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ARCHITECTURE

A thundering cry in the urban landscape

The award-winning **Roar_one** represents a paradigm shift in architectural design, its builders hope

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SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Oliver Lang and Cynthia Wilson have seen their share of bad architecture. From Germany to New York City, the primaries behind Lang Wilson Practice in Architecture Culture (LWPAC) -- who are also married, with two children -- have lived in plenty of lousy apartments. "I'm so used to the deficiencies of apartment living, in Hamburg and elsewhere," says Mr. Lang, who grew up in Germany, earned a Masters in Advanced Architectural Design at Columbia University and is now an Assistant Professor in the School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture at the University of British Columbia. "You spend all your time making those spaces bearable. From that perspective, this project is sort of a critique of my whole life."

The project is Roar_one, a development of stacked homes in Point Grey that Mr. Lang and Ms. Wilson hope will spur a paradigm shift in urban architecture. Designed in association with Hotson Bakker Boniface Haden Architects, Roar_one was one of three winners of the 2005 Design Exchange awards for residential projects, and synthesizes two decades of lessons for the young architects.

"Oliver and I have lived many different ways, both culturally and experientially," says Ms. Wilson, a UBC School of Architecture graduate who has worked in design firms in Barcelona, Berlin and New York City. "This was a process of gathering them together, taking the best, criticizing the worst."

Paradigm shifts are apparent before you even ring the buzzer. The building's front face of glass and slotted patios is partially obscured by 15-foot-high rectangles of aluminum mesh, which can be moved around horizontally by residents like giant shoji screens. Designed at a precise depth-to-height ratio, they can be positioned to completely block late-spring and summer sunlight, effectively eliminating the need for air-conditioning while retaining outside views.

Entering the building is also a surprise: the angled entryway doesn't lead inside but outside, to a bright courtyard set between two four-storey buildings. The parallel walls are painted a brilliant lime green, a concrete planter of basalt stones and Castillon bamboo on the north side. The space feels calm, not quite an oasis, but definitely a world apart from the usual condominium lobby. Trapezoids of sunlight and shadow fall through the exposed stairwells and the sounds of urban living drift in from the vicinity -- a clatter of dishes from the restaurant next door, muted 10th Avenue traffic, children singing somewhere upstairs.

The brilliant green walls themselves are made of concrete blocks, perforated both by scatterings of glass bricks and by view corridors that pass all the way through the stacked double-storey homes, from front to back. These corridors, or "slots" as Ms. Wilson and Mr. Lang call them, are a central design feature of Roar_one, part of a vision of dense urban living that remains full of light and fresh air.

"Our approach is to build the maximum volume possible, then use filters and perforation to mediate and alleviate the mass. The challenge is how to manage density in such a way that it is efficient and maximizes livability." Mr. Lang cites the glassy downtown condo towers as an example of inefficient design. "They all overheat, or have to have the blinds down all day so they are completely opaque. Here in every unit there's cool air, a controlled environment with lots of cross-ventilation."

The stacked homes feature abundant glass, windows that open at opposing ends, and spacious exposed patios. Each of the ten units are 800 to 2,000 sq. ft., with loft-style mezzanines and ceilings of up to 16 feet.

Sergio Rodriguez was the developer of the project ("Roar" comes from a contraction of Rodriguez and Arias, his family names) and like Mr. Lang and Ms. Wilson, he is a Roar_one resident. He sought out LWPAC after reading an article about the firm in En Route magazine. "I grew up in Colombia, and have travelled quite a bit in Europe, so like Oliver my design sensibility is somewhat different from what I was finding in Vancouver. The things we expect from a space are just not here."

Having lived in the building for three months, Mr. Rodriguez says the attempt at porosity is a tremendous success.

"The indoor/outdoor interface is outstanding," he says.

"Almost every day I stop and appreciate I'm in a north-facing unit. Coming from South America I had never lived in one in Canada -- I was afraid it would be too cold psychologically. But I have natural light all day; it floods the unit."

Along with its emphasis on light and inside/outside flow, the project's form arises from what Mr. Lang and Ms. Wilson refer to as scenario planning. "The project was designed from the inside out," Mr. Lang says. "Carving away from the envelope followed after we had designed these adaptable units and stacked them. In each one we have allowed for six to eight scenarios."

In practice, scenario planning means that each unit can be configured to suit the lifestyle of a variety of occupants, from single entrepreneurs to professional couples to multigenerational immigrant families. In one unit, an added wall in the living area would divide off an additional downstairs bedroom, which has been planned with a ventilated window for that purpose.

Over a dinner of their daughters' favourite meal -- soft tacos -- Mr. Lang further explains the scenario approach. "These places are an invitation. In most buildings you have to live with the designer's aesthetic, and the layout of typical two-bedroom apartments doesn't invite live/work environments. They assume a formula. Here we create a layout and a spatial arrangement in which it's up to you how you want to subdivide the space."

From the vantage point of Ms. Wilson and Mr. Lang's living room, there are admirable differences between what they call their "sky-homes" and typical condominiums. Sliding doors open on either side of the inset sundeck dividing the main floor, making a single inside/outside room that circulates with fresh air. The east wall is composed entirely of glass and shows a wide section of blue sky. "We built this partially to respond to a particular demand in the Vancouver housing market: everybody loves the convenience of a condo, but would really like to have a house."

On the mezzanine above, their daughters peek through the industrial-style railing mesh, talking to visitors on the sundeck. "They're still so little, they always want to know where I am," says Ms. Wilson of her two girls, aged 4 and 6. "We used to live in a townhouse and they would follow me everywhere. Now they're happy to be upstairs because they can see me most of the time -- you always have views and a sense of where they are."

Most architects don't get to live in their completed projects. "We thought about the project for three years, but coming in I still felt a certain surprise. There's these aspects of it that uproot you in a nice way, you have to rethink how you live in the space. Now I could not go back to a regular apartment."

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