





Architect Chooses Nature's Elements to Embrace Light and Space

*Paul Skinner of London, Ontario
uses the purity of glass and freedom from interior walls
to reawaken the senses*

TEXT MARILYN MIRABELLI

Silhouetted against an azure sky and above the chartreuse flow of a river, a flock of birds dips and soars high over a circle of verdant trees. Months later, these same trees assume regal bearing, displaying shades of russet and gold; still later, winter sunlight filters through stark branches. Finally, mild spring-time rains augur returning birds, as well as burgeoning plants. The year has completed its cycle.

Such are the unobstructed seasonal views from every possible vantage point in the Skinner residence in London, Ont.

Paul Skinner is a London-based ar-

chitect. He has been responsible for the Courthouse and Registry Office as well as several office buildings in that city. He designed the Recreation and Athletic Building at the University of Western Ontario. Currently, he is working on Phase 1 of the Victoria Hospital Redevelopment.

He lives with his wife and three children in this 2 133 square metre house he designed to accommodate the needs of his growing family.

Nestled in a densely treed double lot, the house fronts on the Thames River and makes extensive use of Ontario and Ohio stone, British Columbia fir and cedar, and vast expanses of

LEFT: Tall birches partially frame the Skinner home as it glows from within at twilight. This beckoning glow exposes an interior free from conventional walls, ceilings and doors. The photograph explains the home's three levels: the lower level with its swimming pool and sliding doors to the recreation room and terrace, the main level with the family room and dining/living area, and the upper master bedroom level.

PHOTOGRAPHY MARJORIE AND IAN SAMSON





glass. Even though the house is imposing, it does not jar with its surroundings. And this is important to the Skinner family; to them, nature is a sacred trust to be preserved and appreciated at close range.

To achieve this, each room looks out to its own specially created view. Fieldstone and double-glazed hermetically sealed one-way reflective glass were used extensively for both exterior and interior construction.

And finally, the orientation of the house takes best advantage of the sun to capitalize on passive solar energy. Two heat pumps climatize the house year-round; three gas furnaces supplement the solar heating two or three times in mid-winter. The interior, free from conventional walls, ceilings and doors, boasts an exciting spatial flow which—along with the expansive use of glass—is the home's most dramatic visual feature.

Indoor/outdoor relationship of space is the most important element in Skinner's architectural planning. He needs to create *within* as much of the outside world as possible.

The house has no overhangs. Its windows slope up to the sky—eliminating the oppressive feelings of shadows; light is always coming in... the moods of the sky—night and day, rain or shine—are always apparent.

This urge to reach for the sky and commune with the elements has excluded the use of curtains. Mature trees, whatever the season, provide exterior draperies—*au naturel*.

In *The Natural House*, architect Frank Lloyd Wright judged glass to be a superior material because of its great ability to reawaken people's

dormant sensibilities. Glass establishes an architectural relationship between interior and exterior, between man and nature. The increased physical strength and the size of glass—and other refinements such as double and triple glazing—have led to the complete integration of glass as a major element in construction.

Skinner's extensive use of glass in his house is a fundamental tool for encouraging spatial impact. Ever since his fifth year in architecture school when he wrote a treatise on glass, Skinner has had a fascination for it. In the Continental Bank and the Credit Foncier building he used glass extensively, inside and out.

In his house, frameless glazing and the development of suspended glass techniques allow him to construct great glass façades uncluttered by structural constraints. Another plus for glass walls—they're impervious to the elements.

Imaginative zoning of interior space—public and private—is also important to Skinner. He looks on the creative placements as an antidote to boredom.

The absence of conventional walls with doors only in some of the more private spaces—the bedrooms, for instance—doesn't inhibit the family at all. Storage centres strategically placed provide desired privacy.

The house is divided into three levels with each level providing a special function. In essence the stairways to the levels replace the conventional wall-and-door concept.

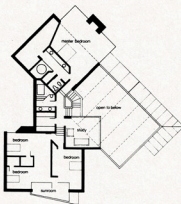
The lower level, with the indoor pool, outdoor terrace, recreation room with workout equipment, organ, electric guitar and drums, provides informal entertaining at its healthiest—and noisiest.

The main level contains the kitchen and breakfast deck, family room, also with a deck, dining and living areas and entrance foyer.

The upper level features the master bedroom and bath and the children's rooms and bath. Overlooking the dining-living area is the partially enclosed study. The front foyer, with



main level



second level



lower level

PREVIOUS PAGE: The 6 x 12 metre living/dining space is floored in green Ohio fieldstone and dusty-rose/mauve stone from Warton, Ont. The 7.3 metre fireplace includes Muskoka mica rock for sparkle. Hermetically sealed, one-way reflective exterior glass wall stretches width and height of this room. A low coffee table with burl walnut inlays on a splendid Tabriz Persian rug is centered between two highly textured tuxedo-style love seats.



ABOVE: Indoor pool, viewed from the lower level, has terrace to the right.

RIGHT: Oblique windows in living/dining area carry up from lower level.







conventional-height ceiling, is compact and a striking contrast to the soaring height and expansive vista of the dining-living area, where the cathedral ceiling of natural British Columbia fir reaches 7.3 metres. An exterior glass wall spans the width of the dining area and the height of the house.

The floor throughout this level—which includes the foyer and the kitchen—is untreated, irregular-cut Ontario and Ohio flagstone and fieldstone, providing textural and color interest. A fireplace, rising the full height of the living area, is constructed from the same stones as the floor, interspersed with Muskoka mica rock for sparkle.

Across from the living room, at the other end of the lower main area, is the formal dining room with its massive dining suite.

Beyond the dining area are the ultramodern open-concept kitchen and family room. The walls of the kitchen are natural, unfinished red cedar, as are most interior walls in the house, both because of cedar's beauty and its acoustical absorption.

The kitchen, says Pat, is the usual room used for family meals. The family room, with its own deck, is three



FAR LEFT: Exterior glass wall provides a dramatic setting for the formal dining room. The table, with brass corners and Oriental influences, stands on another Tabriz rug. High-backed chairs, upholstered in a diamond pattern, bring out the colors of the rug. The chandelier is a large-scale contemporary construction of eight acrylic boxes held together with brass. A smaller version is seen in the view of the hall below.

TOP LEFT: In the kitchen, the eating area is marked by a smoked glass table with teak pedestal, surrounded by leather chairs with chrome frames set on an Indian rug. All-white laminate cabinets and counters streamline the rooms for total efficiency.

LEFT: The three levels of the house are joined by an angular staircase made of the same stones as the floor on the main and lower levels. Open treads are laid with Berber carpet.



ABOVE: The master bedroom occupies one side of the house on the upper level. The room has no draperies thus allowing nature to create its own curtain of magic from the outside. The room is sparsely furnished, reflecting the Skinners' credo of a clean, cool, uncluttered environment with the emphasis on nature.

A log-burning fireplace exhausts through three steel chimney stacks, once bright red, now rusting to blend with nature.

steps down from the kitchen and is partitioned by a counter. This is the real centre of gravity of the house.

Another gathering place for the family is the basement recreation room. It is connected by sliding doors to the heated swimming pool. A second set of sliding doors leads from the pool area to an outdoor terrace designed to benefit most from the spring sun. The pool is heated and exhausted separately from the rest of the house.

Not only do the rooms of the Skinner house flow together, but this effect is enhanced by a series of treads lined in pearly Berber carpeting, spiraling from the lower level right through the main level—through to the upper level bedrooms.

On this upper level, covered throughout by the Berber carpet, the glass-enclosed master bedroom/bathroom occupies one whole side of the house. It has only one plaster wall rising three-quarters of the way to the ceiling and forming a divider. On the bedroom side, this wall is a headboard; on the bathroom side, a mirror, reflecting the whirlpool bath.

The children's rooms are separated from the very private master bedroom by a laundry room and bath.

The biggest contributor to the spatial drama throughout the Skinner residence is glass—light and crystal clear. Its purity chronicles not only the changing hours of day and night, but also the cycle of the seasons. □

TOP RIGHT: The totally open-concept bedroom has one plaster wall rising three-quarters of the way up to the ceiling to form a divider between the bedroom and the master bathroom. On the bedroom side, this partial wall is a headboard for the bed; on the bathroom side it is the vanity mirror. The bathroom is lined in red cedar with beige travertine appointments and has a sunken whirlpool bath.

RIGHT: Like their parents' bathroom, the children's bathroom is also lined with cedar except for one wall which is papered with wallcovering into which dried oak leaves have been pressed. Laundry room is situated on bedroom level.

