

**Grand Entrance** When architects David Battersby and Heather Howat design a home, the pathway to the front door is never a straight shot. "We like to get off the curb and start to orchestrate your experience," says Howat.

**Dramatic Intent** Designed without risers and featuring guards made of fine stainless steel cable, the staircase (opposite) is thin in profile but casts gorgeous shadows.



# POETIC DESIGN

A contemporary house in Vancouver pairs two unusual influences: modern Mexico and calligraphy.

by **BARB SLIGL**

photographs by **EMA PETER**



**Art of Design** The materials palette is intentionally simple: walnut throughout, paired with concrete and steel. Just outside the living room window is a heritage tree that couldn't be moved (right); views inside are oriented toward the ancient beauty. The Wegner wishbone dining chairs and Saarinen tulip table in the kitchen are an atypical black (opposite), but they're in keeping with the refined palette.



alligraphy is the art of writing beautifully. But it's also about showing the hand that is writing the word—a personal, thoughtful concept that Heather Howat and David Battersby of BattersbyHowat applied to the design of this west side Vancouver home. “It is a way of communicating,” says Howat, “but with a specificity to it that is unique.” It's not about decoration, but meticulousness—an attention to detail that results in a kind of poetry in the altogether elegant, modern home.

The 5,000-square-foot, three-floor, five-bedroom house is atop a hill and “had to have a level of sophistication but not be in-your-face or pretentious,” says Howat. Battersby calls it pragmatic, even down-to-earth—quite literally. There's a vegetable garden at the front of the house (three custom-designed circular planters) and huge light wells that connect the basement level to the landscape, creating a terrarium-like experience.

Part of this integration of form and function, nature and architecture, is inspired by Luis Barragán, the Pritzker Prize-winning Mexican architect who used geometric compositions, volumes, lines and shadows to poetic effect. Battersby and Howat made a pilgrimage to his home, Casa Barragán, a UNESCO World Heritage Site (“it was a profound and emotional experience,” says Battersby), and imbued some of that spirit into this house.





*Back inside, the sequence of layers continues. The polished concrete's shades of grey are repeated throughout, from the charcoal of a daybed to the dove tones of the marble countertops in the master bath and kitchen.*

Most distinctive are the geometric masses—bold, stacked rectilinear shapes crowned with a curvilinear roof deck—and screens that create patterns and cast shadows. Howat says it's about “modulating the light.” And there's interplay between privacy and visibility with the wood screens. To passersby at the front of the house, the “screen collapses perspectively,” explains Battersby; it appears solid until viewed straight on. “It gives you this kind of scrim, a semi-permeable facade.”

Like Barragán, BattersbyHowat place as much emphasis on the exterior and surroundings of the house as on the interior. “That's what we endeavour to do with urban houses, is try to relate to the site and landscape,” says Battersby. The garage is sunken under the backyard so that it doesn't encroach on this relationship. Light wells, or “ditch gardens,” mean that, even in the basement, those inside the house continue to feel a connection to the outside, looking upon ferns and hostas through the windows. Other windows frame stellar views—both Vancouver's cityscape in the distance and a massive heritage tree on the property in the foreground.

While there are subtle nods to the Mexican architect throughout

the home, they're interpreted for the coast. This is, after all, Vancouver, and instead of Barragán's bright colours, Battersby and Howat used cedar and a subdued palette. Concrete dominates. “It's essentially a concrete and steel structure with wood infill,” says Battersby. Inside, a central concrete wall is the backdrop for a dramatic set of open stairs—three flights stacked upon each other.

The stairway can be seen as a sequence of layers, material changes—just as Howat describes the house itself. “Some of it's architectural, some of it's practical,” she explains, “and some of it's more expressive.” There are no risers between the solid-walnut treads, the edges of which are cased in a mild-steel frame that also holds in place vertical stainless-steel-cable guards—all of which allow the airy stairs to remain thin in profile, create visual interest and even cast shadows like those screens.

Butting up against that central concrete wall, the stairs are architectural and referential, reiterating the wood screens and geometric massing of the envelope—almost like a microcosm of the house. “It's a very intentional differentiation of components,” says Battersby of the exterior's soffit, cladding and recessed band that separates

**Quiet Moments** In the master bedroom, custom millwork in the bedframe and built-ins pairs with a comfy Portofino chair and ottoman from Minotti (opposite). The powder room is warm and moody, thanks to dark accents from the Ezuma marble walls and backsplash, and a black vessel sink from Stone Forest (centre). The master bath is made for spa days with a deep Acri-Tec Arto IIB free-standing tub (above).





**Great and Green** In order to protect the green expanse of the backyard, the architects partially buried the garage—its roof is part of the lawn.

the upper and main floors into two distinct masses. “We were looking for a way to articulate it architecturally that’s like calligraphy,” says Battersby, “a certain kind of quality, a language set up in the detailing.” Howat explains further: “When I think of calligraphy, I think of the pen that is used, and it is deployed to create the thick and thinness of the line as it travels around the shape of each letter.” Here, the architects shape the house using layers of architectural expression.

Back inside, the sequence of layers continues. The polished concrete’s shades of grey are repeated throughout, from the charcoal of a daybed to the dove tones of the marble countertops in the master bath and kitchen. The soft grey is then tempered with white walls, dark walnut floors and millwork in almost every room (including the master bed, kitchen

cabinetry and library shelving, all custom-designed by BattersbyHowat) and black accents in the mullions and furniture (Wegner wishbone dining chairs and a Saarinen tulip table are an atypical black), as well as a black-stone-clad powder room.

The effect is more masculine than you might expect, says Battersby, and is reflective of the homeowners’ design savvy and desire for uniformity. This “robustness,” apparent in every aspect of the home, goes back to Barragán and even Spanish and Moorish architecture—a long history completely unrelated to Vancouver, says Battersby, and yet reinterpreted here.

And it’s akin, again, to the lines of calligraphy, a stylized elegance that’s been rigorously applied throughout the house and surrounding landscape. It’s apt that a root word of calligraphy is the Greek *kalli*, which simply means beautiful. **HL**