

ARCHITECTS' HOUSES

MICHAEL
WEBB



PETER & THOMAS GLUCK

TOWER HOUSE

ULSTER COUNTY, NEW YORK STATE

In 1961, Peter Gluck bought a tumbledown 1820s farmhouse with 8 hectares of forested land on the edge of the Catskill State Park, and restored it as a weekend retreat. His son Thomas, now a partner in Gluck+, built the Bridge House for weekend guests, working hands-on as a carpenter before he went to architecture school. Peter added the Scholar's Library for his wife, Carol, a professor of Japanese history at Columbia, and collaborated with his son on the latest addition to the family compound.

Thomas took the lead in designing the Tower House, even before he moved back to New York with his wife and two small children. He placed it atop a steep rocky ridge overlooking the other structures. To minimize the footprint and maximize views, he conceived the house as a stack of small bedrooms supporting a spacious

gathering area. That yielded an off-center T-form with a living room cantilevered from a steel frame and supported on one side by a "V" of slender columns. A grid of maple trees was planted to replace those that had been removed during construction, and the regularity of the plantings plays off the geometry of the tower. A 25m long bridge links it to the upper level of the guest house, and a big lawn unites the three buildings below the ridge.

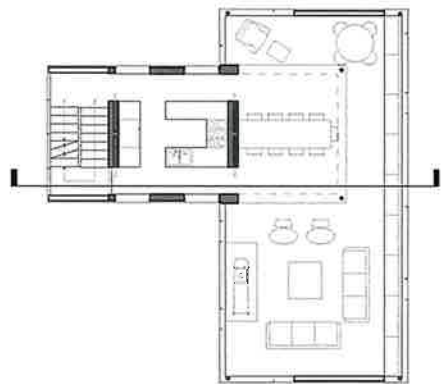
"I was in Minneapolis when the project began," recalls Thomas. "I sketched and made models and together we pushed the design along. Because we were architects building for ourselves, we could create a design that focused on the essentials without compromise. It would be hard to sell a client on the idea of putting the living room atop a switchback staircase."



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Another bold move was to clad the entire building in a taut curtain wall of clear and green back-painted glass, rather than mimicking the woodsiness of the site as most clients would have wanted to do. It's counterintuitive, but the man-made form dissolves into reflections. In form and in surface, the house becomes a part of the forest.

It helped that Gluck+ is a design-build firm. "We were able to buy the glass and equipment from a subcontractor we've worked with before, and he went up for a day to show the local carpenter how to install the glass," says Peter. "And the cost was lower than cedar siding. Lacking that expertise, it wouldn't have been affordable."

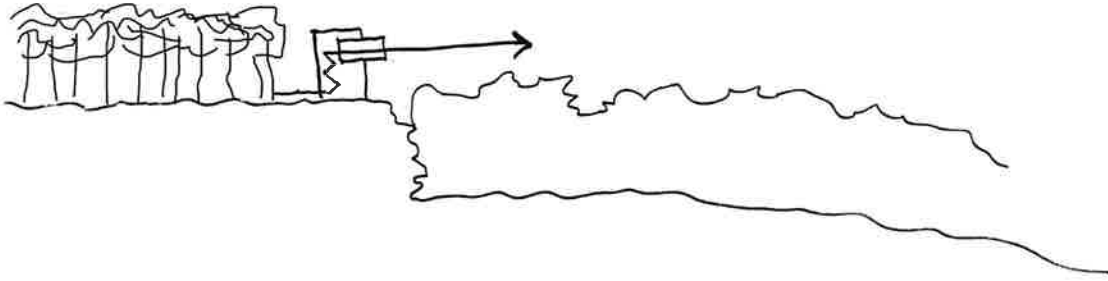
Sustainability was another factor that shaped the design. There's a lot of clear

glass, but it's a weekend house and doesn't need to be heated or cooled through the week. To conserve energy, all the wet rooms are stacked in an insulated central core with small openings, so that only a quarter of the 230sqm interior needs to be heated while the house is empty. Bedrooms and the living areas face north, with plenty of clear glass to enjoy views of the distant Catskill Mountains.

The staircase is painted yellow, and is south-facing to absorb the heat of the sun. In winter, it acts as a heat sink to warm the house; in summer, the accumulated hot air can be swiftly vented, drawing in cool air from the north side and eliminating the need for air conditioning.

In many parts of the world, proposing a glass tower in a region of great natural beauty would have encountered stiff







The living areas are cantilevered from a tower containing the bedrooms and a staircase that acts as a thermal chimney, warming the house in winter and drawing in cool air in summer. Glass curtain walls command sweeping views and dissolve into reflections of the trees (see page 144).

resistance, but this is a small rural community in which most buildings are out of sight of their neighbours. It's a place where the zoning department is open for only two hours every Wednesday morning and the chief of the fire department is a local pig farmer.

Within, the house is divided into three zones: the stack of bedrooms, each with its own bathroom; the open-plan living area; and the roof terrace, which commands a 360-degree view over the tree canopy. The floors are white-painted wood to disengage you from the ground, and the glass never needs cleaning because of the sheer surface and absence of pollution. At night, the house glows like a beacon,

and LEDs on the cable rail of the darkened staircase resemble fireflies in the forest.

The Glucks planned the house as a laboratory in which to test ideas of materiality and structure. "To save costs, we used a lot of wood framing in addition to the steel," says Thomas. "There were all kinds of crazy experiments; as builders, we understand that stuff. But what I treasure the most—even if it's just for a few hours—is the response from friends of my young son and daughter, and of people who know nothing about architecture. They feel it. We trusted our instincts and the result far surpasses our expectations."