



To add architectural significance and dimension to the home's exterior, the architect divided the smooth stucco facade into elegantly proportioned planes and rimmed windows in burnished mahogany frames.

# Simply Sleek

The dazzle is in the details of this streamlined North Shore home

BY LISA SKOLNIK  
PHOTOS BY TONY BERARDI & SALLY GOOD / PHOTOFIELDS

It's probably safe to assume that Chicago architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's tone was authoritative when he said, "God is in the details," in his 1959 speech on restraint in design that linked the adage to his name.

Today, Chicago architect Thomas L. Shafer is unassuming when he acknowledges that "the details" give the subject of this story—a house he designed on Chicago's North Shore—its refinement. In fact, he can't quite bring himself to call the many finely articulated elements that punctuate this home's broad strokes anything that prescribed.

Yet these thoughtful elements bring singular distinction to this sleek, expansive home for a couple and their three children. Deep grooves etched in the home's smooth stucco facade dissect the flat exterior into carefully proportioned planes and give it architectural dimension. Burnished mahogany frames on all the windows add warmth to the cool, pristine walls and voluminous spaces. Room portals that vary in size are tied to function—tall, spacious openings for the public areas; smaller entries or doors for the private spaces. Soaring walls are detailed with incised or recessed reveals instead of traditional molding.

And Shafer gets downright imaginative with the singular flourishes he dreamed up specifically for the home and its occupants.





An extra-wide staircase devised for two has a playful ziggurat-shaped reveal that stylishly echoes its treads. Low-set boat lights with a high-tech demeanor illuminate the narrow space at night and give it an offbeat decorative spirit. The railings are wrapped in jet-black butter-soft leather that makes them “as comfortable as a golf grip,” quips Shafer. The master bedroom has a show-stopping wall of floor-to-ceiling windows and easy-glide curtains on a durable recessed track for effortless light control. And the muscular mahogany front door is topped with a light-imbuing “stretch” transom and punctuated with an oddly shaped glass pane that’s actually a miniature silhouette of the house’s floor plan.

The owners are much more effusive than Shafer about his creation. “We have a seri-

ous collection of contemporary art, and we wanted a meaningful piece of architecture to accommodate it,” says the husband. “It also had to be comfortable, livable, and conducive to raising kids,” adds his wife. “Thanks to Tom, we got absolutely everything we wanted,” the husband crows.

With its dazzling simplicity, the structure belies the complexities of the issues Shafer had to address. For starters, much of the art was so large-scale that a substantial portion of the home required extra-high ceilings. At the same time, the wife, a professionally trained and accomplished chef, wanted a sizable, state-of-the-art kitchen with an adjacent family room to keep the kids close by while she cooks.

Finally, the couple already owned a substantial cache of furniture they planned to use in the place, and “most of it was



OPPOSITE PAGE A state-of-the-art kitchen for the wife, a professionally trained chef, features a generous eating area that is connected to the family room so she can keep an eye on the kids while she works. THIS PAGE Details abound; a staircase sports a ziggurat-shaped reveal, low-set boat lights, and leather-wrapped railings. An oversized transom and window that echoes the house’s floor plan light the entrance.



The public areas of the home have 14-foot-high ceilings to accommodate the owners' growing collection of large-scale contemporary art.



contract because [the husband] has a very spare, clean-lined aesthetic. It's beautiful and really durable stuff, which is great for kids, but it's hard to soften up," notes Mitchell Putlack, the Chicago interior designer they used both here and in their previous home.

Ultimately, Shafer had to figure out how to bring warmth and intimacy to the spacious, streamlined creation the couple required. And he had to resolve "the quintessential art collector issue: Should the structure be a piece of art in its own right, or a backdrop for the work they own? We settled on the latter," he explains.

To that end, Shafer came up with a bifurcated design composed of a large square flanked by a long slim rectangle. The square contains the family living areas: a kitchen, eating area, family room, and garage on the first floor, and four bedrooms and a reading room on the second. The rectangle is a single-story expanse with 14-foot ceilings that holds sweeping living and dining areas. The staircase, which rises from the home's front entrance, bisects the two forms and serves as the off-center heart of the house.

Along with the thoughtful details Shafer devised to keep the boxy structure engaging, there's also a dazzling palette of materials and exquisitely wrought built-ins. Shafer loaded the place with luxurious surfaces, such as a gleaming ebonized rift-







LEFT A multi-tiered lighting system illuminates activity areas and artwork in the dining room. ABOVE A show-stopping wall of floor-to-ceiling windows is rimmed with easy-glide curtains on a recessed tread.

cut white oak floor in the public areas, rich maple cabinets in the kitchen, and figured African sapelli in the bedroom and family room casework. Skillfully arrayed furnishings maximize each room's utility. Putlack laid out the contract pieces to play to the art and accessorized them to look elegant yet inviting.

Now the couple is concentrating on collecting, though Shafer says he won't be surprised if they decide to do another house. "[The husband] was the driving force in this one and keeps saying he wants to do it again," laughs Shafer. "He says, 'I'd do it again in a second. I just have to convince my wife.'" ■

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