

ARCHITECTURE

A blend of muted stone and shimmering glass

Architect Paul Raff plays with the possibilities of light in a beautiful new Rosedale creation



**JOHN BENTLEY MAYS
THE PERFECT HOUSE**

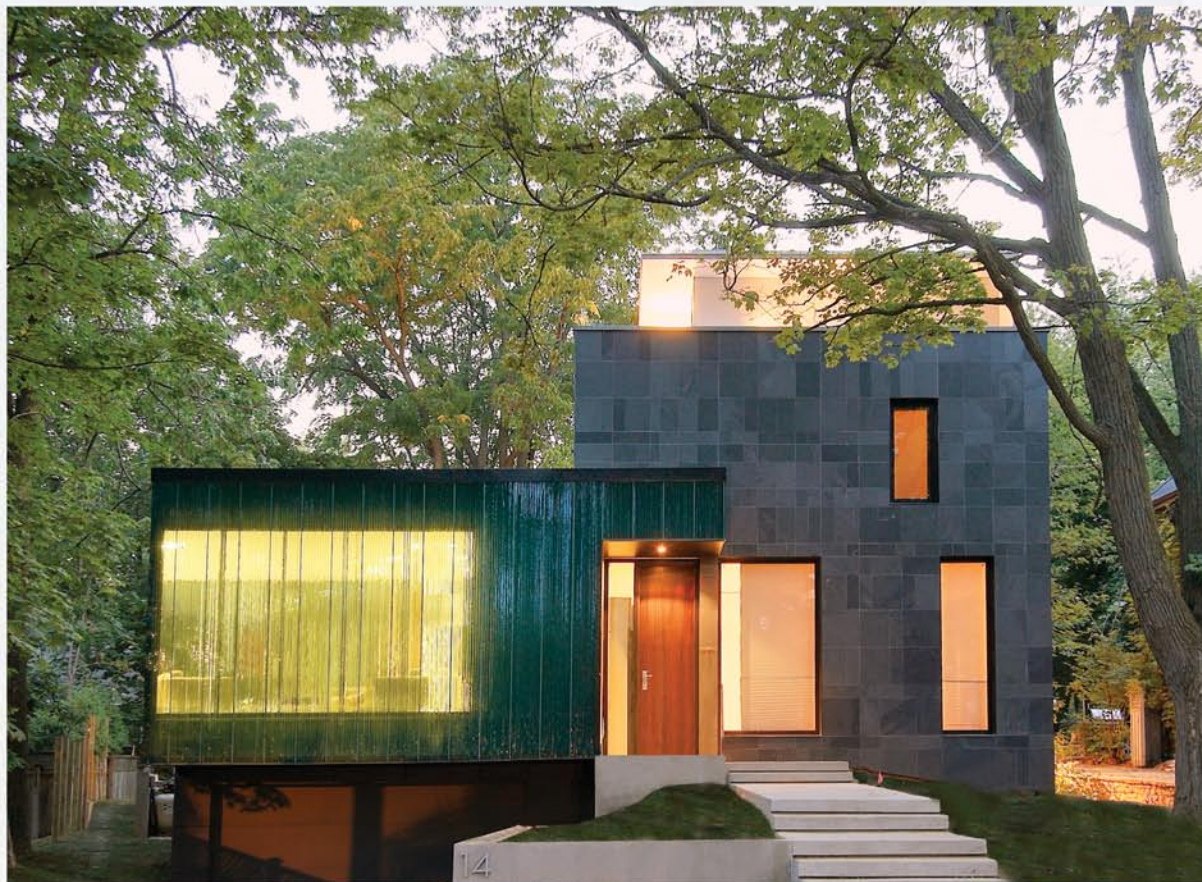
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Toronto architect Paul Raff is an artist of light. He loves it with the passion of those old-school modernists who built houses of glass, and he celebrates sunshine in every project he undertakes.

But unlike some pioneering minds of the modern movement in residential architecture, who liked to invite direct sunlight into every nook and cranny, Mr. Raff is interested in the subtleties of light – the infinite variety of ways it can be modified and modulated to create aesthetic effects, the ways it can be shaped. The result, as we have it in the luxury houses he has designed in Thailand and Toronto, is a distinctively poetic modernism, freed from starkness and too-great simplicity, yet loyal to the clarity of the best progressive residential architecture.

A beautiful new house by Mr. Raff in Toronto's posh Forest Hill neighbourhood is an excellent instance of what I'm talking about. In its basic layout, this building is not radically different from any other family home up and down its shady street. Entering the front door, the visitor finds the living room off to the left and the dining room to the right. The stairway to the upper levels lies ahead, with a spacious kitchen completing the ground-floor ensemble of rooms.

But that's where the resemblance of Mr. Raff's house to its neighbours ends. The front facade is an elegant, restrained composition of black slate planes and a broad screen of tightly bound glass planks cut from heavy sheets and in-



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stalled with their edges outward. Canted slightly away from a head-on address to the sidewalk, this arrangement of muted dark stone and shimmering green glass catches a curve in the street and moves with it, giving a refined lift to the otherwise dowdy streetscape.

The artistry of the glass screen is best appreciated in the living room, where it pro-

vides a softly sparkling, green abstract wall of illumination. The thickness of the screen ensures privacy from the street, while its transparency allows a full use of available light.

Here and elsewhere in the house, Mr. Raff departs from more traditional Forest Hill homes, with their small windows punched in thick brick and plaster bulwarks, and experiments with the possibilities of light. The south facade off the kitchen, for example, is composed of an expanse of clear glass curtain wall, a system more common in high-rise office buildings than in domestic projects. Mr. Raff uses it to striking effect by flipping outward the steel mullions (which normally face inward in a tall building), creating a dramatic interior cascade of smoothly joined glass

panels soaring to the upper storeys of the house.

Yet the inside of the house is not uncomfortably awash in brightness. The stairway runs straight up alongside the curtain wall, breaking the sunshine that streams in from the south. And beside the staircase, a perforated black slate partition further filters incoming sunlight, generating a play of light and shadow on the open-plan interior that changes through the course of the day.

This fine, sharply focused combination of a stairway rising between two walls has deep roots in Mr. Raff's work. In the artistic explorations of the city he has pursued alongside his architectural practice, he has long been interested in the crevices and cracks in the urban fabric – fire escapes

twisting up between buildings, narrow staircases opening the interiors of blocks of flats, and the like.

In a residential project in Thailand, he has separated two stacks of luxury apartments with a tight, straight exterior stairway that breaks up the buildings' mass and allows daylight to penetrate into the architectural volume. In the Forest Hill house, he reproduces this interesting move in an interior scheme, making a moment of quiet, visual drama that greets the visitor stepping through the front door.

The architect's theme of shade and light is carried through, to lovely effect, in the palette he has employed in the inside finishes. Accents in dark slate contrast with the tan bamboo walls to create an interior landscape that is soft

without being weak or reticent, and that exploits to full advantage the natural beauty of stone and wood. The use of bamboo, by the way, is a response to the client's concerns about sustainability. They have little need to worry on that account: Bamboo is found in great abundance throughout Asia, and it is one of the world's fastest-growing plants.

Coming from the American Southwest, the people who commissioned this house were understandably apprehensive about our long northern seasons of darkness. While no architect could give them the sun-washed expanses of the desert they left, Paul Raff has made for his clients a modern home that welcomes in all the light we have here, and that incorporates it with delightful variety.



Far left, the facade is composed of black slate planes and a broad screen of tightly bound glass planks. Above, a green abstract wall of illumination in the living room. Left, the stairway runs straight up alongside a curtain wall.