

MAISON GOULET: AN ICONIC HOUSE IN THE LAURENTIAN MOUNTAINS

*Adrian Sheppard, FRAIC
Professor of Architecture,
McGill University
Montreal*

Architecture is bound to situation. Unlike music, painting, sculpture, film, and literature, a construction (non-mobile) is intertwined with the experience of a place. The site of a building is more than a mere ingredient in its conception. It is its physical and metaphysical foundation.

Steven Holl (ANACHORING)

I believe the brightest highlights in post-war Canadian architecture are the private residences, especially the non-urban retreats. These houses, by and large, find their meaning in the local landscape and culture and in formal and constructional traditions of their regions. One of the latest additions to this slate of noteworthy icons of Canadian Modernism is Maison Goulet, a 2,500 square-foot house designed by Mario Saia, senior partner in Saia, Barbarese, Topouzanov, Architects and principal author of the controversial *Palais des Congres* in Montreal. Maison Goulet was conceived as a second residence for his art historian wife and himself. Since Saia was both client and architect, he had a rare opportunity to create, without compromises, a work of architecture which would embody design ideas, values, and lifestyle which he and his wife share intimately. Theirs is a world of sports and love of nature, simple but good living, and commitment to modernist design.

Maison Goulet is all about the relationship of building to site, about how the vernacular informs modern design, about formal reductivism, about craft, about tectonics, and about architectural coherence. Saia succeeded at making the landscape contribute to the work of architecture and making the house as a component element of that landscape. The building is the archetypal house. It has a simple barn-like form evoking the child's vision of what a house is all about: four walls and a sloping roof, large chimneys, windows cut out-outs in the walls, the whole sitting on a flat plane. Steven Holl refers to these "ingredients" of house design as the proto elements of architecture. They are legible and comprehensible. If Maison Goulet had been a painting instead of architecture, it would be labeled a figurative work of art. Here is no abstraction, no clever formal games, and no private jokes. And yet, the house is much more than an obvious primal shape into which a program has been inserted. It is a highly sophisticated and refined work of modern architecture.

The house is clearly derivative of the morphological circumstances of the land and of the iconic local farmhouse. It sits amid a harsh landscape in an eighty-acre forest in the

Laurentian Mountains north of Montreal. The land slopes down in a southerly direction towards Lac Grenier. The building is located halfway down the slope on a relatively narrow natural rock shelf, which in turn determined the premise of the formal parti. The shape and the east-west orientation of the shelf dictated the building form: a straightforward elongated, eighteen-foot-wide bar. Furthermore, the house, though modern in detail and plan, has its roots in the traditional Quebecois rural residence with its simple shape, pragmatic roof form, powerful chimneys, and correct placement of building on land. Since the slope, the lake and the view are south facing with respect to the house, the configuration of the plan is a natural consequence of the physical characteristics of the site. The linearity of the house, the location of the specific spaces, the openings in the outer walls, and the circulation, all reflect the specificity of the site. As such, the house is as much an essay in landscaping as one in architecture.

Like a church, the front of the house is its rear. The façade one first encounters is that of the back of the house. It is severe and implies seclusion and protection. The wall is clad with monochromatic sheets of zinc-coated metal and the openings are relatively small and placed according to the exigencies of the plan. The roof above is an uninterrupted inclined plane of aluminum sheeting. The front south façade, on the other hand, is liberally glazed to receive the forest, the sun, and the view of the lake into the house.

Tectonically, the house has a hard outer shell and a soft inner lining. The shell addresses the semi-wild landscape; the lining creates a warm interior generally associated with the traditional log cabin. The sense of severity and enclosure of the outside vanishes once is inside with the comfortable and luminous environment where vertical and horizontal spaces flow into one another. Moreover, the long strips of continuous floor-to-ceiling windows frame the spectacular view of the forest and lake beyond and contribute to the excitement of the space. The manifest opposition between the inside and outside makes for a compelling architectural experience

On the inside, the formal idea is simple, but the richness of the experience is derived from the quality of the material palette and the subtleties in the details of construction. The plain volume of the living room extends at either end into screened porches: the west one for afternoon sunning, the east one a semi-open breakfast area that extends the kitchen. All walls, ceilings and window frames are clad in perfectly matched full-size sheets of semi-varnished Douglas fir plywood. The liner is so finely designed and executed that it compares with the vaunted details of the later minimalist architecture of Mies van der Rohe. The pavement of the entire ground floor is made of large, sawed stones denoting the stone shelf below. At either end are two large chimneys that anchor the double-height space of the living room to the rock shelf. By placing one of the chimneys at the far end of the screened porch rather than between the porch and the living room, the two fireplaces become the bookends holding the combined areas together. It is a simple but effective architectural gesture of termination.

An ingenious planning idea organizes a suite of family rooms and a private study on the upper floor. Placed at the extreme ends of the house the two private zones are physically disconnected from one another. To emphasize their autonomy, each zone is accessible

only by its own staircase making travel from one to the other an unavoidably vigorous descent and ascent along the two symmetrically opposite flights of stairs. This unexpected and perhaps inconvenient duality affords the occupants, the architect, and his wife, a definite “other wing” inside the volume of the house, a spatial luxury usually found in much larger houses.

I was fortunate to visit Maison Goulet on two occasions: the first time for a one-day visit with a number of friends, colleagues and family members, and on a second time for a weekend alone with the Saias. The first visit was marked by the inevitable feeling of awe one encounters when experiencing a unique work of architecture. The second visit, I feared, would produce more critical reactions in me. But in fact, it was during this second stay that I discover the true magic of the place. Only by participating in the life of the occupants, by exploring the surrounding land, and by experiencing a complete 24-hour cycle of living, could I admire the rhetoric and the logic of the design and experience the full emotional dimension of the architecture. I believe Maison Goulet will one day take its place among the great icons of Canadian Modernism, such as the best modern houses of Arthur Erickson, John and Patricia Patkau, Brian MacKay-Lyons or Brigitte Shim and Howard Sutcliffe.