

# INTERNATIONAL ARCHITECTURE & DESIGN

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# SAVING GRACE

CARVING AN ELEGANT MODERN LOFT OUT OF A 1970S BRICK HOUSE  
BY CAROLYN KENNEDY

The loft-style update of this home included knocking down interior walls and creating a two-storey space at the rear. Living with a minimalist scheme requires “the flexibility to put things away,” architect Pat Hanson says. Her elegant solution: 30 linear feet of storage—in the living area (shown) and the kitchen—hidden by swing-out doors.

**Opposite:** A detail of the plaster wall of the graciously curved staircase that greets visitors when they enter the house.



'IN A NARROW CITY HOME, YOU WANT ONE GREAT, BEAUTIFUL, PROPORTIONAL SPACE THAT'S FLEXIBLE FOR LIVING.'

Tastes change: That's one thing that can always be counted on in the world of design. So those who recall a time in the '60s and '70s when wide sideburns, wider bell-bottoms, crocheted vests, and ironed-straight hair were the epitome of hip can both shake their heads at the style hiccups of decades past and feel relieved to be living now at a safe remove, with only the odd Polaroid surviving as evidence.

Similarly, the Brutalist style of architecture, which shared a heyday with those fashion crimes, has provoked its share of angst and regret. Brutalist structures were characterized by a prominent, repetitive angularity, generally realized in concrete (though sometimes in brick), and critically regarded as having a cold, fortress-like appearance. The Robarts Library at the University of Toronto and large parts of the University of British Columbia are two of its well-known incarnations. Over the years, Prince Charles, among many others, has been one of Brutalism's vocal detractors.

Toronto architect Pat Hanson describes, more charitably than HRH, the period that unleashed Brutalism as "not the best time for architecture." Still, when a client and her husband showed Hanson the house they



At the standard dining height of 30", the elegantly veined, 15' statuario marble island creates seating for 10. A 6" block of Corian raises the workspace and a prep sink to a functional height in the kitchen area, in the central part of the house. *Faucet, Vola. Sofa, by Antonio Citterio, from B&B Italia. Arne Jacobsen Egg chair, KnollStudio.*

**Opposite:** The house's high perch, 30 feet back from the road, provides a view from the south-facing kitchen/dining area while maintaining the residents' sense of privacy. The 20' fireplace bench in the living area is unveined Thassos marble. *Black leather Smoke Lounge chair by Moooi, through Nienkämper.*

had just bought—a 1970s townhouse built of dark brown brick in the Brutalist style—she saw its positive points: it was a well-considered, solid structure, if not beautiful by anyone's standards. Its saving grace was the setting: the central, city neighbourhood and lush ravine location were compelling arguments in favour of its purchase. But the house had been renovated more than once, its relatively modest main floor chopped up into small, dark rooms. Just as problematic, the charms of the surrounding landscape were lost to the residents as soon as they stepped inside.

"Open it up" was Hanson's immediate response to the house and the site. The house sits at the bank of a hill: at the front end, the kitchen overlooks a canopy of trees that keeps the road at a comfortable distance, ensuring privacy and quiet; to the north, the embankment of the ravine that snakes through downtown Toronto offers a woody camouflage of the city beyond. "They had two different spectacular views," Hanson says. "It was pretty obvious that you'd want to capture those views from inside the house."

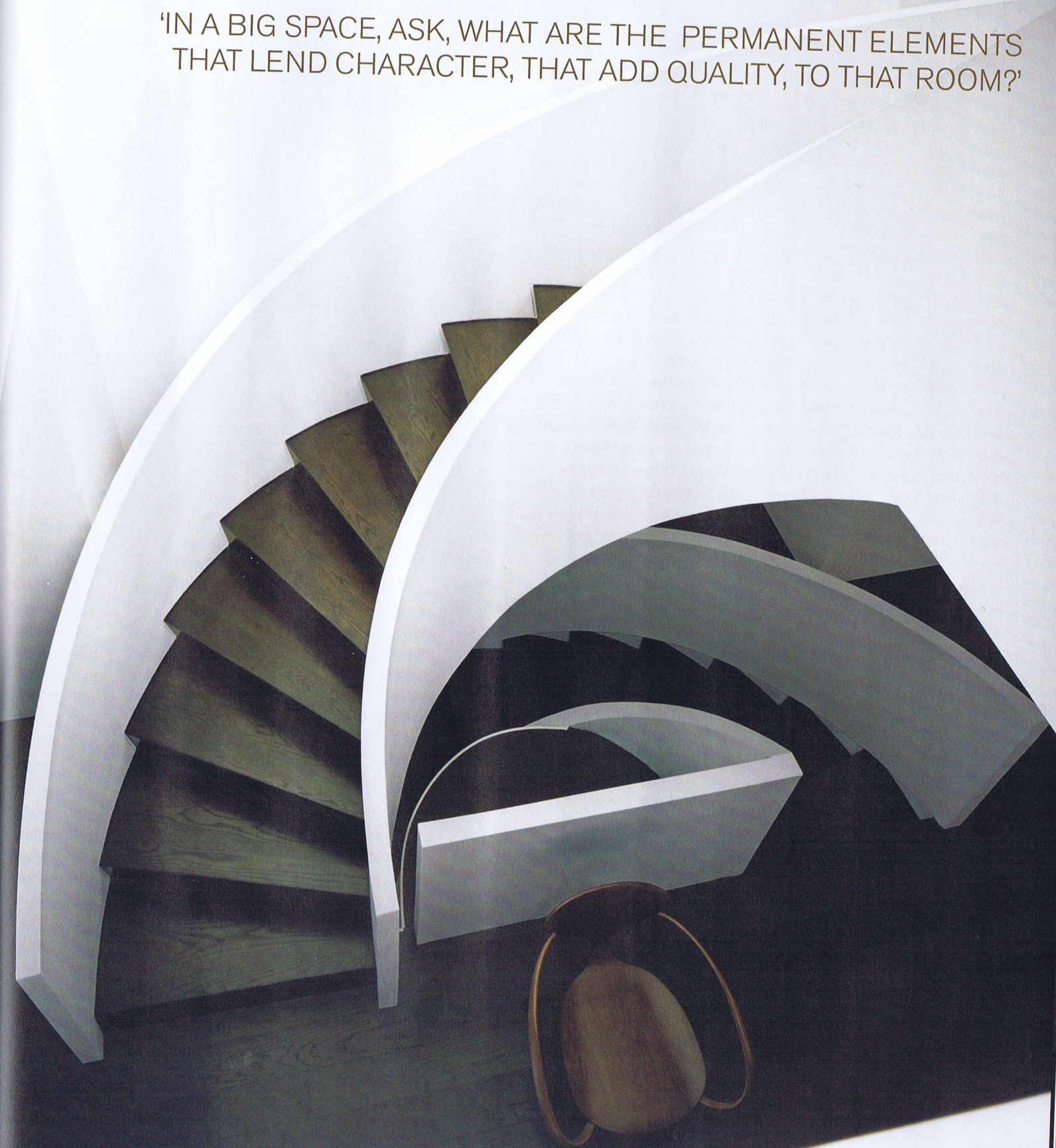
She sent the interior walls tumbling down, in a single modernizing stroke creating a spacious, livable room on the main floor. The two-storey rear wall of the house was replaced with fixed and operable windows, opening up both levels to the view of the ravine to the north and bringing in natural light that fills the space from back to front.

The architect carved out distinct areas in the now open-concept, 70-by-20-foot space by creating three sculptural points of anchor. She suggests: "In a big space, ask, What are the permanent elements that lend character, that give quality, to that room?" In the kitchen, a 15-foot marble island consolidates the activities of dining and food preparation in response to how most of us live today: it's a dining area that seats 10, its honed, flat white top providing a coolly elegant table, while its length and breadth make a generous and practical work surface day to day. In the living area, a low horizontal fireplace cavern is elaborated by a 20-foot bench-height slab of unveined Greek marble, offering a hearth-side seat, a shelf for display, a spot to set a drink.

The most sculptural of the three elements, of course, is the curved central stair. An existing staircase with a wrought-iron railing was re-clad with the same hardwood used throughout



**Above:** The bathroom walls, bathtub, shower, and counter with integral sink were fabricated seamlessly out of white Corian. The flooring is the same statuario marble as the kitchen island.  
**Left:** Operable skylights throughout the house aid ventilation.  
**Opposite:** A Cherner chair sits at the foot of the sculptural curved stair. The walls were removed from the main to the second floor but left in place around the stairs to the lower level. The architect used dark-stained engineered wood flooring on the stairs and throughout the house for a monolithic effect that acts as a unifying element and a dramatic contrast to the all-white envelope. Cherner chair, *Quasi Modo*.



'IN A BIG SPACE, ASK, WHAT ARE THE PERMANENT ELEMENTS THAT LEND CHARACTER, THAT ADD QUALITY, TO THAT ROOM?'

the house; the walls around the stair were sheared away between the ground level and the second floor; and the railing was enclosed with drywall and a layer of plaster applied by an artisan. Such considered reuse of existing structure represents an important aspect of Hanson's approach. "The key with looking at these [older] buildings," she says, "is that you don't have to rip everything out to do something new."

Unusually, the house has a side entrance (often considered a liability), which the architect also chose to keep. She sees the side placement as a solution to another common problem in older city homes, an alternative to requiring guests to walk through the living room upon entering—or to taking width from an already narrow space to create a tiny separate vestibule. Here, Hanson simply widened the doorway to provide a more generous opening, making an entrance that is at once more gracious, yet discreet, while offering the lovely curving stair as the first thing visitors see upon entry.

Hanson, formerly a partner in a large firm, formed her architectural practice, gh3, with landscape architect Diana Gerrard in 2005. An appreciation of the value of urban outdoor spaces has led to some attractive projects. The 10-person firm completed an elegant renovation of the quadrangle at University of Toronto's Trinity College in 2007 and recently won in competition what is sure to be a high-profile project, the job of creating June Callwood Park, to be completed by fall 2011. Last spring, gh3 was awarded the Governor General's Medal in Architecture for its interpretation of a photographer's lakefront studio—a small, simple, quietly spectacular glass structure open on four sides to the landscape. "It was great to win it in only our fifth year of business together," Hanson says with quiet satisfaction.

This is a house that has clearly overcome the obstacles of its past, and even rebutted some of them. Interestingly, Brutalism too has undergone a public renovation of its reputation in a time frame similar to that of the transformation of this house. For her part, Hanson says that, as she worked on the house, its strong points became more apparent to her. It didn't have great proportions and it had that hard brown brick, she notes, "but it was well built and well detailed. I've grown to appreciate it." The winning studio and this smart, sleek home share essential points of the modern-minimalist tradition—strong, uncluttered lines, dramatic spaces and voids, generous natural light, and the sense that every element has been carefully considered before being included in the mix. Tastes will always change, but it's a fair bet this house has found an enduring state of grace. ●

At the rear of the house, Hanson created a two-storey space by leaving a void in the floor between the master bedroom and the glass back wall. A large panel slides over to close off the second floor for privacy; left open, the suite has a full view of the back garden and the ravine. *Saarinens Womb chair and ottoman (upstairs), KnollStudio.*

THE HOUSE DISPLAYS SOME ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF THE MODERN-MINIMALIST TRADITION, INCLUDING DRAMATIC SPACES AND VOIDS.

