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## CONDOS

Who should  
tell the kids they  
have to stay in  
the playground?  
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## FOR SALE

Gaga over the  
gardens and  
great room in  
\$3.6M King  
mansion  
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**H**  
HARBOURPLAZA  
RESIDENCES

The Penthouse Collection Coming Soon

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Life Storeys



JOHN SINAI

## IT'S ELEMENTAL

Virtually floating in a reflecting  
pool, this arresting Vancouver  
house lets the outside in,  
remaking Asian traditions  
beloved by its owners

MARTHA UNIACKE BREEN

**T**his serene Vancouver house by architect Arno Matis, with its quietly tinkling reflecting pool, sparkling white walls and abstract-looking slatted screen across its upper levels, shows a distinctive Asian accent. But it's also very much an urban West Coast home, and it's a study of the links between the two design philosophies.

"The clients are a professional couple who work very long hours, so they wanted their home to be a sanctuary, to be transported to another world," Matis explains.

They had travelled extensively, particularly to Bali, Thailand and Southeast Asia, and had developed a real love for those cultures. They wanted their new house to feature water as a key element, along with an abundance of light and air, and a minimalist palette of simple, beautiful materials.

And they wanted an almost

seamless connection between inside and out.

"In Southeast Asia, of course, the climate is very conducive to bringing the outdoors in; and here in Vancouver, it's almost like that as well."

"So much of the design features huge sliding glass doors, as much as 50 per cent of them fully operable, which literally bring the outdoors in when they are open."

But of course, the home is located in the heart of a modern North American city, not an ancient Southeast Asia rainforest, so creating the private world the clients envisioned meant much more than simply building a modernist home for them, however beautiful.

It involved creating a complete spiritual and physical change in environment, from the moment you step through the wooden gate and enter the walled garden that surrounds the house.

See MATIS on Page PH4



**HARBOURPLAZA**  
RESIDENCES

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“THE STAGGERED PATTERN OF THE SLATS CREATES A SENSE OF MOVEMENT. IT’S MORE NATURAL, LESS PREDICTABLY GEOMETRIC; THEY LOOK RANDOM, BUT VIEWED TOGETHER IT HAS A NATURAL PATTERN, ALMOST LIKE BRANCHES. — ARCHITECT ARNO MATIS



MICHAEL ELKAN PHOTOGRAPHY

Natural variations in the composition of a new type of concrete, made using white limestone sand, give it a subtle texture that almost resembles Carrara marble.

## Southeast Asia meets West Coast in a vision of light

MATIS

Continued from PH1

The first striking features of the exterior, as one travels down a meandering path of stone slabs towards the front door, are the pure-white walls and supports for the swaths of glass. It turns out they are made of a unique concrete of the firm’s own design, using special white limestone sand sourced in Washington state. Natural variations in the composition of the concrete give it a subtle texture that almost resembles Carrara marble.

“For our company, residences are an opportunity to experiment with new materials and techniques on a small scale,” Matis says. “We often use houses for this purpose and then transfer ideas to our larger commercial projects. But even we were surprised at how well it turned out; by the time we got the large walls poured, it was simply breathtaking.”

At least as arresting is the reflecting pool that wraps around the front to the centre of the side elevation, where it ends in a quietly splashing waterfall.

Originally, the architects considered flooding the property and “floating” the house completely within it, like a houseboat; but the city of Vancouver, lacking a certain imagination, required the same rules that apply to standard swimming pools, such as fencing. So they opted instead to create a narrow moat of sorts, which flows over an infinity edge into a channel a few feet below.

The pool casts shimmering light into the house, and when the windows are open,

the contemplative sound of trickling water effectively cancels out the urban noise of traffic and metropolitan life beyond the garden walls.

Both inside and along the path from the gate to the front door, stone steps take you up and then down, defining discrete areas and purposely slowing the journey. Offset concrete slabs take you into the garden, then up past the reflecting pool to the front door; inside, you can turn and descend a few steps to the living room, or around to the dining area and kitchen. In this way, “rooms” are clearly delineated, yet the whole main floor is essentially one large space circulating around a central core. The

THE INTERIOR  
FEELS  
BOTH MASSIVE  
AND LIGHT  
AT THE SAME  
TIME

play between unity — white marble floors, white walls, rich mahogany woodwork throughout — and definition, through such elements as the central core and a freestanding, marble-clad fireplace in the sunken living room, makes it feel both massive and light at the same time.

The simplicity of the design masks what, in some cases, are very complicated feats of engineering. A perfect example is the see-through staircase in the front hall. Separated from the rest of the hall by a series

of vertical mahogany slats, it consists of a single white beam, set slightly off centre, upon which the treads are fixed, allowing you to see from the front door right through to the garden at the back. On the outside wall beside it rises a soaring mahogany-framed window, some 30 feet in height, that is an engineering marvel in itself. “It was actually built in the University of B.C.’s lab,” where Matis is a member of the Advisory Design Council, “and was lowered into place by crane. It’s a pretty amazing piece of sculpture just on its own.”

The manipulation of light and views is at least as crucial in creating the feeling of sanctuary. Many of the windows are slightly canted or set at different angles, creating delicate patterns of light and shadow. Window-walls frame views of greenery and garden, or the simple lines of walkways and terraces; railings are structural glass, so as to maximize garden vistas. The staircase window overlooks a grove of black bamboo, with their graphic stems and dappled, spiky leaves set against stark white walls.

The upper level features another strong visual element with a practical purpose: a screen of narrow horizontal mahogany slats, adding privacy for the glass walls of the master suite within (for we are, it must be repeated, in a high-density urban neighbourhood, not an isolated Asian grotto). Under the extended eaves of the roof, it gives the home’s profile an almost pagoda-like silhouette. “The staggered pattern of the slats creates a sense of movement,” says Matis. “It’s more natural, less predict-



MICHAEL ELKAN PHOTOGRAPHY

A freestanding marble-clad fireplace is a feature of the sunken living room.

ably geometric; they look random, but viewed together it has a natural pattern, almost like branches.”

What makes the home’s design so interesting is the way it addresses what might be seen as contrasting ideas: unabashedly modern materials and sophisticated engineering, in the service of a very simple, open design; natural elements such as wood, sunlight and greenery with smoothly engineered materials and flat (or slightly angled) planes; openness and enclosure; western urban living, with the eastern concept of sanctuary and solitude.

“I grew up being exposed to West Coast architects like Arthur Erickson, who wondered what it was like to live on the West Coast in this time, in this climate, and how these elements enhance how you live — especially the natural environment, which is a very large part of how we live here, with the mountains, the sea, the woods,” Matis observes.

“And in some ways, these are similar elements in the Asian climate as well. Here, because the clients had an appreciation for Asian design, the fusion of Asian and West Coast contexts made this project especially interesting to work on.”

National Post



JOHN SINAI

The open staircase and the front hall get daylight from the 30-foot-high mahogany-framed window, an “engineering marvel” that had to be lifted in by crane.