

Star Tribune/AIA home of the month

The Home of the Month appears in the Sunday Homes section the first Sunday of every month. The program, a partnership between the Star Tribune and the Minnesota chapter of the American Institute of Architects, features architect-designed houses selected by a jury of experts. The houses represent a range of prices, styles and locations.



Photos provided by ALTUS ARCHITECTURE + DESIGN

Stuart and Alexandrine Harris built a modern home that reflects their design sense on a wooded Minnetonka lot. The far living room wall is composed of storefront windows framed in aluminum.

streamlined DESIGN within reach

European couple brings their love for functional modernism to Minnetonka.

By LYNN UNDERWOOD • lunderwood@startribune.com

Neither Stuart nor Alexandrine Harris lived in a contemporary style home while growing up. But as Europeans (Stuart is from the United Kingdom and Alexandrine is from France) they were steeped in modern design.

Alexandrine lived in an old house with the modern interiors favored by her family. Stuart's design sense was influenced by the many innovative modern buildings in Rotterdam, Netherlands, where he lived for a time.

The Harrises gravitated to modern design for its minimalist qualities as well as for its practicality.

"The beauty of modernist style is the elements of functionality and the use of space and light," Alexandrine said.

In 1998, the couple moved to Minnesota and lived in a soft contemporary suburban home. Three years ago the Harrises decided to take their appreciation for modern design to the next level: They built an ultra-modern home composed of glass, concrete blocks and fiber cement panels on a wooded lot in Minnetonka.

"We wanted a home that reflected our taste and was truly our design from the ground up," Stuart said.

AIA continues on H4 ▶



Above: The home's exterior is composed of charcoal-colored concrete block on the first level and ochre fiber cement panels on the second level. This backyard view shows the "land pier" or hill, that was built to create a terrace off the kitchen. Steps lead down to the lower-level walk-out.



Left: The Harris boys are at the corner living room window overlooking the lower-level walkout and a flat backyard play area.

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◀ AIA FROM H1

They hired architect Tim Alt, of Altus Architecture + Design in Minneapolis, to design a modern structure that included efficient, multifunctional spaces, abundant natural light, easy access to the outdoors and designated play areas inside and out for their two young sons.

"We also wanted to be able to see the boys outside from anywhere in the house," Alexandrine said.

At the same time, the Harrises wanted the 4,000-square-foot four-bedroom modernist home to be in harmony with the surrounding landscape. In fact, they bought the deep wooded lot for the abundance of mature trees, including a lovely tamarack tree at the front of the property. To save that tree, Alt asked the city for a variance for the home's setback. "The tree was a critical piece of the landscape," Alt said, so critical that he positioned the home's front entrance near the tamarack.

Alt also modified the natural gradation of the site to create a flat back-yard play area for the boys. Next to that he constructed a "land pier," or hill, to form a terrace. The story-high hill, now covered in low-mow fescue grass, acts as an alternative to a traditional deck by providing access to the outdoors from both the main level and walk-out level.

The organic sculpted land and tree shapes provide an interesting contrast to the pristine simplicity of the home, said Alt. "One of my favorite things is how the shadows of the trees change the character of the house," he said.

Mod exterior

A long curving driveway leads to the home's front entrance. One's first impression is of the structure's strong geometric lines enhanced by horizontal clerestory windows and a boxy, L-shaped design. Most of the first lev-

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Stuart Harris

el is charcoal-colored concrete block and the second level is ochre-hued fiber cement panels attached with exposed stainless steel fasteners.

"We liked the combination of warm ochre and the industrial gray block," Stuart said.

The low-maintenance, dark concrete block also forms three interior walls as well as the kitchen backsplash. Alt used the concrete block for its economical qualities — it required only a one-step finishing process and was both the foundation and finished material.

"The Harrises were open to using non-traditional materials," said Alt. "Not everyone would love burnished concrete block as the base aesthetic. But they embraced it and trusted me."

Window to the world

The interior also features nontraditional elements. The far living room wall is composed of four floor-to-ceiling storefront windows framed in aluminum, which give an unspolled view of the back-yard and the trees beyond. "We feel like we're right in the middle of the garden," Alexandrine said.

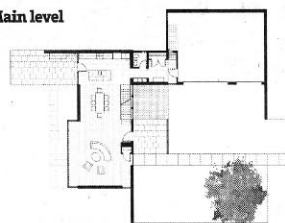
Alt installed a screen made of stainless steel cables, typically used as a handrail, on the open staircase for security as well as for the screen's transparency.



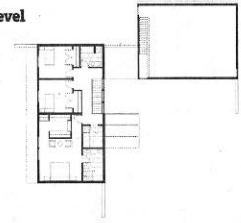
Provided by ALTUS ARCHITECTURE + DESIGN

The minimalist kitchen is a combination of warm maple cabinets with a cool slate floor, black granite center island and gray concrete backsplash. Clerestory windows draw in light, yet provide privacy from the house next door.

Main level



Upper level



"The screen allows you to see out the front entry windows," said Alt. "And the staircase feels less heavy."

The multifunctional open floor plan encompasses the living and dining rooms and a slate-and-maple kitchen, which has a bank of clerestory windows that draw in light, yet maintain privacy from the house next door.

"The floor plan is very communal," said Alexandrine. "We can cook and gather together all in one space."

The Harris boys have their own awesome space above the three-car garage. Alt built a 36-by-26-foot playroom where they can shoot baskets and play floor hockey all year long. The best part? It's not a cold, windowless basement, said Stuart.

Even the lower level of the house isn't a cold, windowless basement. Alt designed the space to hold an office with in-floor heat and a large window, which offers a view of the backyard. There's also a guest suite for visiting European relatives.

With the completed home nestled among the trees, the family has imported a piece

of their modernist European heritage to Minnetonka.

"We wanted our new house to look cool," said Stuart. "But most of all, we wanted practical spaces we enjoy living in and [that] work for our lifestyle."

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ABOUT THIS PROJECT

What: New Minnetonka residence with four bedrooms and 3½ bathrooms.

Design team: Architects Tim Alt, Roger Cummelin and Tammy Angaran, Altus Architecture + Design, Minneapolis; www.altusarch.com.

Size: 4,000 square feet.

Cost: \$135 a square foot (includes landscaping).

Online: To see a photo gallery, go to www.startribune.com/homes.