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BY JOANN GONCHAR, AIA

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PAUL WARCHOL
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ARCHITECTURE NEED not always be serious. And nowhere is light-heartedness more fitting than in a vacation house. One such playful example is the Tower House—a 2,500-square-foot structure on a sloping, wooded site in Ulster County, New York, about 100 miles north of Manhattan. Designed by New York City-based Gluck+ as the mountain retreat for one of the firm’s principals, Thomas Gluck; his wife, Anne Langston; and their two children, the house resembles a cross between a Modernist skyscraper and a tree house. It is completely glass-clad and has three bedrooms and adjoining baths stacked one on top of the other to support a living and dining room cantilevered 30 feet from the ground. A switchback stair, with bright-yellow treads and risers, connects all four levels and leads to a rooftop deck. The goal, says Gluck, was to create an aerie within the trees and take advantage of views of nearby Catskill Park, a vast state forest preserve.

Completed last summer, the house is the most recent

TIGHT AND BRIGHT Although the kitchen (below) is only about 175 square feet, it is open at each of its corners to the main living area or the stair flight; with its yellow walls and treads, since the kitchen is part of the thermal core—the only portion of the building heated during cold periods when the house is unoccupied—it includes insulated pocket doors that the owners close before leaving at the end of winter weekends.

Take a virtual tour of this project at architecturalrecord.com.
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structure built on the 19-acre parcel purchased more than 40 years ago by Peter Gluck, Thomas’s father and firm founder and principal (the practice was known until recently as Peter Gluck and Partners). The site contains an almost 200-year-old farmhouse and two other buildings the office designed— a guesthouse completed in 1995 (aectors, April 1996, page 84) and a study space built in 2002 for the senior Gluck’s wife, Carol, a Japan scholar.

The Tower House sits on a small plateau above the rest of the property and relies on a combination of wood and steel construction. Covering the armature is a skin that includes olive-green fritted glass, as part of a rainscreen cladding system and insulated vision glass. This sleek envelope simultaneously emphasizes the structure as a man-made object and acts as camouflage, reflecting the house’s environment and altering its appearance over the course of a day, with the passage of seasons, and in changing atmospheric conditions. “We were trying to make a building about the experience of being in the woods without having the materials be natural,” explains Thomas Gluck.

The philosophy extends to the interior, where the selection of colors and finishes amplifies the feeling of a Platonic, rather than rustic, nest among the branches.

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the car to the kitchen, the house’s configuration offers operational benefits, particularly in regard to energy conservation. According to its designers, the building uses only about a third of the energy consumed by a typical house of the same size in a similar climate. It has no air-conditioning but remains comfortable throughout the summer except in extreme heat, says Gluck. Tolerable conditions are maintained by exploiting the stack effect: the sun heats the air in the south-facing stair enclosure, creating a pressure differential that draws outdoor air into the house through gill-like casement and awning windows and then vents it through a roof hatch. At night, when there is no sun to induce this

CLOSING UP: GLAZED RAINSCREEN FACADE

The Tower House has an all-glass envelope that reflects the trees and the sky. It includes squared panels with an olive-green frit intended to match the hue of lichen growing on nearby branches. The panels, part of a rainscreen cladding system, are structurally glazed with silicone to aluminum 75 and angles. These extrusions are barely visible, as are the frames of operable windows inserted within the skin. The goal, according to the designers, was to enhance the building’s geometry and maintain the continuity of reflections between panels.

FLOATING BOX In order to enhance the sensation that the main living area (opposite) is a volume fitted into the trees, the wood floor and gypsum board walls have been painted white, except for the floor in the part of the space directly below the roof, which is light gray (above). Through its mimicry windows, which include both fixed and operate insulated units, the room offers views of the Tower House’s immediate environs and of the Catskill Mountains.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CENTER/SHERRY GRAM"
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The most significant savings, however, are realized by making it unnecessary to heat the entire house during the winter periods when the building is unoccupied. To prevent water pipes from freezing, a highly insulated 14-foot-by-13-foot core encloses the baths and the kitchen and includes substantial pocket doors. Before leaving at the end of a winter weekend, the owners slide the doors closed, set the temperature for the core to 50 degrees, and turn off the heat everywhere else.

This kind of careful consideration of energy use demonstrates that the Tower House is more than a mere folly—plenty of substance lies behind its whimsical exterior.