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Architecture
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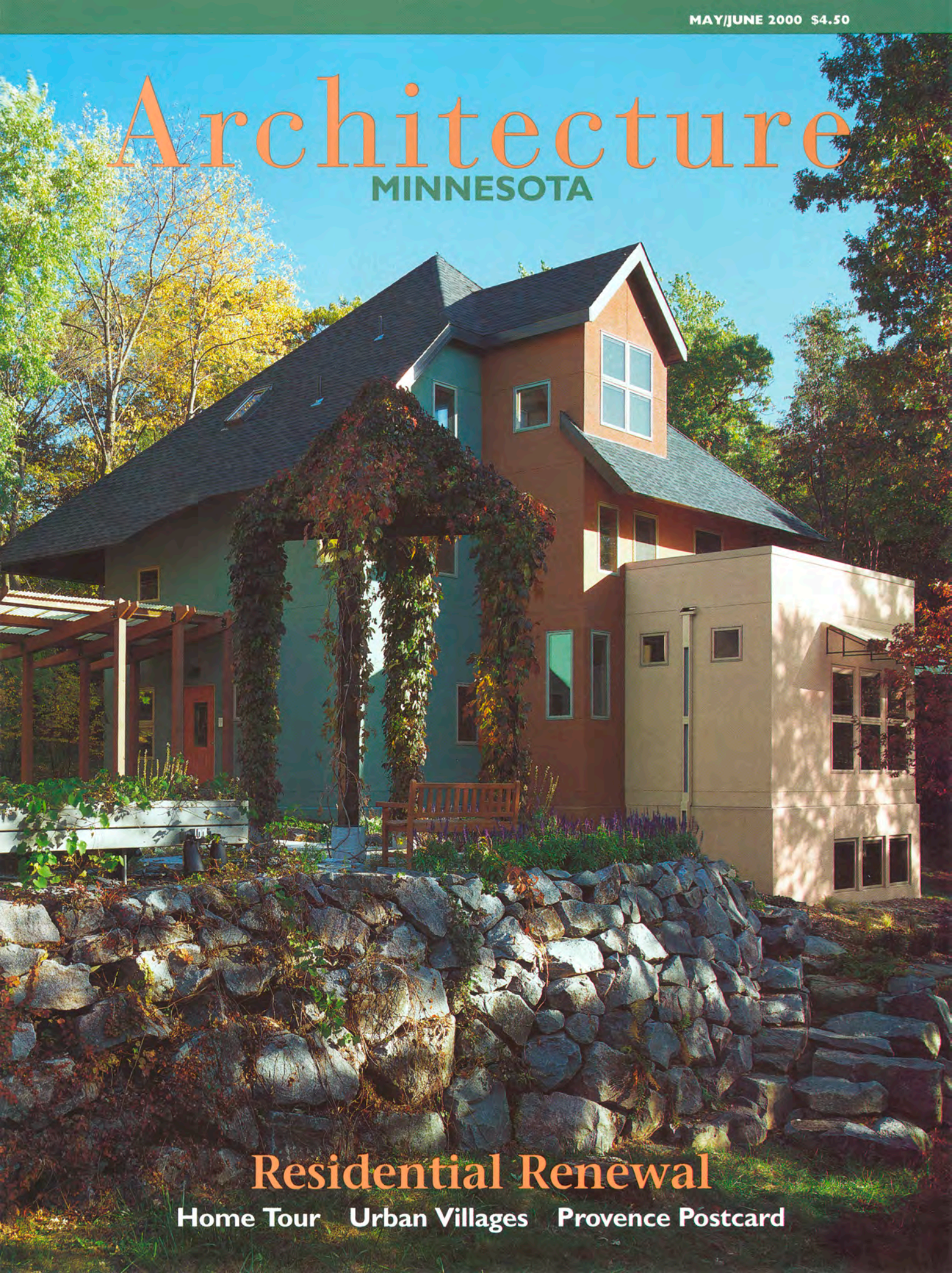

Residential Renewal

Home Tour Urban Villages Provence Postcard

An architect rethinks the midwestern stucco house by merging site concerns with her modernist sensibility

By Camille LeFevre

Meadow Modern

KAREN MELVIN

Architect Rosemary McMonigal and her husband, Jim Korba, had long enjoyed living in an urban neighborhood, with its energy, bustle and proximity to such amenities as a library, post office and coffee shops. But one day they fell in love with a wooded suburban lot near Lake Owasso in Roseville. Located next to a wetland and wildflower preserve, the site included a grove of old-growth oaks.

"For us, this location bridged an important lifestyle issue for us," explains McMonigal, principal, McMonigal Architects, Minneapolis. "Everyone we know has cabins and we wish we had one, but our jobs and lifestyles don't allow for that. So finding a spot that's a getaway in a first-ring suburb opened our minds to living in the 'burbs. We decided we could trade neighborhood amenities for more openness, privacy and a natural setting."

For five years McMonigal pondered what shape her new house would take. At the same time, she deepened her respect for the oak-savanna ecosystem at the 3-acre site, with its mature oaks, profusion of native wildflowers and low-lying marsh along the west side. "We decided to spread out as little as possible," she explains. "So we pulled in and pushed up instead. But we still wanted strong architectural definition. That's where the interlocking cubes came in."

McMonigal's design solution was to create three vertical cubes that intersect, which gave a distinctive profile to the house exterior and defined living spaces inside. A hip-style roof unifies the three cube elements into a stylish whole. And while the interior has a spacious feel, the 3-level house has a footprint of less than 1,000 square feet.

"As soon as I captured this notion of how to have less of an impact on the site, I started exploring the traditional stucco, midwestern house," McMonigal explains. "They were strong, square and blockish houses with hip roofs and widely overhanging eaves that hugged this squarish mass. So I explored the idea of what makes a modern, midwestern stucco house."

The result is a sculptural assembly of simple, colorful forms: the clay tone of one cube was inspired by the color of dried oak leaves; the tan color of another cube reflects the sandy soil and rock outcroppings on the site; the third cube has the greenish cast of leaves in summertime. Protective roofs and awnings keep out hot sun in summer and allow in winter's low light. And a series of outdoor garden rooms increases the pleasure of this suburban-woodland home.

Inside, the house features an open floor plan aglow with the honey hues of maple cabinetry (including functional built-ins) and

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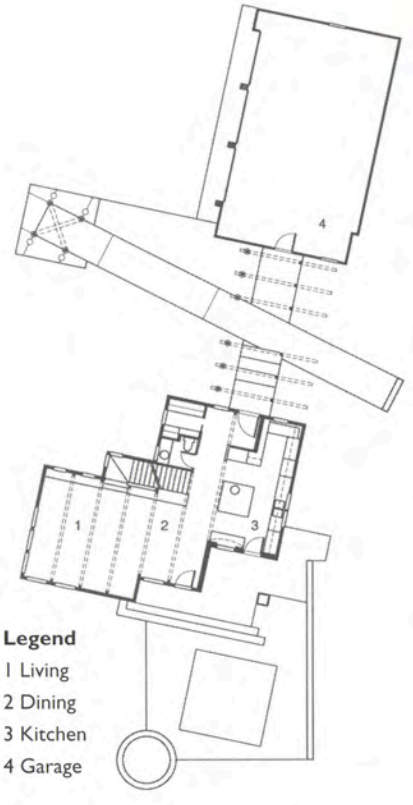

Legend
1 Living
2 Dining
3 Kitchen
4 Garage

flooring. "People think of modern houses as being stark, cold and white," McMonigal says, "but you can bring in color and warmth while enjoying a contemporary, open plan." The first floor, which includes living room, half bath, kitchen and dining room, is also warmed by sunlight streaming in from walls of windows.

The second floor includes two bedrooms and a bath that also functions as the laundry room. A small rooftop deck is "our perch for sunset, panoramic views of the wetlands," McMonigal says. The architect uses an intimate third level (the house's square footage decreases with its height) as a studio, in which she paints and creates textile art. Future owners, she says, could use this space as a master-bedroom suite, as it does include a bath.

McMonigal also designed the house to be as energy-efficient as possible. The prefabricated walls, shipped from Canada, feature an interior insulation core between studs to provide thermal break. Sheathing was field installed to reduce shipping weight and allow the control of joint placement. Inside the house, load-bearing beams and posts are exposed to allow outside walls to remain well insulated.

As such, the house is one of several currently being evaluated by the University of Minnesota and the State of Minnesota to determine new energy codes for housing. "We have equipment set up in the house for testing air quality and energy efficiency," McMonigal says. "I'm interested in learning how a contemporary house can perform well and be a healthy house."

As to whether she ever feels as though she's living in a laboratory, McMonigal laughs and says, "Well, I suppose so. But it's a very comfortable one, with beautiful views at that."

Korba and McMonigal Residence
Roseville, Minn.
McMonigal Architects, Minneapolis