



The 3,200-square-foot Northumberland County home combines clean, clear modernist sculpting on the interior with a highly simplified, abstracted traditionalism on the exterior. PHOTOS BY TOM ARBAN

An unpretentious wintry weekend refuge



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If she designed only for her own delight, Toronto architect Cindy Rendely would probably give every one of her houses a flat roof. That's because she is a long-standing admirer of European modernism and its fertile commitment to boxy, squared-off shapes. You might also say that flat roofs, strong horizontal lines and 90-degree angles speak to Ms. Rendely's soul.

She is not, however, a fundamentalist in this matter. When an interesting Toronto professional couple of the pitched-roof persuasion turned up at Ms. Rendely's office not long ago, bringing with them a remarkable 100-acre site in Ontario's rural Northumberland County, it didn't take a lot of arm-twisting for the architect to agree to give them the sharp peaks they were looking for. The resulting 3,200-square-foot weekend refuge handsomely combines clean, clear modernist sculpting of interior space with a highly simplified, abstracted traditionalism on the exterior.

Given the dwelling's prominent situation, high on a broad, treeless hilltop in rolling farmland, the architectural nod to its steeply pitched roof gives to the barns and Victorian farmhouses round about is a notably polite gesture. This nod helps soften the impact of the building on its lovely neighbourhood – an impact that could have been rude, if the house had been inclined to brag about its modernity. The roofline also gives the structure a sense of belonging to the old, well-worked landscape – an attractive quality that is usually absent in city or suburban residential schemes carelessly transposed into rural settings.

But I don't want to give the impression that there is anything folksy or antiquarian about Ms.



Rendely's very contemporary wood-framed house. Far from it. The pitch of the galvanized aluminum roof over the building is dramatically acute (44 degrees), not bland or routine. Clad in wooden siding prepainted in a light grey shade and punctuated by large windows, the exterior is devoid of ornament, very plain, even a little austere. As Ms. Rendely explained to me when we visited the place one sunny afternoon a couple of weeks ago, the general form of the building was intended to recall a child's line-drawing of a house: a direct, no-nonsense illustration of "house-ness" in the most artless visual language possible.

While delivering this thought-out simplicity in its overall sense and shape, Ms. Rendely's design is rather more finely detailed than

what kids have in mind when they sketch a house.

The central volume is a long, narrow, open-plan pavilion containing the kitchen, the dining area (with seating for 10) and an informal living-room arrangement of furniture to one side of the massive, dark-tiled fireplace. Lined with Douglas fir plywood, the pitched ceiling over these zones rises to a summit more than 15 feet over the floor.

The exterior walls bounding these regions of the house have been exploded by broad, sensitively placed windows that open toward splendid views in all directions. Nearby, to the north, lie cornfields, and a vast black barn stands at the distant edge of the furrows. The south-facing windows frame a wonderful scene composed of the grey limestone



terrace and swimming pool (a few steps below the house), hilly farmland beyond, and, very far away, a wide expanse of Lake Ontario shoreline.

A cube enclosing a guest suite pops out from under the roof at the west end of the corridor-like, single-storey central element. Toward the other end, the building rises to two storeys, and there, on the upper level of this block, Ms. Rendely has put the spacious, high-ceilinged master bedroom suite. The project's composition is completed by a separate studio building angled 15 degrees from the long axis of the main plan – a jaunty move that breaks up the otherwise straight, steady march of architecture across the hilltop.

In reviews of the many houses I visit in the course of a year, I rarely comment on the way the own-

ers decorate their places. This column is mainly about architecture and the people who make it, after all, not the tastes of clients. I'm making an exception in this case, however, because Ms. Rendely's clients have done an especially fine job of understanding and complementing her design.

The couple's interests in home furnishings run to mass-produced things from the post-war heyday of American industrial design – the plastic chairs of Charles and Ray Eames, for example, Coca-Cola's famous red button sign, and so on. These items of popular culture are refreshingly free of high-art airs and graces and laborious historicizing. They seem very much at home in the similarly unpretentious house Cindy Rendely has created for them to live in.