Inside Outside

Subscriber Copy

THE INDIAN DESIGN MAGAZINE ISSUE 286 APRIL 2009 Rs 50

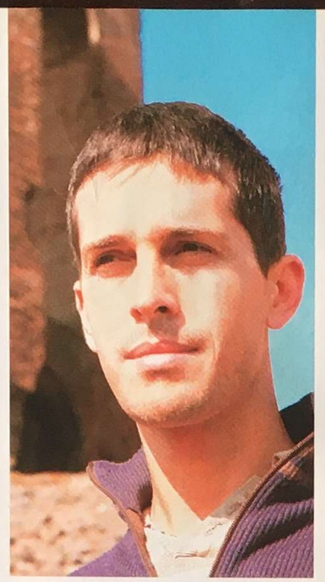
PROJECTS BY

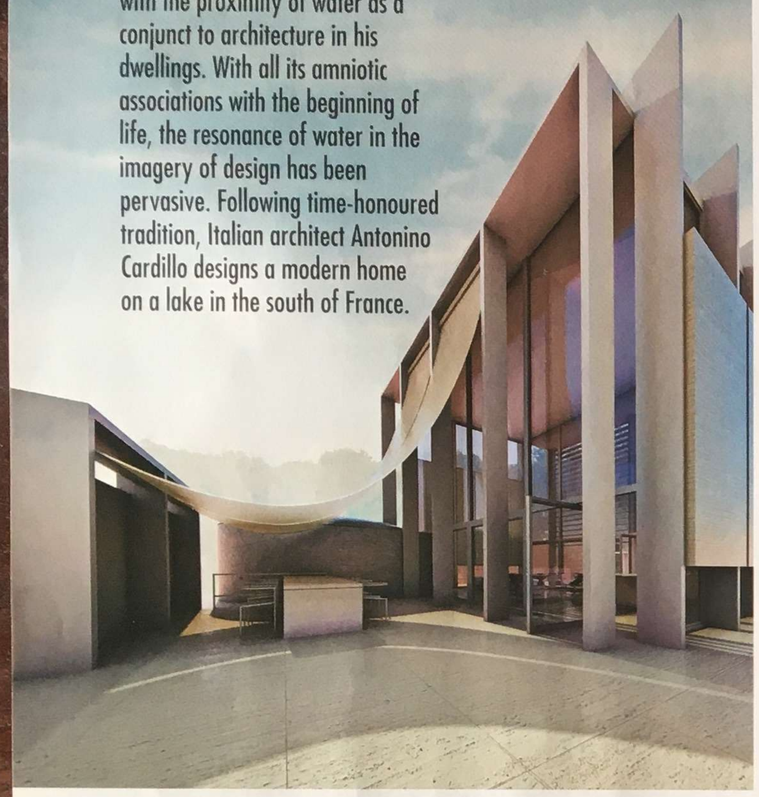
Haresh Lakhani, Hiranmay Biswas,
Kohelika Kohli & Vikram Phadke

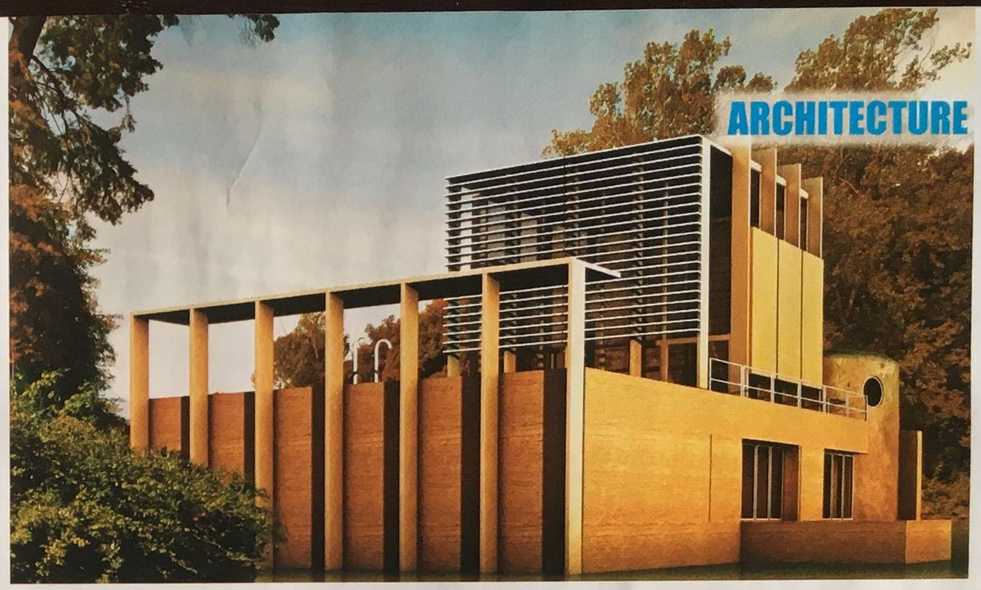
A HOUSE ON A LAKE

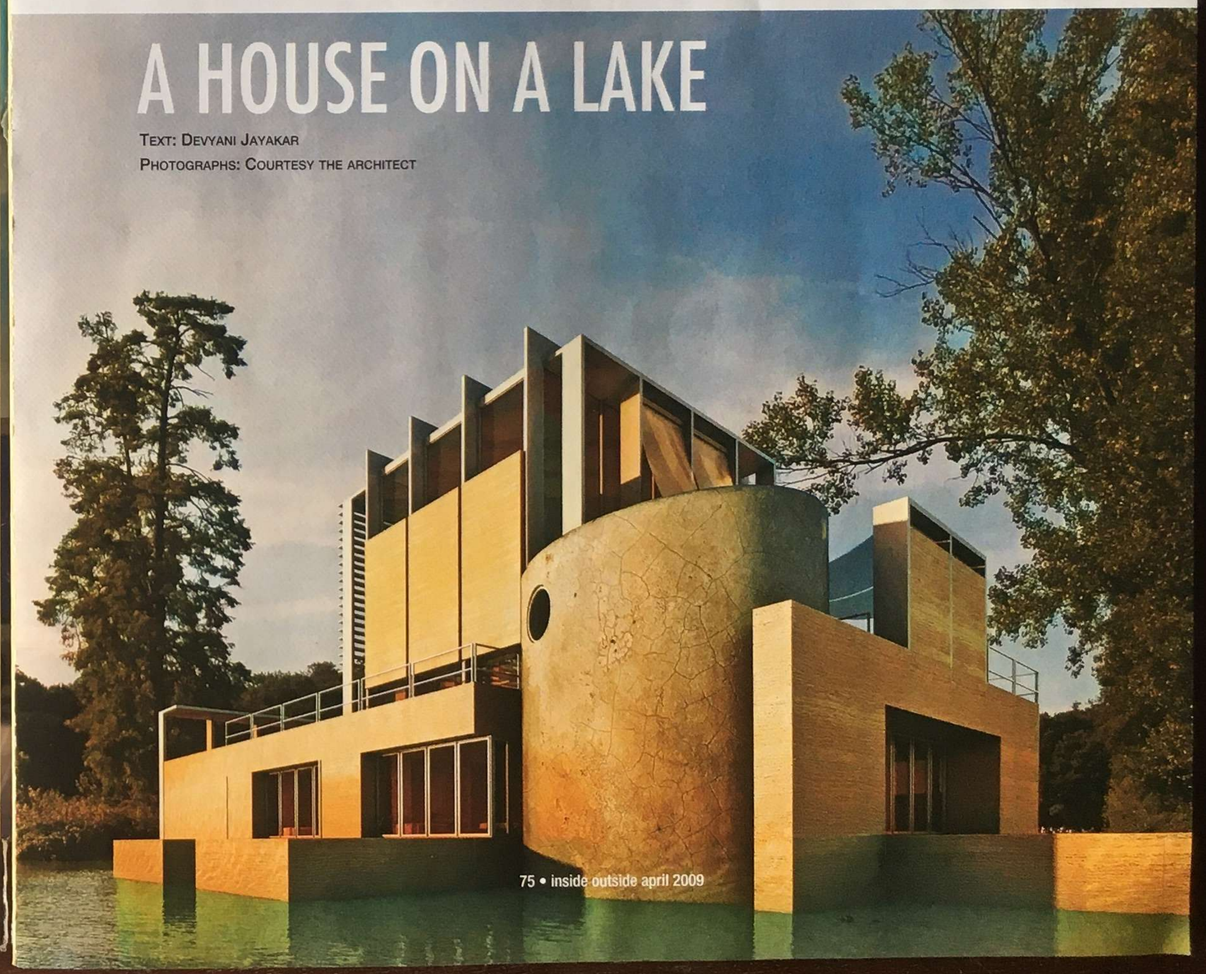
TEXT: DEVYANI JAYAKAR
PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY THE ARCHITECT

Throughout history, man has flirted with the proximity of water as a conjunct to architecture in his dwellings. With all its amniotic associations with the beginning of life, the resonance of water in the imagery of design has been pervasive. Following time-honoured tradition, Italian architect Antonino Cardillo designs a modern home on a lake in the south of France.









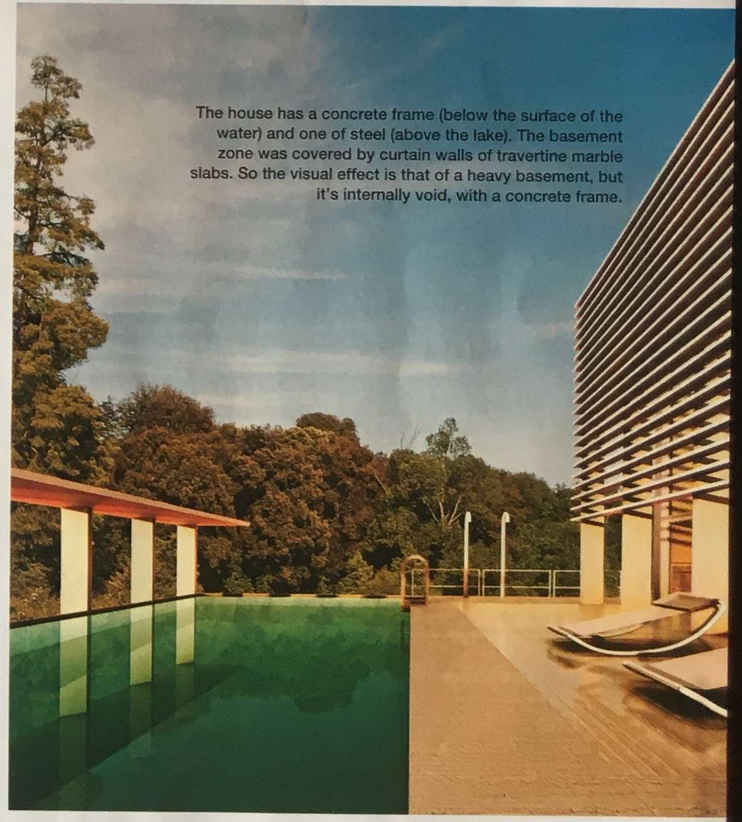
Beyond the mirror of water, in an inaccessible place, a portico measures and interprets the landscape. The living area extends its own teak flooring so as to lap the swimming pool.

The house looks like the transfiguration of a boat, set against the wooded banks of a little lake in the countryside of Nimes in the south of France: a man-made landing stage on the edge of a natural border. The city, one of the most important hubs of Roman Gaul, was founded by the legionnaires from the Egyptian campaigns of Caesar and is located along the Via Domitia, a Roman road that linked Rome to the Iberian peninsula.

Antonino explains that the client's brief was to create a home for weekends, with the possibility of hosting many friends, almost like an inn. The building is made up of two contrasting entities, spread over two levels: a compact basement in travertine comprises the hall and bedroom on whose terrace is set a high, luminous living room, articulated by a slender white metal structure. The arrangement of the metallic elements regulates the sunlight, with Antonino's signature brise-soleil screening it at midday. Deep containing walls, covered in teak and suspended a metre off the floor, partially occlude the morning and afternoon light and also enclose the air-conditioning in the high summer.

The landscape, viewed from within, is broken up into myriad quadrants and undergoes an analytical process of reconstruction. Beyond the mirror of water, in an inaccessible place, a portico measures and interprets the landscape. Outside, to the south, the living area extends its own teak flooring so as to lap the swimming pool. To the north of the glass room, a textile parabola, stretched between the two edges of the building, shades the external dining area and finds its echo in the curve of the lounge chairs. Lastly, the eccentric location of a tower for the stairs subverts the symmetrical composition of the building. Determining the perceptions of the internal spaces, it becomes the essential key to a reading of the architecture.

'In this structure called Max's House, the opposition between a massive "base" and a "shaft" is clearly derived from classical Roman tradition. However, the lack of a visible access – such as the great staircase of a temple – makes this building an enigmatic entity. I believe that sometimes architecture is all the more interesting, the more invisible or concealed it is. When it is not only made up of that which can be



The house has a concrete frame (below the surface of the water) and one of steel (above the lake). The basement zone was covered by curtain walls of travertine marble slabs. So the visual effect is that of a heavy basement, but it's internally void, with a concrete frame.

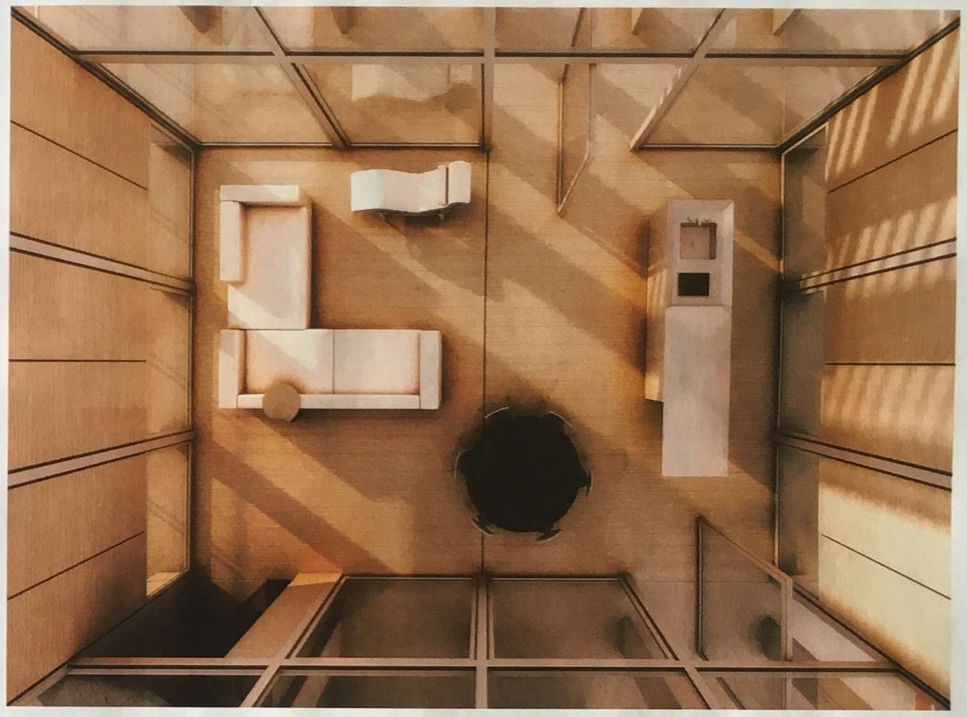
The question 'If the structure leaks, can it be architecture?' is a poor criterion, since rain could easily enter the open oculus in the dome of Rome's intensely moving Pantheon, for example, and no one dares question its architectural pedigree. But Max's House holds its head above water.

seen and touched, but rather that which suggests and leaves the rest to the imagination,' says Antonino. 'In some ways architecture is not just lived-in space but also imagined space. Inside it, space is not crossed with the body alone but some of its parts become meaningful precisely because they are unknown to the body – thus becoming places of the mind, open to many readings. How else can the sense of certain unreachable places be explained?'

The building is also a provocative commentary on the contemporary trend to 'dissolve' architecture in nature or the surroundings, thereby denying its original identity. 'But the human order is clearly not "natural", while the order of nature is based on the balance of power, rather than thought, reason or feelings. These two systems, even if opposed, attract each other, and they lend multiple meanings to each other through mutual relations and clashes,' says Antonino.

Philip Nobel, architect and critic who writes for The New York Times and Architectural Digest, has said, 'Part of the joy of appreciating concrete buildings is that the material makes it harder for architects to lie.' It is what it is – a solid body shaped by the architect's imagination. There is a little steel thrown in to handle tensile forces, but in unifying structure and skin, much of the cosmetic function of a typical curtain-wall building is

The arrangement of the metallic elements regulates the sunlight, with Antonino's signature brise-soleil screening it at midday.



Concrete gives architectural gestures the power of certainty, and thus a dignity. At the scale of human life spans, at least, concrete is permanent – and if nothing else, at least elegantly decrepit. It's forever, almost… and nothing goes to ruin better.

eliminated. In short, concrete buildings are primal. And if a building can be both primal and refined, well…isn't that why we all love the work of Tadao Ando?

Max's House was built by the union of a structure in reinforced concrete frame (below the surface of the water) and one of steel (above the lake). The basement zone was covered by curtain walls of travertine marble slabs. So the visual effect is that of a heavy basement, but it's internally void, with a concrete frame. In this way the contact with water is as low as possible – which minimises the risk of leakages.

The relationships between architecture, building, and a good building seem pretty complex. The question 'If the structure leaks, can it be architecture?' reinforces the requirement that buildings must first satisfy the needs of shelter, but this is a poor criterion, since rain could easily enter the open oculus in the dome of Rome's intensely moving Pantheon, for example, and no one dares question its architectural pedigree. Is a building necessarily architecture? Is architecture always good building? All slippery slopes indeed, and to be avoided at all costs. But Max's House holds its head above water.

Here, Antonino plays a charged game, putting water in contact with concrete – as he does especially in the tower which houses the staircase. It qualifies as an act of hubris, water being the one thing you want to keep away from concrete, the element that will, as surely as a jackhammer, reduce it to dust in time. But concrete gives architectural gestures the power of certainty, and thus a dignity, even in buildings which are small and compact. Though the walls may crumble in places and reveal their rebar bones, though these may rust out and the whole blow away in time, at the scale of human life spans, at least, they are permanent – and if nothing else, at least elegantly decrepit. Building in concrete must offer a god-like feeling to the architect. It's forever, almost… and nothing goes to ruin better.