

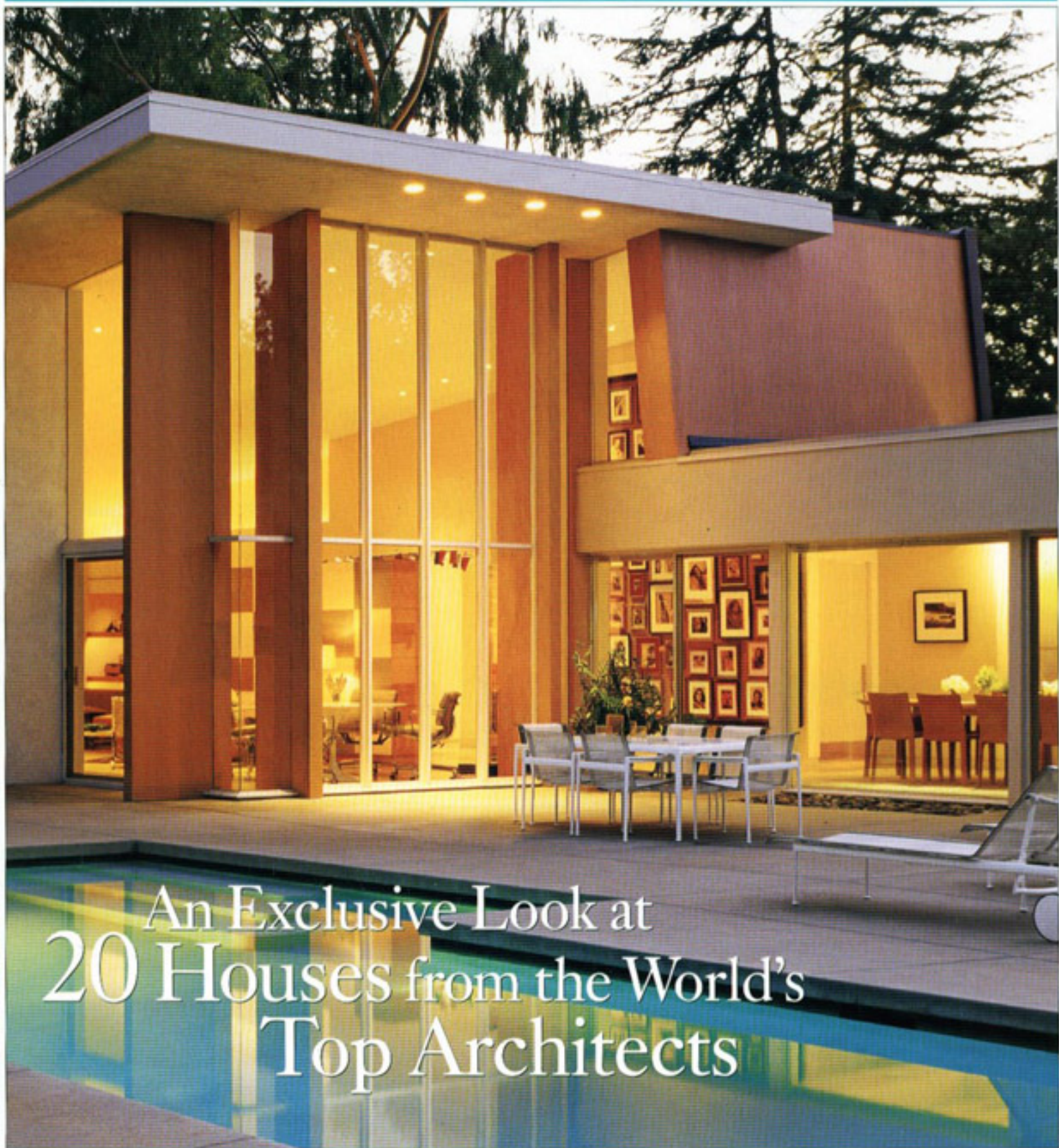
SPECIAL COLLECTOR'S EDITION

# ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

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## ARCHITECTURE ISSUE



An Exclusive Look at  
20 Houses from the World's  
Top Architects



# The Big Picture

An Architect and Designer at Home with a "Totalitarian" Approach

Text by Nicholas von Hoffman/Photography by Durston Saylor



"In our industry, design is at its best when you can grab hold of all the elements and create a unique world," says New York-based architect and designer Campion A. Platt.

THE MOMENT OF TRUTH for Campion A. Platt came when he was a teenager in Switzerland. His mother, he says, "wanted to move to Florence to do art. I was kind of left behind in Zurich. I felt like I needed to find a vocation. So I thought, Well, I'm very good at math. I'm very good at physics and physical sciences. I love to build models and do pen-and-ink drawings and watercolors. Architecture seemed to be the natural solution, and at the age of 15, that was what I wanted to do."

From then on Platt seems to have immersed himself in his life's work. In the process, he has created a look uniquely his own, though Platt himself is not so sure. "I don't think I've found a distinctive voice yet. For instance, you look at a building and know it's a Richard Meier, or a Zaha Hadid or a Mario Botta." His own style, he says, "is a bit eclectic. I'm still working on it—it's kind of a lifelong pursuit."

"When I started, I took some time to figure out what I wanted to do," he recalls. He also turned down jobs because they didn't fit what he was trying to achieve. "The people I respected were a lot of mid-century Italian designers and Frank Lloyd Wright."

Platt says that when he was in graduate school at Columbia, Wright "was not high on the list of people's inspirations. I always thought he was great in that he was a 'totalitarian.' He did everything—the architecture, the interiors, the lighting, the rugs, the utensils." So it isn't surprising that Platt takes a dim view of "building out the architecture and

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LEFT: For clients in Manhattan, Platt combined a 19th-century French gilt settee with nickel-and-leather chairs of his own design (see *Architectural Digest*, February 2003).





ABOVE: Furniture by Platt is joined by metal pieces by Warren McArthur in a Manhattan apartment (*AD*, December 1995). "Chairs are the most difficult things to do well."

RIGHT: For Princess Zarina of Malaysia's Southampton home, he designed pieces that interpret "classic elements of a traditional country house" (*AD*, May 1998).

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then fitting in interior design."

A corollary to his totalitarian approach is what the architect calls themes. "We did an 1850s residence in Sag Harbor a few years ago, and I had a dream, an epiphany, about an old captain who had lived there. He had collected furniture from around the world. As it turned out, the owner thought there was a ghost in the house who was a captain. Then we found some artwork behind a wall with images of a man in a hat with a beard and a pipe. So there was this great connection between the owner's belief and our concept for the house."

Opportunities to develop unique concepts may not come along too often, but sometimes they do. "I've had clients who've given me a set of keys and said, 'We trust that you're going to come up with what we want.'"

When it all goes right on a turnkey, it can be very satisfying. "I did an apartment in New York City for a celebrity and his wife," he recounts. "I got a call the day they moved



LEFT: Inspired by a Louise Nevelson sculpture, Platt designed shelving that incorporates floating planes for a master bedroom in New York City (*AD*, December 1995).

in. I was at a restaurant, and my heart dropped. 'They're calling me, and there's something wrong.' They hadn't come to the apartment for about a month and a half and hadn't seen all the final finishes. But they said it was more than they could have hoped for. It was the best response for a job well done that I've ever gotten."

Platt thinks that 80 percent

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of his look may come from the furniture. The furniture designer he most admires is Jacques-Émile Ruhlmann. “He made the most beautiful chairs, and they’re also very comfortable to sit in.” Ruhlmann had some observations about residential architecture and design that may or may not have cogency today: “Only the very rich can pay for what is new, and they alone can make it fashionable. Fashions don’t start among the common people.”

Costs, Platt notes, are driven up by the whos and hows of the craftsmanship needed to execute one-of-a-kind design.

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“Most of the best people aren’t good at business.” Such people can’t tell you what something is going to cost, being unable to gauge the hours needed to finish a piece to perfection, nor can they produce to a schedule. “I tell my clients, ‘We’re going to have somebody really great make this thing, but they might be a month late with it.’”

His volume of work is expanding from its current level of about six projects a year to about 30. But, he says, “when you grow like this, you need to train a group, like a Richard Meier or a Charles Gwathmey. They have 75 or 100 people, and they’ve developed enough of an aesthetic and a tool set that it’s understood what needs to get done. So there’s a transition from my kind of midsize office—we’re about 15 or 16 people now—to the next level, where you have to delegate more.”

But Campion Platt knows that nothing can be taken for granted. “You’re only as good as your last project,” he observes. “You can wonder, Is this the right way to go? Why is this other person getting so many more projects? There are always demons running around in your head, because, after all, we’re in the service business and at the behest of people who have money.” That said, it has not stopped the architect yet. □