

Architectural PROFILES

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Photo: Ben Rahme/A-Frame Inc.

Q&A with Paul Raff Studio

Commissioned as a family home Cascade House, in Toronto's Forest Hill, was designed in response to the clients' love of modern art and their desire for natural light. Simple yet materially rich, Cascade House combines two primary elements – glass and slate – to meet these goals.

The most dramatic design strategy is a 13-foot tall screen of 475 vertically stacked sheets of heavy, jagged-cut emerald green glass canted slightly away from the sidewalk. The screen's dual purpose maximizes sunlight while providing privacy. It imbues the room with the quality of an art installation.

Complementing the translucent wall is a freestanding wall of dark slate that frames the staircase and rises from the lower level of the house to the top floor. The slate wall has an environmental as well as an aesthetic function; as a thermal wall, it absorbs the sun's energy during the day, and slowly disperses heat overnight.

We asked architect Paul Raff to expound on some of his ideas for sustainability in architecture and what role architects can play.

Q From where do you draw your art and architecture inspirations? How would you describe your architectural vision?

A I have a strong, longtime interest in art, and there is no doubt that this informs my work as an architect. But also much of my inspiration is drawn from travel and observation of environments—all sorts of physical environments large and small, urban and rural. I'm always visually soaking in the world around me and considering the effects of forms and spaces. I see the world as a vast and varied environmental artwork. The physical environment is infinitely rich with variations that potentially effect mood, consciousness, and sense of self. Architecture, as an art, also has this potential power to effect, so the experience of the world around me is a catalogue of potential.

Q Tell me about sustainable design for Cascade House specifically orienting the house on a strict north-south-east-west axis (to facilitate precisely designed relationships with sun angles.)

A The house employs a number of sustainable design strategies in its material selection, mechanical systems, solar panels, et cetera, but the “passive solar” strategy had a great impact on the shape of the house. By orienting the house precisely with the compass, a strategy I’ve used on other projects: the design articulates a clear relationship with the sun, especially for its inhabitants, over the course of days and over the course of seasons. There is almost no glazing on the north face, and the largest expanse of glazing is on the south face. This is a response to our northern latitude where the winter sun comes from the south, so south glazing captures its heat, and the thermal mass of the stone wall behind the glazing absorbs that heat and emanates it long after sunset. Combined with a high-performance building envelope, this strategy is extremely effective.

Q You have created habitats across the world as far away as Thailand. How important is sustainability in other parts of the world?

A Environmental sustainability, as well as social and economic sustainability, is obviously a growing matter of concern in more developed countries, but is being addressed differently and to varying degrees. In rapidly developing places like Russia and South-East Asia where the environmental impact of growth is huge, sustainability is shockingly “off the radar.” I have

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found, though, that using clear and simple logic works in getting people to open their minds to the issue. On my projects we have had pretty good success synthesizing environmental concerns with development realities, and in getting stakeholders to support ecologically sensitive strategies when it was not even remotely on the agenda at the outset of a project.

Q You are a partner in rvtr a multidisciplinary academic research-based practice along with Kathy Velikov, Geoffrey Thün and Colin Ripley, which is engaged in sustainable innovation in architectural and urban design. What is the architect’s responsibility for sustainability? Should architects do more to incorporate environmentally responsible strategies in their designs?

A The profession of architecture is partly characterized by the word “responsibility” (responsible for how buildings work, responsible for significant financial expenditures, responsible for public safety, etc.) The responsibility framework has arguably shifted radically with the philosophy of sustainability emerging powerfully in recent decades. Our world picture has changed focus. Architects are uniquely positioned to effect change, and are, by the nature of our training and way of thinking, well suited to be agents of change. As a broad and serious societal concern, we are obliged to engage environmental sustainability in our practice. I think most architects in this part of the world are trying to do more, and we will continue to try to do more, and the collective effort will continue to grow rapidly. That being said, this is not simple, there are many aspects to architectural practice, and many questions raised when one considers from the outset a need or desire to build a building. This is partly why I practice both as Paul Raff Studio providing architectural services for clients, and am a partner in an academic research-based collaborative practice: it helps me leverage the power of solid research based architectural thinking in all sorts of current projects.

Q This winter in Toronto was particularly cold. How successful was the solar heat capture of the slate wall in Cascade House?

A This 4600 square foot house cost about \$175 to heat in the coldest month of the year. It works.





Q You are an architect who is also involved in interior design through your studio. What are the benefits/challenges of combining these functions?

A Let me say first that I have had nothing but positive experiences working with interior designers – I have been hearing stories of conflicts between architects and interior designers for years, and I think it is unfortunate and avoidable. Some of my projects are interiors only, and some include architecture and interiors, and many of my projects – especially though not always larger ones – separate the functions such that I am just the architect coordinating with interior designers. I think the fact that I design some interiors makes me easier to work with for other interior designers because I understand and respect what they do. My Studio is a multi-disciplinary collaborative environment, so maybe I benefit from a culture of creative collaboration that makes this seem more natural.

I also frequently work on projects run by larger architecture and landscape architecture firms to design integrated artworks or special features, and I would say the same thing. It can be very fruitful for everyone – especially the client/user who benefits from the result. With good process and mutual respect, inter-disciplinary collaboration is extremely fruitful.

Q Do you draw inspiration from any 'heroes' in architecture?

A Yes, but there are way too many to name – maybe that means they are not “heroes,” but I certainly deeply admire the work and thinking of many architects from various times and places in many different ways.

Q Do you get emotionally invested in your buildings?

A Yes. Even the modest ones are “a work” which means that I am emotionally and intellectually invested in synthesizing what feels like the ideal design – as good and right as it could be for its particular situation.

Q How do you judge whether or not a building is successful?

A I ask myself a few questions: Does it resonate? Does it feel as right as it could be for its particular situation and site? Is it performing well for clients, owners, users? A huge part of the success of a building has to do with the process of working with the people involved. I like to work very closely with clients and key consultants and trades early on. The first step is to understanding and interpreting the clients' pragmatic requirements and also helping them realize the poetry within the project. A very important aspect of a successful project is to ensure that the end-users will be happy. We work closely in developing the design, and following through to completion. This helps ensure that people feel their projects are a collaboration

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of all efforts and not just a singular perspective. It also makes the process more fun for everyone.

Q Do you have a favourite building, historical or modern?

A No, but I often get asked that question, so instead of saying just “no” I offer my “top ten architectural experiences” list. The list is a little different every time I make it:

1. Living in a traditional Japanese house
2. Riding on the roof of an elevator
3. The light/colour/shadow effects on the west window of my studio
4. Prairie grain elevators
5. Walking around Templehof Airport in Berlin
6. The most modest Romanesque churches in France
7. Jerusalem
8. Asking a construction worker if he liked the colour of plastic he was installing on the Umbra store in Toronto
9. Visiting the Alhambra when I was a teenager
10. Walking across the Brooklyn Bridge