

A JEWEL BOX

NEW HOME DESIGN PUTS INTERIOR ON DISPLAY

WRITTEN BY SHERRY MOELLER

A SUSPENSEFUL DESIGN: Rouzita Vahhabaghai, design partner at ita-design, says the home seems to float at night when the dark pedestal base disappears and the main and upper levels are on display in a glass “jewel box.”



Photographs by Maxwell MacKenzie



Fred Bahrami was “just lucky” when he stumbled upon two NW lots for sale one Sunday night in November 2002. “I pulled my checkbook out on the spot,” he says, to purchase the land that would soon hold his “dream house.”

And to add to his luck, he thought of his friend Rouzita Vahhabaghai, a designer who at the time was with Inscape Studio and has since started her own firm, ita-design, when he began to conceptualize the home. “I wanted a house with a very strong statement, open spaces, high ceilings, lots of light — modern, minimalistic,” Bahrami says. The home design exceeded his expectations. He never imagined it would be so spectacular.

Vahhabaghai sees it as “a jewel box” giving visitors a glimpse of the interior from its tall 22-foot windows framing the first and second floors off the three-story entry tower. “The important thing with every project is how the client sees the spaces” from the beginning, says Vahhabaghai. She, along with Principal Greg Kearley, discussed uses and priorities as well as budget with Bahrami to establish a design with clean lines and plenty of open spaces for entertaining. The layout is transformable; it can be broken up and focal points can change with activities. The first floor can be divided into a public side and a private side, Vahhabaghai adds.

A VERTICAL VISION: The owner says the staircase is a “vertical tunnel,” which at night casts a shadow against the white walls.

Show Stopping

At night, the home has brought traffic to a halt, the owner says. When Vahhabaghai first saw the home at night with the lights aglow, it even made her stop and take notice. "I stood and stared ... it was so shocking for me to see all the elements come together even more dramatically than I had anticipated. You really get a sense of the spaces at night."

The materials along the facade, including the black granite comprising the lower level walls, seem to disappear and only the interior lights remain in focus illuminating the details inside. It's like a floating storefront display, but with privacy shades along the lower windows and glass above revealing the dynamics of a modern home. It has a little mystery about it.

Walking the Walk

As concrete steps unfold outside, the series of folding planes continues inside with the ceiling's floating soffits hiding duct work and revealing lights, invisible doorframes melding into the walls, and black stairs seeming to float against walls of white. "I wanted to blur the boundaries between the interior and the exterior," says the designer, and the wood wrapping the tower inside and out emphasizes this concept. Plus, "you get a sense of the space when you walk in," Bahrami adds. The tower stands out as an object marking the entrance to the home.

A FITTING BEGINNING: The view of the main floor shows how the designer introduced a series of folding planes along the floors, walls, ceilings and stairways.

Warm and Comfy

The fireplace “pulls” away from the wall in the front two-story living room creating an object within space. This area of the home faces south and stays warm during the day in the colder seasons and is kept cool in the warmer months using solar shades. In the center of the main floor is the dining room where Vahhabaghai blocked the upper windows for privacy, but added windows along the floor and side to hint at the outdoors and to offer a glimpse of the bamboo lining parts of the side pathway.

The owner’s lounge or gathering room off the kitchen is the more private and informal side of the first floor where the owner watches TV in comfort.

Industrial Meets Functional

Lighting reflects against the glass tiles separating the top and bottom walnut-finished wood cabinets in the stylish kitchen. Wood in rich finishes, such as the Brazilian cherry flooring and Brazilian walnut-clad walls of the interior and exterior, shows the owner’s love of deep grains. Vertical and horizontal wood cladding, which is used throughout the house to further emphasize the direction of the folding planes and the objects they create, adds an element of warmth and rhythm to the spaces inside and out.

Then cable wires form the rails of the stairway leading to one of the home’s lofts, which becomes an extension of the owner’s suite on the second floor. Here the designer starts a visual connection to the

front of the home with three-foot divides in the railing that mimic the three-foot mullions in the windows.

A sliding shoji screen provides privacy for the bedroom as well as the large bathroom, which incorporates frosted glass around the steam shower, freestanding sinks, and a tub that seems to float above the floor into the minimalistic design. Bahrami favors minimal, open spaces in his home. “It’s pure and clean,” adds Vahhabaghai, while giving a glimpse of the outdoors with the lower panoramic window located at eye level above the tub. “We even checked the measurement of Fred’s height relative to the window level to be sure the view is framed in a comfortable eye-level position while using the tub,” the designer says.

Quiet or Not

One of Vahhabaghai’s favorite spots is the Zen space within the tower on the second floor above the entrance. It offers the right mix of serenity and light, while the third floor is completely open allowing the owner to close off the areas later if more bedroom suites are needed. The entire third floor is clad in wood on the outside to break up the mass of the home. This wooden box then “floats” above the horizontal line of windows that run along the entire base of the floor, Vahhabaghai says.

Balconies on each floor, which double as entertainment areas, also bring a taste of the town into the spaces with the rooftop deck, situated 40 feet above grade, offering the best views over the parapets.

A HOT SPOT: The sun blazes through the towering windows in the winter months and warms the wide-open living room. “Space is the first thing you notice” here with its depth, height and light, Bahrami says.





COMMERCIAL GRADE: A walnut finish graces the wood cabinets in the kitchen, which includes frosted glass and stainless steel accents.

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What's Next

To the right of this residence, Vahhabaghai has designed another home with similar aesthetics for Bahrami, president of Commercial Real Estate Services (CRES). "There's a lot of animation," between his 7,000-square-foot home and the new 3,500-square-foot home next door, he adds. Both homes "play with geometries," Vahhabaghai says. The new home with its metal and cable *brise-soleil* will create a transparent wall that will link Bahrami's home with the neighboring properties.

Remembering Roots

Born in Iran, Vahhabaghai grew up in Rockville and attended Catholic University where she received a degree in architecture before returning to Iran to work with an architectural firm for a few years. There she learned the building techniques and materials, which were mostly concrete and brick, used in the country. She also dealt with the challenges of the topography when designing villas in the Damavand Mountains.

Vahhabaghai returned to the US and worked with Inscape Studio, where she

was project lead for the prototype Relief International's Women's Development Centers in Afghanistan. Relief International, a non-profit humanitarian organization, sent Vahhabaghai and Kearley of Inscape Studio to pitch the project directly to the Minister of Women's Affairs in Kabul and to check the actual site in Jalalabad where one of the Centers was to be built. This flexible design offered unique public and private courtyards.

Once Vahhabaghai visited the communities and bonded with the women and young girls, "the centers took on a new meaning," she says. "What an amazing feeling to be involved in something that is more than architecture, and such a great symbol of strength for women."

Now with her own design firm, ita-design, for the last two years, which she started with her sister, Bita, who specializes in graphic design, Vahhabaghai is working on several projects, including consulting with Bahrami on a luxury condominium project in DC.

Rouzita and Bita Vahhabaghai also work on product and furniture design projects. They have a handbag collection for men and women using unconventional materials, such as wood, on the horizon as well. **ws**



MOVING FORWARD: Rouzita Vahhabaghai continues to consult with Bahrami on his projects as design partner at ita-design.

RESOURCES

- **ita-design**
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202.625.4864, www.ita-design.com
- **Commercial Real Estate Services (CRES)**
3611 R Street, NW
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- **Inscape Studio**
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