. Here is a house designed for living, not dedicated to some abstract notion of contemporary life. Even the garage, which has large windows facing onto the central courtyard, is integrated into the larger whole. Zuckerman, who's crazy about cars, wanted to be able to commune with his day and night. "I love cars," he admits unnecessarily. "They're such a big part of my life."

The courtyard, which won't get much use in the bitter Toronto winter, includes a small swimming pool and full living-room-style contents. It also serves as the main organizing principle of the structure. Though directly accessible from the street, it functions as an extension of the two-story main living space of the house. When Zuckerman bought the 75-foot-long property in 2003, it contained a renovated industrial building that was owned by a firm of upscale graphic designers. But about half the site was empty, which meant extra scope.



Ontario stone and ipe wood decking cover the courtyard living room, which connects the interior and the garage through large plate-glass windows.

"The thing about living in Toronto," Zuckerman says, "is that the summer is not long. I really wanted to enjoy it while it lasted." No wonder the place has a feeling of openness and connection that is more California than Canada. The house is now seeing its first winter—the renovation was completed in May—but one imagines the snow will make for an exquisite vista, especially from inside.

The courtyard residence has always been too inward-looking to suit North American tastes, but this variation reflects Canada's growing sense of urbanity. The fully integrated house and garden imply a lifestyle not typically associated with downtown Toronto. Clearly it's an idea whose time has come; just months after Zuckerman moved in, a stranger made him an offer he couldn't refuse. Now he and Taylor are working on a new site. "I like the process," Zuckerman jokes. "Michael and I are on the same page." —Christopher Hume