

TAILOR-MADE

Unique design choices give homeowner custom-built home

BY PHILLIPA RISPIN • PHOTOGRAPHY: ERICH SAIDE • STYLING: BRENDAN POWER



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THE CASUAL OBSERVER taking a first look at this house would probably notice several things: the freestanding glassed-in elevator, the spectacular stairwell of reclaimed wood blocks stretching from basement to second storey; clean lines, large windows, and plenty of light.

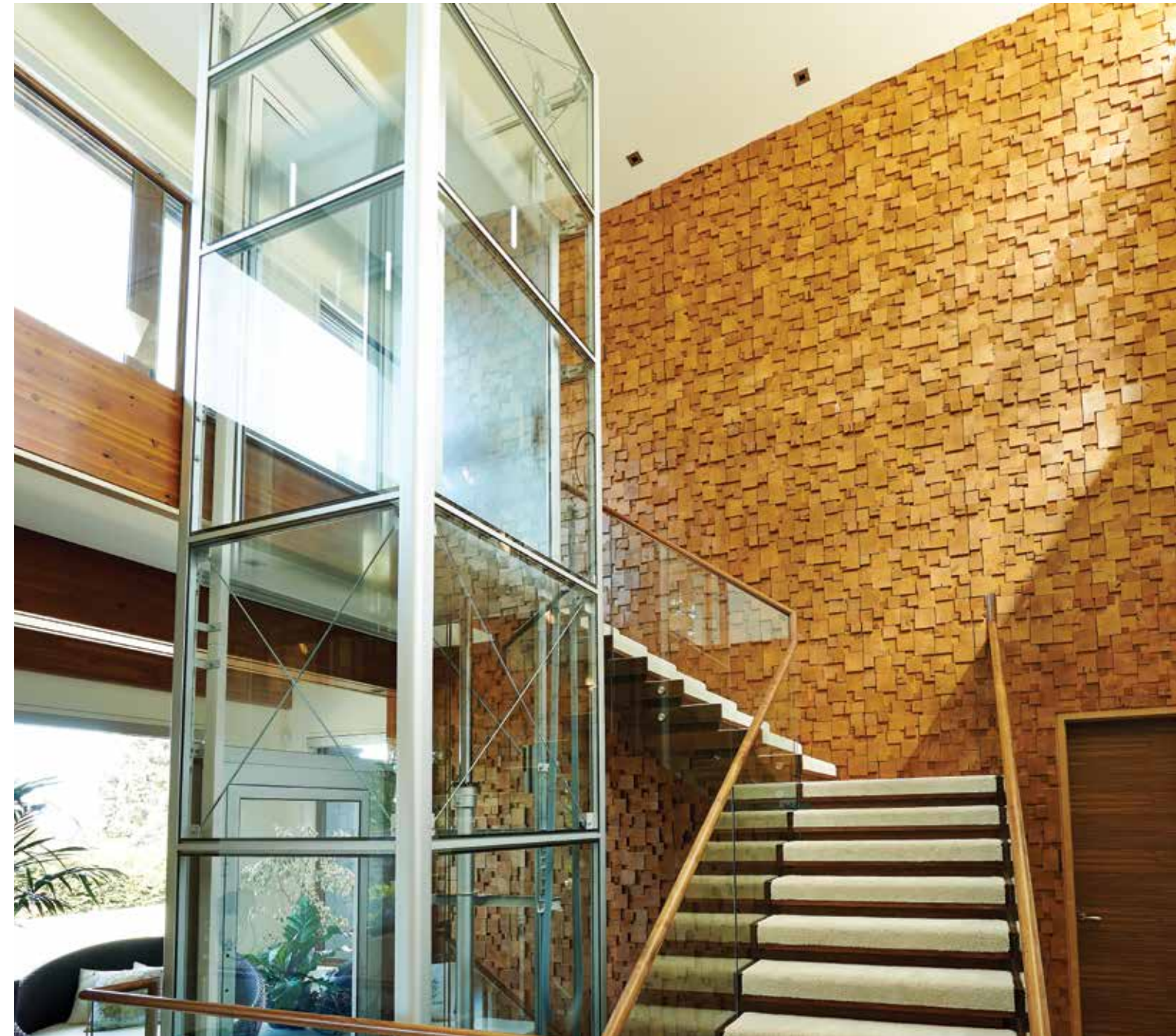
A closer look, however, would reveal unusual design and decor choices: no living room, only a partial wall between the kitchen and the dining area, no sofas in the family room, no obvious closet in the master bedroom, baseboards flush with the walls.

These are all reflections of the unique desires of the homeowner, realized by architect John Henshaw and interior designer Joy Chao, partners in business and in life. “This home was designed for the long term,” says Henshaw, explaining that the homeowner, who is in her mid-forties and has two adult children living with her, kept her eventual retirement in mind when discussing the design of the house.

“The main-floor den can work as a bedroom,” says Chao. “The hallways and doorways are wide enough for a wheelchair. The house is built to a certain degree following universal access design principles, and it can be further adapted in the future.”

The feature wall in the stairwell is made of four-foot-by-four-foot modules of reclaimed fir blocks.

“Because it’s reclaimed fir, even though there is a pattern to it, each piece when they cut it looked very different,” says interior designer Joy Chao. Wall, stair treads: Mike Anderson Furniture.



But it was built in the present for current needs, too. "This is a hard-working house," Chao says. "The homeowner wanted a home where she could entertain family and close friends. She wanted it to be more spacious. She had specific ideas as to how the space should be divided. For instance, there's no formal living room, because whoever is invited to visit will be close to her."

So where will guests be entertained? In the dining area, around the dining table, cleverly designed by Chao and her team; it has a hydraulic lift so the tabletop can be lowered. Presto! The dining room becomes a living room, with comfortable chairs gathered around what is now a coffee table. The family room is less of a guest entertaining space and more of a TV room for the homeowner and children, so individual chairs for watching seemed a suitable choice.

The initial design of the house, the basic shell and the grounds were decided early in the building process. Landscaping, done by landscape architect Ron Rule, is extensive. There are big areas with their own characteristics, such as water features—a fountain on one side, a Japanese garden with a water feature on another—that mask the noise of traffic on nearby Marine Dr. The house has a large southern exposure, so many photovoltaic panels were installed. ☞



(This page) In the dual-purpose living-dining area, a cleverly designed table is just right for dining but can be lowered to become a coffee table. Table: Corian, fabricated by Eagle Iron and SSC Countertops; chairs: Bo Concept. (Bottom, right) The kitchen has a bright dining nook with a more conventional table, custom-made in pecan by Live Edge Design. (Opposite) The kitchen island and countertops are Volga Blue granite, and Crema Marfil marble tiles cover the floor. The extensive walnut cabinetry that extends into the living-dining area is, like that in the rest of the house, fabricated by Sage Cabinetry.





(This page) The homeowner wanted the main-floor powder room to evoke Bali, and for family and friends to feel as though they were washing in a pool of water. The basin, from Robinson Lighting and Bath, is solid granite. The luminous countertop is by Joel Berman Glass Studio. (Opposite) The media room is strictly for family and is carpeted in broadloom for comfort. The bifold doors on the right give access to a covered porch. The windows at the far end of the room frame views of a park next to the property.

The interior, however, was designed and then changed as construction progressed. “The aesthetic is contemporary and as open as possible,” Henshaw says. “The homeowner is fond of natural wood and fir; thus we put in lots of beams. Ceilings are almost 12 feet on the main floor, and 10 feet upstairs and in the basement. There are big windows, and a big light well in the basement, for as much natural light as possible.”

Those decisions were the easy part. The demanding part extended throughout the building process. “We knew there would be a lot of thinking, ideas going back and forth as we went along, because the client needed to see things,” Chao says. “She constantly came up with new ideas. She was very involved.”

That process kept construction somewhat slower than usual but also offered opportunities to get things right. “That main stair, I

didn’t design it until quite late in the project in terms of exactly what it would look like and how we were going to build it,” Henshaw recalls.

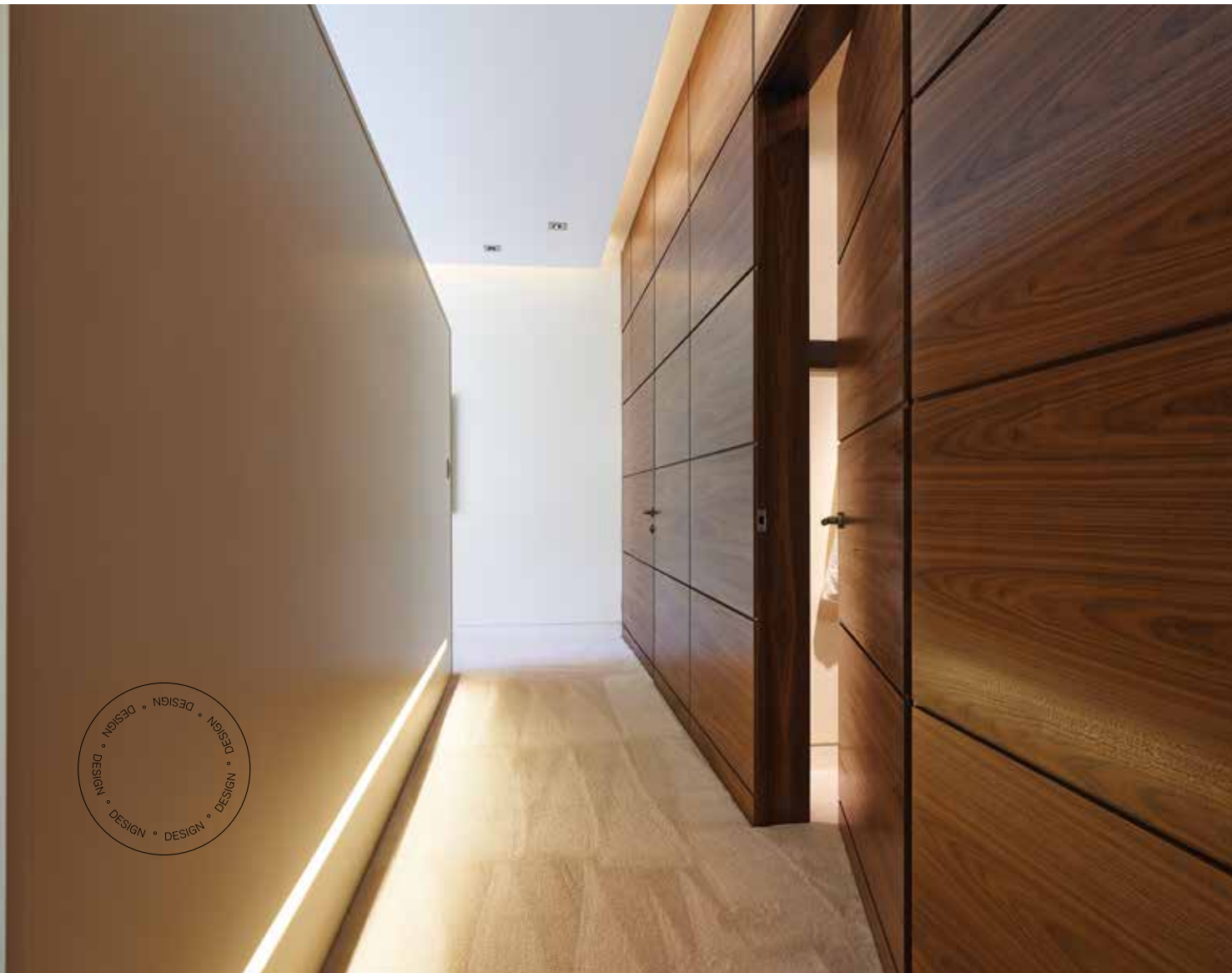
“And the feature wall behind the stairs took a good six months to figure out what would make the client happy,” Chao adds. “We did many versions of the design.”

The staircase and stairwell are showstoppers, but there are less obvious design and construction details that are equally impressive. ☞



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Behind the headboard in the master bedroom, a walkway leads to several closets and the master bathroom. The grain of the walnut panelling is bookmatched for an elegant effect. The floor-level lighting can be left on all night for safety. Here, as in all bedrooms in the house, the floors are carpeted for noise suppression and a lush feeling.



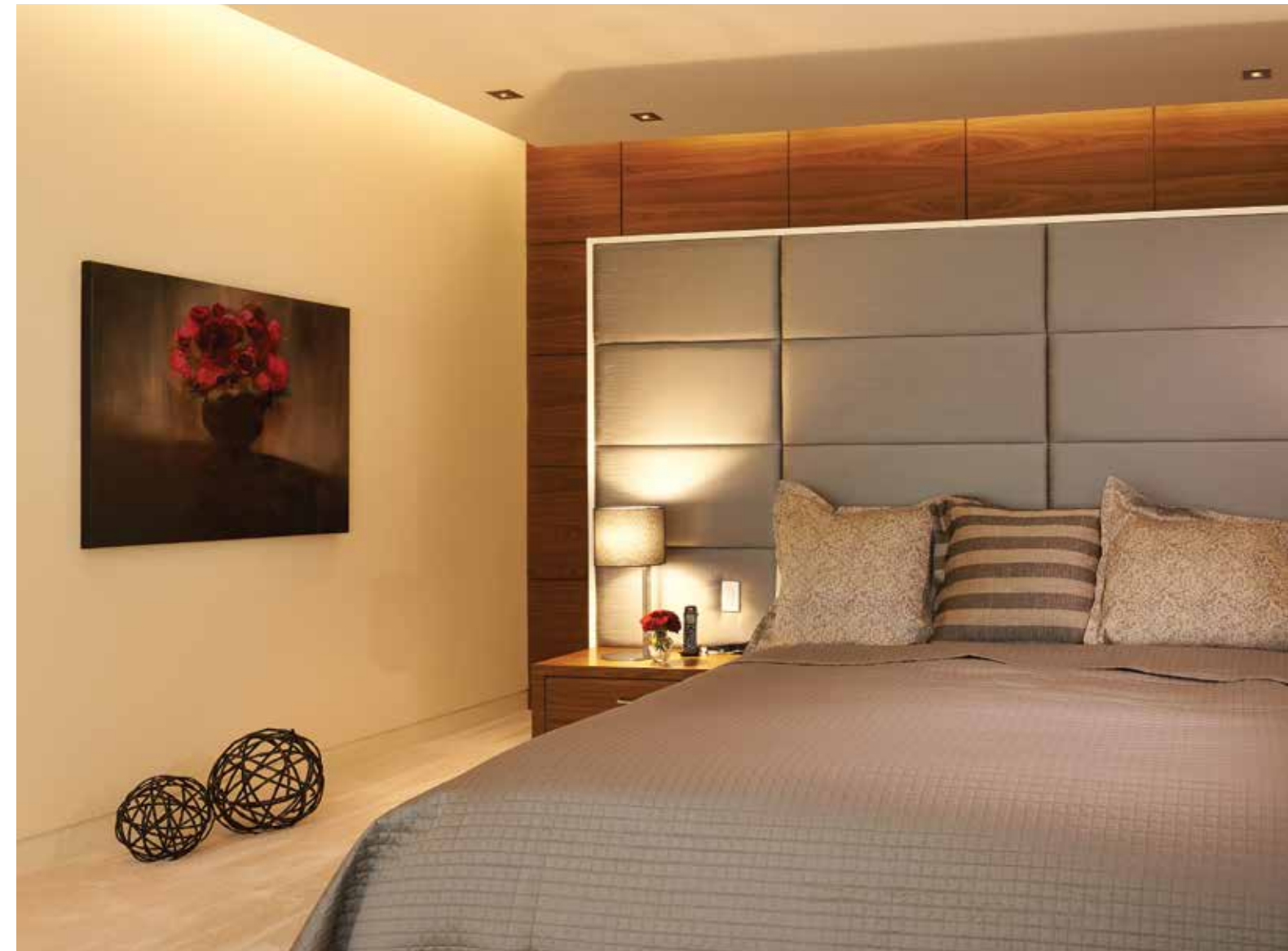
“Contemporary houses are sometimes a lot more difficult than traditional homes to build,” Chao points out. “Because the line is so simple, there’s not a lot of room for errors. For instance, all the baseboards are flush with the drywall, concealed, so that required ingenuity. Traditionally, when you have a wall built, you have drywall installed, then you put on the baseboard, and then you hang the door at the last. Because we did concealed baseboards, the

baseboards had to be put in before the drywall was put on. The doors had to be hung to make sure everything was level. Then the drywall had to be installed. Tolerances in this house are very, very tight. If there was just a quarter inch out of whack, you’d see it right away.”

Henshaw is generous in his praise of the team from general contractor Copa Development. For example, “Drywall has different levels of finish,” he says. “Normally, if you go

into a house, it’s a level three or level four finish; if you want it really good, it’s level five. These guys went above and beyond level five. Officially there is no level eight finish, but we joke that they’ve gone through the walls so many times, it is like a level eight finish.”

A large upholstered headboard in the master bedroom was built in place to conceal the row of closets and the entrance to the bathroom.



“It was quite a challenge. A lot was designed as we went along, and we allowed for the possibility of redesign.”

The end result is a large (7,500 square feet) home with a master suite, two bedrooms with ensuite bathrooms, and a private office upstairs. In the basement, there's a spa area with a pool, an open recreation area, a laundry, and the housekeeper's bedroom and bathroom. The ground floor features a large kitchen, the dining/living area, the family room, and the show-stopping foyer, elevator and stairwell.

It's a tailor-made home, designed with care, executed with care, and offering care-free living for the homeowner who got exactly what she wanted. Despite the numerous redesigns and unusual requests, Henshaw and Chao enjoyed the project.

“Our interior designers had to do a lot of work to satisfy the client and her children, who had their own requirements for their rooms,” Henshaw says. “It was quite a challenge. A lot was designed as we went along, and we allowed for the possibility of redesign.”

“It was great to work with a client willing to wait while we came up with solutions,” Chao says. “We had the luxury to think about it. I wish all clients were like that.”

The rooftop deck looks to the southwest. To the right, there are photovoltaic panels; three kinds are installed on the roofs of the house and the garage to augment the general power supply, especially for heating the house and the indoor pool.