



ARCHITECTURE:
ANTOINE PREDOCK
SENSUOUS MODERNISM IN DALLAS

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"In contrast with other houses of mine on sites with seemingly infinite vistas, this house explores the close-range tension between object and landscape," says Antoine Predock, who designed a residence of concrete, glass and steel for a couple in Dallas. A black steel bridge cuts past the cylindrical dining tower to define the glazed entrance space; the front entrance is on the opposite side of the tower. The stainless-steel exterior wall "absorbs the house in reflection."



ABOVE: "The fissure blasts through the rather mute limestone ledges to the creek and trees on the other side," says Predock of the front entrance, where opaque glass doors open to the glazed interior. "The house is not only about what happens in plan or detail; it's more about exploration and surprise."

OPPOSITE: Facing a grassy terrace, the convex stainless-steel wall is "an installation piece, lodged in the house," notes Predock. "It was a leap of faith for me," says the owner. "I worried that it would blind people or that birds would fly into it. That hasn't happened, and it's just the most beautiful, magical thing."



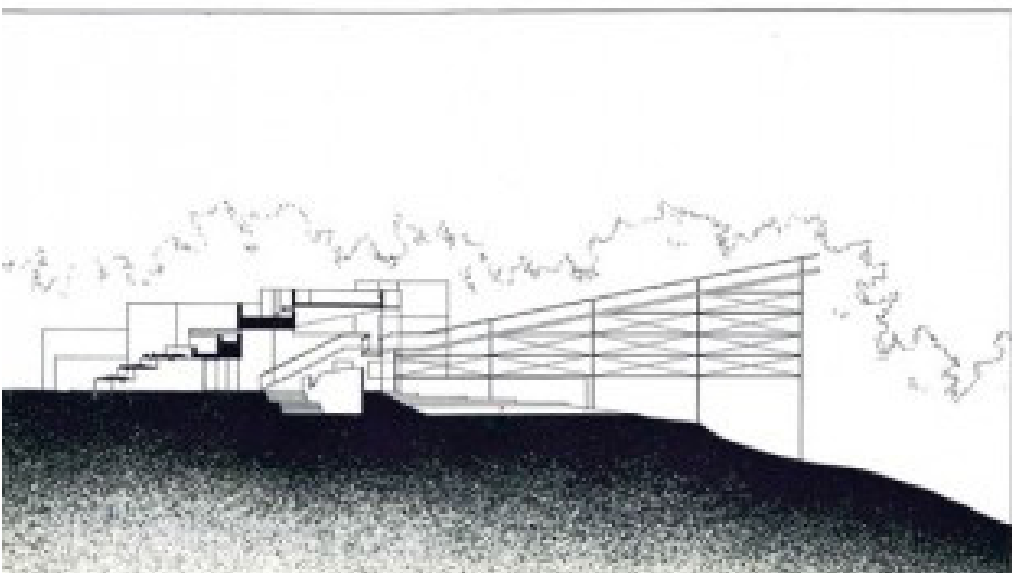
Modernist houses built during the last decade or two are seldom delightful. The sleek, conservative versions, purged of quirks and geegaws, are sometimes quite beautiful, and about as homey as a new CAT scanner. Or, if the house is the work of a deconstructivist, it may be overenergized, its collage of ostentatiously oddball materials and faux-earthquake angles stirring the kind of anxiety that passes for seriousness. But there is another way. The work of sui generis masters from Alvar Aalto to Frank Gehry proves that modernism doesn't have to be either predictable and safe or manic and zany. Now that pantheon of hopeful, idiosyncratic, daring-but-humane modernists has been joined by Antoine Predock,

"The house unfolds laterally," Predock says, "and there are many routes to take on the experiential ride." LEFT: A passageway on the roof terrace leads to a small outdoor theater.





"We saw Antoine's vision and worked to enhance it," says designer Mil Bodron, who, with Emily Summers, was responsible for the furnishings. "There had to be a definite order to the furniture because of the very few ninety-degree corners." ABOVE: Living room seating includes two 1930s Charles James sofas, a pair of late-1930s Michel Roux-Spitz wood-and-silk armchairs and a Mies daybed. To the rear are Abelier International's linen-covered "Tilbury" sofa and the Pace Collection's "Camilla" armchair. BELOW: A section shows the limestone ledges at left and the observation platform at right.



whose new house for a couple in the Dallas suburb of Highland Park, for all its gravitas as an architectural object, is an exuberant, pleasurable place. It manages to be both impeccably handsome and jazzed to the max. The house was designed by Predock, along with two assistants, David Nelson and John Brittingham, but the woman who hired him, a social and cultural leader in Dallas, plainly deserves a share of the credit. She was, by all accounts, not just a good

client but a great one, close to textbook-perfect. People who hire architects to design houses tend to stumble across them, relying on not much more than an acquaintance's cocktail party say-so or some half-remembered photograph. Then, disappointed that the house won't be finished by the end of the month, they take turns bullying and being bullied by the architect. Not our exemplary Dallas dream woman.

Back in 1987 she organized her own quasi competition, approaching the task more like a company looking to build a headquarters, or an institution adding a major wing, than the art-collector wife of a sportsman who wanted a new house. She hired University of Texas at Austin architecture dean Lawrence W. Speck to assist with her search for a world-class architect. Speck, she says, persuaded her to limit the candidates to English-speaking architects for communication purposes and not to consider the country's several most celebrated architects—the Gehrys, the Richard Meiers—who are so busy building museums that they might lack the time to devote their full attention to her not-quite-so-high-profile project. Her short list was impressive nonetheless, and included California's Thom Mayne and Michael Rotondi, New York's Steven Holl, and Gary Cunningham from Dallas as well as the Albuquerque, New Mexico-based Predock. She visited each architect's office and toured buildings each has designed. "It's the most fun thing I ever did," she says. "I could have done it forever."

After she hired Predock, she was at first rather too respectful of him, too trusting of the expert always to know best. She wanted to show him her folder of magazine pictures she had clipped over the years, rooms and details of houses she liked. He demurred. She abdicated. And while he accommodated her loose program—three bedrooms, lots of space for parties, places to put her collection of sculpture, views into the trees at every level for her husband the bird-watcher—Predock designed the house



"It's where the strata of the house overlap," observes Predock of the entrance space. "It's the crossroads." Concrete steps lead to the living room and library; a golden-maple stair ascends to the master bedroom. Tony Cragg's 1982 painted-wood construction *Tree* is on the wall at right. "The light creates a ricocheting laser effect," the architect points out. "But the house has its shadowy realms too."



"On one level, the house has to do with contemplative personal connections to the landscape—on another, it's a social venue," says Predock. "Mythic agendas and great for parties." ABOVE: In the dining tower, reproduction Jean-Michel Frank chairs surround the tables, distinguished by individual collages hand-painted on the backs.

OPPOSITE: "I like the idea that architecture can aspire to the sky," Predock says. The black steel bridge extends up from a concrete prow and angles outward from the dining tower toward Turtle Creek, creating an observation platform. "Its trajectory is finite, though it could be any length since the journey it leads one on is imagined."



more according to the dictates of his muse than those of his client, getting her pro forma approvals along the way.

When the working drawings were finished and bulldozers virtually on the horizon, however, she focused, and then panicked. "I got the floor plan out and realized we couldn't do furniture arrangements or hang a large painting. I hadn't really put myself in the design. Antoine couldn't see the design through my eyes. The architect needs a client to push and pull. I was not being a good client. I became one. We made some changes." She turned from deferential patron to engaged inhabitant-to-be. Even so, she says, "I never unilaterally said no" to any of Predock's ideas, but always kept talking, suggesting, working out mutually acceptable solutions. "It's not fun" when a client shifts gears in midstream, Predock admits, but in

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"The design orchestrates the various vantage points of the site: sky, creek, tree canopy," explains Predock. LEFT: The bridge approaches the dining tower from the living room.



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this instance, he says, it was back to the drawing board for "refinements, not a basic change in the concept of the house." In the end, he worked on the design for more than two years; construction took another two and a half years.

"We didn't want it to look like a big fancy house," she says. As big and fancy are understood in suburbs like Highland Park, it surely isn't. The house, at the end of a cul-de-sac, could not be more different from the conventional haute suburban houses that are its neighbors. The nearby mansions "are stylistically aberrant and have nothing to do with that place. They're only about style. I tried to imagine the primordial site, the site that was there, the timeless site," explains Predock, whose earnest, mystical talk would be laughable if it weren't so consistently attached to such splendid architecture.

Between the street and the house proper is a terraced slope of rough-quarried Texas limestone, five massive ledges densely planted with native shrubs and grasses. The rusticated limestone (six-foot-long half-ton chunks slid into place on ice rollers) gives a benign Pleistocene face to the twenty-first-century concrete structure behind, sweetening and humanizing the all-but-windowless façade of the house that Predock admits has "a certain defensive posture." Passersby, says the owner with a smile, "think it's a public library. Or a nuclear bunker." Who knew a bunker could be so attractive?

The lack of front windows is not antisocial so much as teasingly inscrutable and, as it happens, environmentally prudent: The house faces west, which in this part of the country is the hot side, and which makes the dark, cool front passage appropriate as well as dramatic. Walking between and beneath masonry masses, you enter the house through an all-glass door, the blue-green translucence opening onto a white, light, airy expanse within. "The fissure through

that dam," says the habitually metaphorical Predock of his front entrance, "delivers a promise that is a bit unexpected." But this is no meretricious one-trick architecture, a house that expensively shoots its architectural wad at the curbside and doorsill. The complexities—of sculpted space, of sight lines, of materials—are only beginning. "I like the surprise, the way the house slowly reveals itself," says the client.

The entrance hall, with its big, acute angles and vaulting space (the ceiling rises to twenty feet), is reminiscent of I. M. Pei's East Wing of the National Gallery. Right away, the craftsmanlike scrupulousness is evident—in the floor, for instance, where the lines between the gray limestone blocks parallel not the walls but the Dallas street outside. From the hall, five paths of very different character are fetchingly visible: a hard left toward the kitchen; straight ahead up steel stairs to the dining tower; to the right up broad concrete stairs to the living room; up a set of steep, narrow golden-maple stairs to the master bedroom; or a hard right down through a long, semisubterranean art gallery and onto the pair of bedrooms for guests.

Predock chose to avoid the seamless, the tidy, the conventionally likable.

It is a comfortably large house, about 10,000 square feet, and foot for foot had the most generous budget of any Predock building. As a result, every detail is perfect, all the more crucial in a house where the materials—concrete, steel, limestone and granite—are so aggressively raw and real. The shell of the house is poured concrete suggestive of Louis Kahn's nearby Kimbell Art Museum (built, in fact, by the same contractor). On the

interior walls, the tie holes that pock each concrete plane are so precisely arranged they read as minimalist decoration more than vestigial industrial blemishes.

The living room is neither rectilinear—"There are a couple of square angles," says the owner, "but not too many"—nor extravagantly wacky in its geometries. Instead it is subtle, complicated, singular. In its sense of enclosure it is nicely balanced between hermetic four-wall orthodoxy and loosey-goosey unboundedness. The back side is a broad, floor-to-ceiling glass bay giving out on the thickly wooded yard; the front, a gently curved wall of Sheetrock. Each end dissolves into a set of intriguing passageways—north toward the cooking-and-eating wing of the house; to the south, still more glass framing still more glimpses of trees and grass, and a small library and a spiral stair up to the master suite.

The suite occupies the entire upper floor of the house. The sleeping chamber is large and winningly plain, its glass wall providing the bird-watcher in the family an unimpeded panorama of the tree canopy, what Predock calls "an immersion in an experience. You're swimming in nature." The master bath, on the other hand, is large and more typically Dallas-swank, clad in pink quartzite ("It's unfashionable," says the lady of the house, "but I love pink"), and with a glass-enclosed shower from which the bather can see the birds and vice versa. "I didn't want generic baths," the client says, and she didn't get them. Indeed, each bath is, in this studiously gray-and-white house, a niche of (relative) pizzazz. The powder room on the main floor features thick glass plates bolted over the concrete walls. Downstairs, one guest bath is clad in impeccably mitred sheets of black granite, the other covered in plaster impregnated with ground blue-marble chips and featuring a basin seemingly scooped out of a blue Bahia-granite cube.

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While the house is by no means off-puttingly perverse, again and again Predock chose to avoid the seamless, the tidy, the conventionally likable. In section the house is deliberately ambiguous: The living room, for instance, is not on the first floor, but it's not exactly on the second floor either—and the library at the far end is two steps down, yet still higher than the official first floor. Everywhere are slight disjunctures and elegantly fractured planes (a three-inch channel between the floor of the long "art moat" and the front wall, a fissure between the bedroom wall and ceiling) that are just odd enough to be enlivening. The strange trompe-l'oeil reflections of house and nature in the curved, two-story-tall sheet of stainless steel on the rear exterior seem almost gilt on the lily, but in Predock's view it's "like a vacuum that the house is sucked into. It's somewhat disorienting in a way I think is good." Inside, the geometry can be complex—even some drawers are parallelograms instead of rectangles. Blessedly, however, Predock in the end is pursuing no single-mindedism, no abstract set of formal rules. "My work," he says, "is experiential."

And although it is a tough place, it is not harsh. For all the emphasis on heavy, authentic materials, the solidity is sometimes wittily *faux*—as with the veneer of bird's-eye maple on the ceiling of the round study that corresponds exactly to the bird's-eye maple on the floor of the round dining room above. Many of the client's midcourse design changes had the effect of softening the uncompromisingly hard, hard surfaces Predock had specified: The long floor of the art moat was switched from stone to wood, the floor of the study from black slate to black wool felt, a portion of the surface of the decklike prow from concrete to grass.

The high road north from the living room is the way to the most spectacular parts of the house. A zigzag stairway leads to a short black steel bridge spanning the central entrance hall.

Once again, like a plot-your-own-adventure branching novel, there is a set of intriguing choices. Straight ahead is the twenty-two-foot-wide circular dining room—cum—observation tower, which itself opens onto a rooftop set of several concrete terraces, including a compact amphitheater. Turn away from the dining room instead, and you are immediately outside, heading up a rather steeply inclined steel walkway toward Turtle Creek, the treetops and the sky. What Predock calls the Skyramp extends out sixty feet and rises thirty-five feet off the ground. Standing at the end, you experience the house in apotheosis. Looking back, you get a splendid postcard view, a suddenly lucid one-shot revelation of its complex interconnections; look out and you are inserted radically and a little vertiginously into nature.

Despite their rarefied contemporary art collection (pieces by Nam June Paik and Robert Wilson, even stacking tables made by Donald Judd) and the furniture skewed toward rare early-modern pieces (Charles James sofas acquired from Christoff De Menil, Frank Gehryesque Thaydon Jordan chairs from the 1940s), the inhabitants of this extraordinary house are regular, unpretentious people. When it was finished last summer, they threw a party for the construction workers and their spouses. Their Chevy Suburban sits in the garage. And Predock's client is unperturbed at the prospect of incessant unannounced visits from squads of architects and students, their hearts set on inspecting this new masterwork. "I couldn't build this," she says, "and not share it." Along with the pleasures of architectural patronage, in other words, she's glad to accept the rigors. "People said it would be a difficult house to live in. And it is. People said, 'It will be a housekeeping nightmare.' And it is. So it'll be dusty. It's difficult, but it's fun. Give me fun anytime, give me magic. I need that in my life more than things like a place to put the vacuum cleaners." □