

Toronto Architect Michael Taylor updates the classic Modernist style in a 'cool, civilized and poised' Scarborough home.

John Bentley Mays

While on an architectural tour in eastern Germany last year, I spent a night at the second and most famous home of the Bauhaus, in the industrial town of Dessau. (The design school began its brief, enormously influential career in 1919 at Weimar.)

I had long been an admirer of the stringent, vividly anti-traditionalist modernism embodied in the Bauhaus buildings created in the mid-1920s at Dessau by Walter Gropius, the school's director. I still am. But that sleep-over in the dormitory gave me new appreciation of the dislike for architectural modernism shared by many people nowadays.

The high-ceilinged room I stayed in was very large, with industrial-scale windows, but furnished with the overly strict stinginess that, to the minds of some, is what high modernist styling is (or was) all about. The ceiling and unadorned walls of the room were painted stark white, while the floor was a naked slab of concrete.

The thin walls and hard interior surfaces of the multi-storey, factory-like building meant that even the slightest sound in the corridors outside or above or below my room echoed throughout the entire structure.

Had such a visit to the premier shrine of the style (or one version of it) been someone's only close-up experience of modernism – and were many other and more wonderful expressions of the versatile design strategy not visible in cities around the world – he or she could be forgiven for dismissing the modern movement (which thrived, in fits and starts, between 1900 and 1970) as an especially cold, hard, disagreeable episode in this history of the building art.

But the best twentieth-century structures available to us for viewing – the most refined designs by Gropius, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, Alvar Aalto, Louis Kahn and numerous other architects – prove just how subtle and humane modernism could be. It's little wonder that the modernists and their works have continued to inspire designers in our own day, a few generations past the heyday of the movement.

Such were my thoughts a couple of weeks ago, when I visited a new and very Bauhaus-modern house in Scarborough crafted by Toronto architect Michael Taylor.



(Click on the image for published article)

Perched on the edge of steep bluffs above the Lake Ontario shoreline and commanding a splendid view over the water, this residential project is a small, fresh embodiment of the cultural values we welcome in the most effective modernist handiwork. These values include efficiency with grace, simplicity without austerity, close attention to detail and a thoughtfully measured relationship with the surrounding environment.

Mr. Taylor's house does not throw itself wide open toward the beautiful scenery, for example, as if eager to gobble it down. Standing inside the master bedroom – one of the two upper-storey rooms in the 2,300 square-foot, two-level dwelling – the visitor looks out through a deep set window that neatly contains and frames the backyard grove of tall, elderly oaks and the lake beyond.

The view through the trees from the double-height, open-plan living and dining area on the lower floor is considerably more generous – though here too, as in the bedroom above,

the perspective on nature has been carefully focused and tamed by the architecture of the house. This is neither a glass box, in other words, nor a rustic cabin in the woods. It's a serious but poetic little right-angled composition that addresses its dramatic natural setting atop the Scarborough Bluffs with big-city attitude, and an attractive touch of reserve.

That attitude – cool, civilized, poised – is expressed in every straight line, oblong volume and detail of Mr. Taylor's design. The street-side façade of the house, a quiet play of solid geometrical shapes, is clad in off-white stucco, for instance, accented with a stack of thin, pale limestone slabs marking the front entrance. All these moves add up to an elegantly up-tempo, urbane moment within an otherwise humdrum bungalow streetscape out of the 1950s.

The light limestone exterior element slides past the mahogany front door and comes inside, eventually ending on one edge of the sunny, white-painted living-dining zone. The modernist whiteness of the interior might seem relentless, were it not offset by the odd piece of handsome dark trim (blackened steel around the fireplace, black cement board panels), a large, vividly colourful photograph of a desert canyon over the fireplace, warm oak flooring and, of course, the richly hued view out the tall rear windows.

During my visit, Mr. Taylor remarked that the classic modernists often promised more sophistication than available building technologies and skills allowed them to deliver – hence the leaking and chilliness and other notorious blights that too often came along with stream-lined design. He's right. And in that sense, his house on the Scarborough Bluffs is a fulfillment of those early promises, and successful marriage of contemporary construction techniques with some of the finest design ideas of the last, or any, century.

62 • GLOBE REAL ESTATE

THE GLOBE AND MAIL • FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 30, 2011



FROM PAGE 1
Mays: Big-city attitude, and an attractive touch of reserve

R The thin walls and hand-laid interior surfaces of the multi-story, factory-like building meant that even the slightest sound in the corridors outside or above or below my room echoed throughout the entire structure. Had I had a visit to the premier shrine of the style (or one version of it) been someone's only close-up experience of modernism – and were many other and more wonderful expressions of the vernacular design strategy not visible in cities around the world – he or she could be forgiven for dismissing the modern movement (which thrived, in fits and starts, between 1900 and 1970) as an especially cold, hard, disagreeable episode in the history of the building art.

But the best twentieth-century structures available to us for viewing – the most refined designs by Gropius, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, Alvaro Siza, Louis Kahn and numerous other architects – prove just how subtle and humane modernism could be. It's little wonder that the modernists and their works have continued to inspire designers in our own day; a few generations past the heyday of the movement. Such were my thoughts a couple of weeks ago, when I visited a new and very beautiful modern house in Scarborough crafted by Toronto architect Michael Taylor.

Perched on the edge of steep bluffs above the Lake Ontario shoreline and commanding a splendid view over the water, this residential project is a small, fresh embodiment of the cultural values we welcome in the most effective modernist handwork. These values include efficiency with grace, simplicity without austerity, close attention to detail and a thoughtfully reassured relationship with the surrounding environment.

Mr. Taylor's house does not throw itself wide open toward the beautiful scenery, for example, as if eager to gobble it down. Standing inside the master bedroom one of the two upper-storey rooms in this 2,000-square-foot, two-level dwelling – the visitor looks out through a deep-set window that neatly contains and frames the backyard grove of tall, slender oaks and the lake beyond. The view through the trees from the double-height, open-plan living and dining area on the lower floor is considerably more generous – though here, too, as in the bedroom above, the perspective on nature has been carefully focused and tamed by the architecture of the house. This is neither a glass box, in other words, nor a rustic cabin in the woods. It's a serious but poetic, little right-angled composition that addresses its dramatic natural setting atop the Scarborough Bluffs with big-city attitude, and an attractive touch of reserve.

That attitude – cool, civilized, poised – is expressed in every straight line, oblong volume and detail of Mr. Taylor's design. The street-side façade of the house, a quiet play of solid geometrical shapes, is clad in off-white stucco, for instance, accented with a stack of thin, pale limestone slabs marking the front entrance. All these moves add up to an elegantly up-tempo, urbane moment within an otherwise humdrum bungalow streetscape out of the 1950s.

The light limestone exterior element slides past the mahogany front door and comes inside, eventually ending on one edge of the sunny, white-painted living-dining zone. The modernist whiteness of the interior might seem relentless, were it not offset by the odd piece of handsome dark trim (blackened steel around the fireplace, black cement board panels), a large, vividly colourful photograph of a desert canyon over the fireplace, warm oak flooring and, of course, the richly hued view out the tall rear windows.

During my visit, Mr. Taylor remarked that the classic modernists often promised more sophistication than available building technologies and skills allowed them to deliver – hence the leaking and chilliness and other notorious blights that too often came along with stream-lined design. He's right. And in that sense, his house on the Scarborough Bluffs is a fulfillment of those early promises, and a successful marriage of contemporary construction techniques with some of the finest design ideas of the last, or any, century.






The Scarborough house illustrates how technology has finally caught up with the design ideas popularized by Walter Gropius, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier. BY SAUL LOEB

