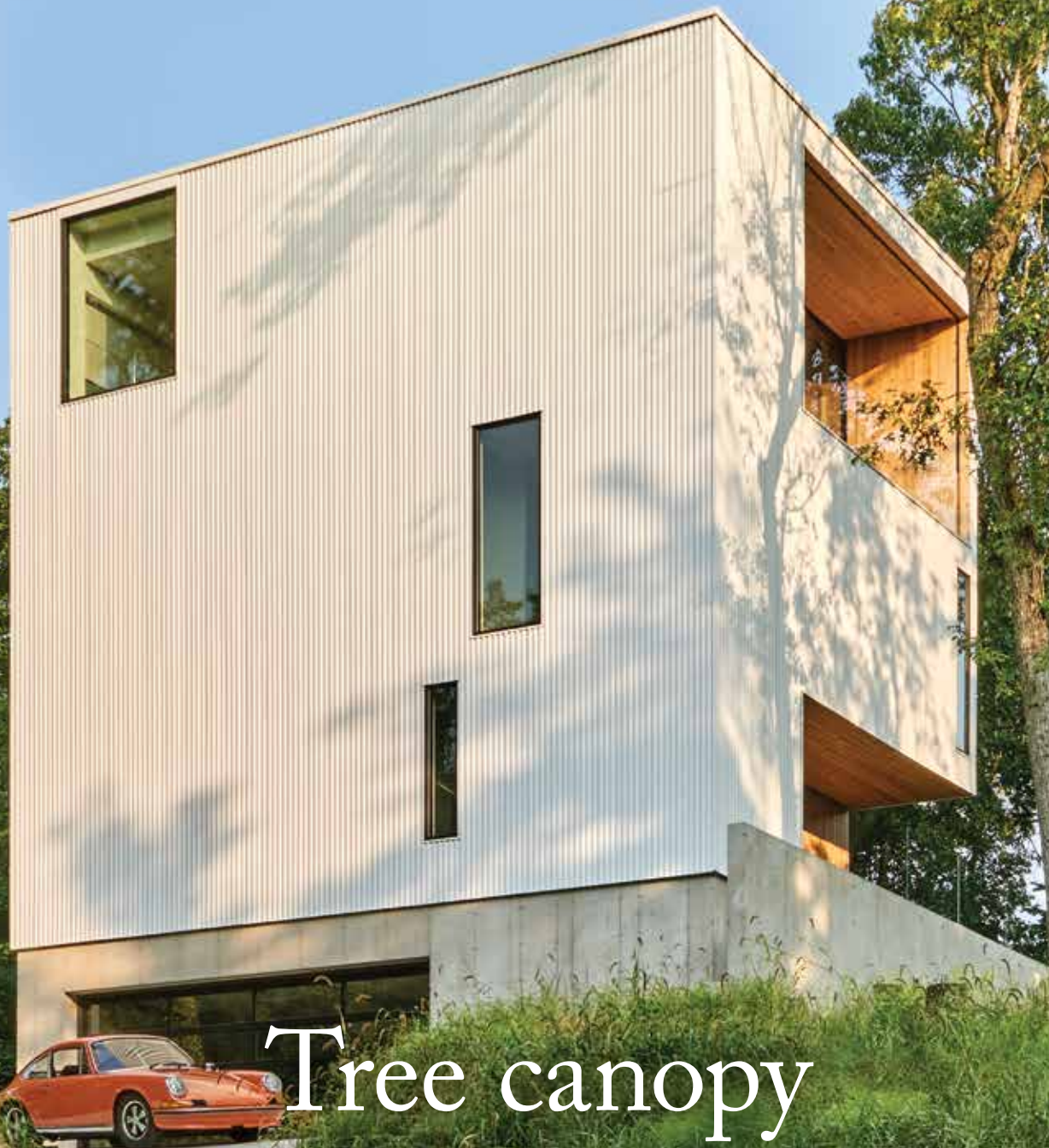


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Tree canopy

This family retreat, inspired by its terrain, rises above the Indiana Dunes National Park as a vertically efficient and dynamic destination

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Tree canopy

Text: R.J. Weick

Informed by an efficient program and simple, vertical massing to minimize its impact on a steeply wooded site, this modern retreat quietly expresses a bold vision. Inspired by the rugged beauty of its natural landscape, set within the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore of Indiana Dune National Park in Beverly Shores, this family retreat embraces its terrain, offering a dynamic interplay of tree canopy and steel skin, and geometric volume and sculptural voids. Its narrative is embedded within the interstitial spaces of the project, in which sculpturally

carved balconies, soft light and warm wood, and an inverted organizational program place it at the intersection of additive and subtractive form, preservation and innovation, and built and unbuilt landscape.

Built by Caron Custom Homes of Decatur, Michigan and designed by dSPACE Studio of Chicago, Illinois, the collaborative team was tasked with the design of a one-of-a-kind home that fit contextually within the existing architectural legacy of Beverly Shores. The Indiana-based town is known for its Century of Progress Architectural District, a role the com-

munity has served since 1935 when several homes from the “Homes of Tomorrow Exhibition” of the 1933 Chicago World’s Fair were transported across the lake to be preserved as a celebration of innovation in architecture. The client was also deeply inspired by the natural beauty of the site and wanted the compact home to respond in harmony with the existing landscape, which is enveloped by roughly 15,000 acres of federally protected sand dunes, wetlands, woodlands, prairie, and diverse plant and bird habitat along the southern shore of Lake Michigan in Indiana.







“The owner wanted an innovative and exciting home that was different from what you would expect. We embraced that challenge,” said Kevin Toukoumidis, AIA, LEED, founding principal at dSPACE Studio. “This project is a wonderful example of how constraints can yield a unique design that is one-of-a-kind. Here the design was influenced by the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore, which is beautiful, and its history of progressive, modernist architecture in Beverly Shores.”

dSPACE is an award-winning architecture firm that has built a portfolio of thoughtful, innovative, and sustainable design in architecture, interiors, and landscapes. For this retreat, known fondly as “Tree House,” its

location within the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore and within walking distance of the Century of Progress Architectural District—featuring the Weiboldt-Rostone House, Armco-Ferro House, Florida Tropical House, Cypress Log Cabin, and House of Tomorrow—served as quiet inspirational backdrop for the tall, narrow home. Surrounded by 1930s-era futurism and federally protected landscape, this home is intentionally stacked to minimize its footprint, and reimagines the primary gathering area on the top floor amid sculptural balconies and treetops to maximize interaction and views of the landscape.

“One of the things that drew them to the site was the natural beauty and landscape.

It has an interesting topography, dramatic changes in grade, and beautiful trees. In addition to a unique, modern design, the owners wanted views of the entire site, because it really does feel like you are nestled in the forest,” said Robert McFadden, LEED, principal at dSPACE. “It wasn’t only about focusing on views toward the lake, they wanted to maximize views in every direction. The wishes of the client drove the design of the house.”

Informed by the limitations of the site, the home is tucked high into the trees, rising above the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore. Rather than lean into the horizontality often found in modernist design across the Midwest, where sprawling structures mimic dis-



tant horizon lines and rolling bucolic terrain, this Tree House embraces height as a dynamic solution, not unlike the dense, urban landscape. As its 2,200-square-foot volume stacks four levels of efficient programming onto its dune, this retreat is equally inspired by the towering mature trees and peaked sand dunes around it, and leverages structural voids as a means to provide views of the entire site. It not only creates a dynamic relationship to and with its landscape, but also offers an inherent tension and creative landscape of additive and subtractive forms.

“The client responded to the concept of a sculptural volume mirroring the trees. They wanted outdoor space, so we proposed the idea of carving outdoor decks from the facade, bringing natural light deep into the house and integrating nature into every floor,” Toukoumidis said. “Wherever you are in this house, there is a strong visual and physical connection to the outdoors, promoting wellness and well-being,” Toukoumidis added.

While sculptural and artful as cedar-wrapped voids within the white, steel skin façade, each balcony and carved space reflects an intuitive and intentional solution that complements the internal program across its multiple levels. There is a curated feel that taps into the human experience, in which views from the primary suite on the second level face northeast, inviting early morning light deep into the space, while the windows in the kitchen on the third floor are oriented to the west, allowing the colorful drama of sunset light to flood the gathering spaces—and those spaces that are likely to be in use at that time of the day. McFadden noted the creation of that experience, where each space has a unique perspective of the landscape in both elevation and solar path in the sky, was an ongoing evolution working with the client to ensure the strategy aligned with specific needs and lifestyle. The shape and size of those windows and balconies were also highly considered, leveraging insulated glazing and deep overhangs to create a sense of human scale, intimacy, and expansiveness in line with each space’s function.

“We had clear direction to design this strong connection to nature on every side of the house. We had to consider how to achieve that goal, and how to incorporate these program elements in a way that is meaningful,” McFadden said. “The largest balcony is situated off the living space on the top floor. It faces south, offering filtered light at different angles throughout the day. It is an ideal approach to integrate nature with the main living space. In the kitchen, a tall window faces west to offer views of the lake and the city skyline when conditions are right. This design intentionally creates experiences of delight and discovery for the occupants,” McFadden added.



From the approach, the steeply pitched, heated drive draws clients and visitors alike toward a garage and lower-level space featuring functional, utilitarian rooms and the elevator core located at the southwest corner of the home. There is a retaining wall that serves a dual purpose as a curated walkway, drawing guests around the home to the entrance and expansive front porch on the first floor. From there, its interior unfolds in careful orchestration, leading family and friends up into the home before culminating into primary living on the third floor. Its design elevates daily living high into the trees, leaving those who use its space with an impression of being in a tree house. The elevator also provides an aging-in-place solution and its interior design intentionally recedes into the background as a quiet partner to the natural beauty of the landscape.

“The natural lighting surrounding this house is quite beautiful. We orchestrated the interior and exterior finishes to integrate with the environment,” Toukoumidis said. “It





evolved into an elegant, quiet interior palette that allows nature to be the star of the show.”

To bring the vertically stacked retreat home to reality, the client and the design team looked to the creative and technical expertise of Caron Custom Homes. The firm has worked with architects, designers, and homeowners for more than 20 years delivering well-crafted homes defined by exacting detail. Paul Caron, owner of Caron Custom Homes, said from the onset, the project posed challenges as a difficult house to build in its location, but was intrigued by the design of the home and at the opportunity to work with the client and team at dSPACE.

“It is located on a very steep, critical dune and that comes with specific criteria in how you can and cannot work on it. You have to make sure you’re applying all of the protective measures to the dune to keep it stable and so, working through that, there is a lot of planning and thought process that will go into its retention. Mobilization of equipment, of materials, of being able to apply the materials to the home, is more difficult in these types of builds and situations,” Caron said.

“dSPACE is good at what they do. They are very good at design work, they are detail oriented, so in that regard we fit together well as a team and I think a good architect paired with a good contractor who can understand it and then orchestrate and delegate the work, that’s the whole package. We need each other to build great things, it is not a singular art that makes all of this happen,” Caron added.

Caron Custom Homes offers custom home, general contracting, and custom cabinetry services to clients throughout the Michigan, New Buffalo, Union Pier, St. Joseph, Sawyer, and Lake Michigan region. The firm also has an in-house woodworking shop and, as Caron noted, has continued to evolve over the years, improving its project management, construction management, and increasing its staffing capabilities to ensure one-on-one dedicated attention to their clients both from an administrative and individual project management perspective.

“This is Caron Custom Homes, it’s my last name, and I’m one of those people who takes a ton of pride in family and who you are, and I’m proud that we stick with our clients and apply a one-on-one perspective. I want to enjoy the excitement on their home with them. We’re honest, we’re dependable, we follow through, and we have a desire to improve as a company to make us better to meet the needs of our clients,” Caron said.

While the site of this particular build proved challenging, as did navigating township guidelines with the help of the design team and client, Caron noted that all of the interior and exterior details had been thought through and planned upfront, prior to breaking ground on

the home. And as a result, the build itself was a smooth process and the team was able to deliver a final result that aligned with what had been planned from the onset.

“There are architectural alignments that were thought through carefully and the ways in which to apply lighting that were more of an indirect way to apply it to show some of those details—that keeps coming out for me. We all see things from a different perspective, but I think from a contractor or architect’s perspective, those are the things that stand out to me immediately, the amount of forethought and planning that goes into making all of those details appear the way they do,” Caron said. “Typically, the simplest homes are the most complex to make it look that way, and I think you see that in modern architecture.”

Caron Custom Homes also provided custom cabinetry and woodwork for much of the home—with the exception of the kitchen which had been pre-selected by the client prior to the firm coming on board—where natural oak floors and cedar wrapped balconies in matching stain complement the white exterior cladding and interior details like the white kitchen countertop and suede stucco fireplace. There are also built-in bookshelves that house literary and musical collections, a wood-burning fireplace, and a hidden bar.



The lighting was also carefully considered for how it would appear and be experienced at night within a highly walkable neighborhood.

“Tree House has a different personality at night. The cedar cladding has a warm glow

in the architectural lighting, softening the sculptural qualities of the contemporary design, and there is an artful array of windows.

The house has a beautiful impact, a warm and inviting presence,” Toukoumidis said.



The team also worked with an engineering partner and an arborist, to carefully integrate a septic system into the slope of the dune and retain as many trees onsite as possible, respectively. There is also a geo-web system integrated along the driveway in which drought-tolerant native plantings and dune grasses help blend the structural retaining all into its landscape. Its exterior, high-performance thermal envelope and passive solar design provides both a utilitarian and artful canvas in which seasonality unfolds upon its skin.

“There are a couple of things that we are really excited about with this project. The idea of inverting the traditional stack of the house creates a unique condition that adds interest to the project. Being in that space, among the trees is enjoyable,” McFadden said.

Toukoumidis added that the success of this project is in how it responds to the environment and lives in harmony with the dune landscape.

“We design homes to promote wellness and to bring people together,” Toukoumidis said.

For Caron, who noted the project was

a great team effort and a wonderful experience, it is about the personal relationships built with each project and being able to see problems before they occur, anticipate them and be proactive, that really contributes to the success of a project.

“To orchestrate a build, it takes tremendous amount of planning and delegation, the right people in the right places. I gain the most in the personal relationship,” Caron said.