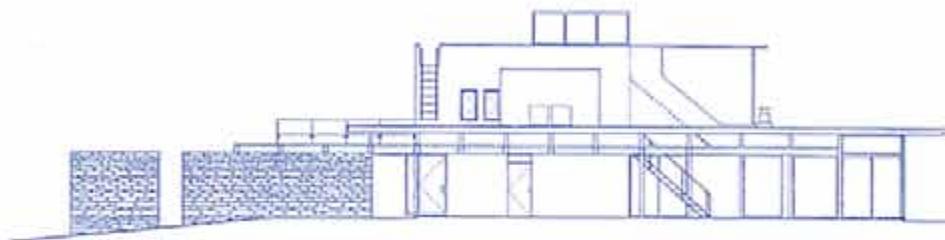


# AMERICAN MASTERWORKS

HOUSES OF THE 20TH AND 21ST CENTURIES



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*RIZZOLI*  
NEW YORK



SR+T ARCHITECTS / KARLA ROTHSTEIN &  
JOEL TOWERS  
ROSS HOUSE, 1995–1997

BALLSTON LAKE, SARATOGA, NEW YORK



This work, designed by two young architects at the very onset of their careers, may be seen as a diminutive masterwork in as much as the commission enabled them to demonstrate in a single work all they had learned during their graduate education, not only at the level of plan and section but also in terms of the sophistication they were able to bring to the detailing and construction of the house. The result also

testifies to the faith of the clients, who still live in the house, given that they were willing to risk an unorthodox approach to their primary residence, situated on an idyllic site overlooking Ballston Lake, in Saratoga County, New York State. That the house was conceived as a sensitive but didactic exercise is confirmed by the architects' account of their initial intentions:



*Our design was shaped by a reflexive relationship between house and environment. The Adirondack summer camp style, comprised as it is of spacious overhung porches for sheltered outdoor summer living, from which residents retreat in winter in favor of centrally located dining and living rooms heated by wood burning stoves, informed the organization of this house. The topography of the site—a lightly wooded swath of land 615 feet (187 meters) long, that slopes from a rural road on the east to the lake front edge on the west, 70 feet (21 meters) below—drove our approach to the building and our decision to honor that landscape by constructing a roof-form that floats above the*

*descending terrain, while asserting a strong leading edge off of which the volume and the program of the house unfold. We carried these three elements—responsiveness to microclimate, landscape, and a clear reading of the structural and material character of the house—into a modern social and spatial context. The house attempts to negotiate continuity in the character of the local landscape with an emergent, modern sensibility.*

What is remarkable about this modest house is that its plan is almost an ideogram, consisting as it does of two precast, reinforced concrete spine walls slightly offset from each other but mutually embedded in the site like two parallel blades that descend a precipitous wooded slope toward the lake. Both of these walls are oriented east/west and where the one is anchored to the kitchen/bathroom core while extending eastward as a retaining wall to the ramped drive descending to the garage, the other, two stories in height, flanks the northern face of the stair hall leading to service facilities beneath. The gap between these two wall-planes accommodates a generous elevated terrace and entry from the east, whereupon one finds oneself in a high living room set before an equally generous veranda facing the lake.



Despite its elaborate sectional organization and the contrapuntal play with butterfly and monopitched roofs over different zones of the house, the bulk of the accommodation is on the main living level, which is subtly articulated in plan and section so as to create different "settings" in different sectors of what is essentially a single space. In this respect, the southern wall of the dining area is canted in such a way as to open toward a small balcony and a view of the lake beyond. The narrow end of the trapezoidal dining space leads directly to the only bedroom, which is raised some four steps above the datum of the living area. This subtle spatial organization stems from the placement of the central core, namely the kitchen/bathroom, the kitchen being planned in such a way as to serve with almost equal ease both the dining and the living space. In a parallel manner, the closed volume of the bathroom shields the bedroom from what would otherwise be a totally open plan. The rotary movement around the core is suggested by the position of the freestanding stove, together with its tubular metal chimney. A straight flight connects the living level to the lower ground floor, thereby affording access to the garage

and to an exercise room with a window onto the lake at the lower level. While isolating the garage from the living room, this stair also serves to access basement storage and laundry facilities.

The poetic character of this house, which from the exterior seems larger than it is, depends to a great degree on the contrast and interplay between two totally different modes of construction; on the one hand, the aforementioned precast concrete walls and, on the other, the wood framed, horizontal boarded construction typical of the region. The formal, technical, and conceptual interaction between these two tectonic modes has been lucidly characterized by the architects themselves:

*The house is fabricated of sandblasted precast concrete panels, glass, and wood. The assembled precast concrete wall serves as an eccentric spine, supporting the floors as they reach to the eastern, southern, and western extents of the house. The material and spatial density of the precast concrete shelters the dwelling from the prevailing winds while its assembled mass grounds it to the site. The lightness of the glass and wood counterbalance the concrete, opening the house, in both plan and section, to the surrounding landscape.*



*Together the wood and concrete establish a hybrid, stable structure, while the glass and concrete create a dialectic of heavy and light, expanding toward the lake and sky.*

The spine walls of the house were built up out of fourteen precast, prestressed concrete panels, each of a different shape and with different apertures, and each being seven inches thick, eight feet eight inches wide and assembled into position with a tower crane. Once each individual panel was hoisted into position, it was joined to the in situ concrete ground slab through metal plates already cast into the slab. The panels were then sandblasted to eliminate any superficial irregularities. In a subsequent phase, lower decks were poured, wooden floors were constructed, and the framed walls erected together with their roofs.

Among the most striking aspects of this work is the rhythmic character of the concrete walls, particularly as the taller of the two steps down the slope along with the seams between the panels. The syncopation of windows, large and small along the north elevation, contributes to this harmonic effect, as does the butterfly roof over the main volume projecting out toward the lake. The large overhangs of the roofs and the deep eaves give the building the profile of an oriental pavilion; this character is amplified by the timber fenestration and by the cedar boarding covering the east, south, and west elevations.

With the greatest subtlety, the architecture of Le Corbusier is a latent presence in this work as we may judge from the handling of the garage as though it were a "dock," which makes a reference to Le Corbusier's *Maison Jaoul* of 1956. The rhythmic fenestration of the north walls is equally indebted to Le Corbusier, only in this instance the reference is the *Ronchamp chapel*, which dates from the same period. Even the overhanging roof suggests the silhouette of Le Corbusier's unbuilt *MAS-house* prototype of 1940.