

Inside Outside

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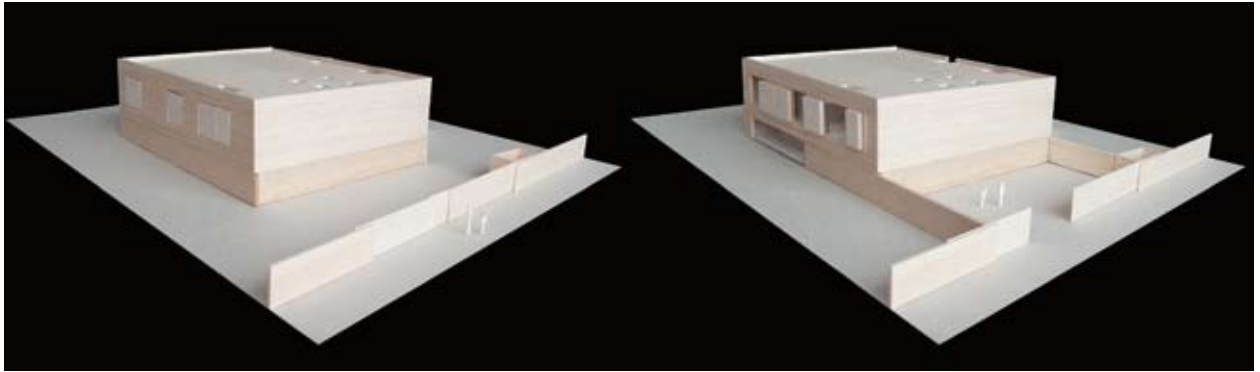
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COVER STORY: Artist Ketna Patel's studio in Singapore



PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY THE ARCHITECT





Move over, Fort Knox!

The 'Safe House' designed by Robert Konieczny of KWK Promes, is located in a small village on the outskirts of Warsaw, Poland. A giant concrete cube whose walls are designed to move, this liveable fortress includes a drawbridge, hidden entrances and solid coverings for every last window and door — all operated by a remote control! 'In this building it is not the form, but the way of functioning which is the most important. The name "Safe House," gains a new meaning now,' Robert tells Devyani Jayakar.



Closed mode: concrete panels and roller doors seal all the windows and entrances until the house looks like an impregnable concrete cube which does not disclose its identity.

On September 1st 1939, Germany attacked Poland, beginning what came to be known as World War II. To those of my generation, a safe house is associated with the Resistance movement – and its bravery in the face of Hitler’s genocide and the unleashing of the Holocaust. But all this was more than 65 years back. So what on earth is Robert Konieczny’s ‘Safe House’ doing in 2011, caught in a time warp of its own making? Robert is right, when he says that ‘Safe House,’ with all its impregnable security, gains a different meaning now. Move over, Fort Knox!

This 6100 sq ft home looks perfectly normal at first glance. In a very high end manner, of course. Swimming pool, enormous sheets of plate glass which permit the interior to merge extensively with the garden...very Miesian in a Farnsworth House kind of way. If inhabitants can look out, others can look in – with equal ease. Rather like living in a fish tank.



But then watch the sci-fi-like mutation in wide-eyed wonder, when the house draws in itself to shut like a clam, getting encapsulated in concrete walls, all at the touch of a button. Drum rolls and fanfare would be an appropriate accompaniment! The walls can be moved at the owner’s desire, to present a concrete monolithic cube to the world outside. Performance complete, it creates an ultimate cocoon, possibly for those who harbour paranoias of the extreme kind. Once safe within its fold, only a security code can open the home. Anyone who still feels insecure would be better off seeking professional help...of the psychiatric kind.





When the house opens up, the eastern and western walls move towards an exterior fence, creating a courtyard. After passing the gate, one cannot enter the house or the garden any other way but through the main door, waiting in that safety zone, for its opening.





The reason this private home is an architectural feat, is that it has so many moving parts; the concrete walls, inner walls, shutters and aluminium entrance gate. When the house opens up, the eastern and western walls move towards an exterior fence, creating a courtyard. After passing the gate, one cannot enter the house or the garden any other way but through the main door, waiting in that safety zone, for its opening.

Being so large, how are these huge panels of concrete moved? It's all remote-controlled! And...gulp...what happens in case

of a power outage? This home could make a very fancy tomb. But not to worry, 'There's a power generator in case of a power cut, which accumulates enough power to keep the house working for about three days. Besides that, the shutters can be steered manually,' clarifies Robert's office. 'And the sliding walls are not dependent on the form of the building. That's why this patent can be applied to both modern and traditional, single and multi-storeyed houses, covered with roofs of different geometry.'

Now accomplishing all these 'Open Sesame' feats required a lot of technically complex solutions. The sliding walls (both 2.2 mts high, 15 and 22 mts long) are not the only mobile elements of the building. Apart from these, there are large shutters (all 2.8 mts high, with width ranging up to 3.5 mts, opening up to 180 degrees) and a drawbridge, (*What! No moat, Robert?*) leading to the roof terrace above the swimming pool. All

The house can draw in itself to shut like a clam, getting encapsulated in concrete walls, all at the touch of a button.



A giant roll-down gate closing the southern elevation is manufactured by a company normally supplying shipyards and air companies. It is made of white anodized aluminum, making it possible to let it function as a movie projection screen.



A drawbridge leads to the roof terrace above the swimming pool.





these movable elements are based on built-in electronic engines, that guarantee safe operation.

The indoor swimming pool, however, has no special lockdown capabilities. Invaders are welcome to take a self-consolatory dip before leaving, bereft that their plan didn't work out. A giant roll-down gate closing the southern elevation is manufactured by a company normally supplying shipyards and air companies. It is made of white anodized aluminum, which makes it possible to function as a movie projection screen.

The mobile parts – because of their considerable size – are light steel frameworks filled with mineral wool. As a result, the building is excellently insulated when closed. The whole house as well as the mobile elements are clad with cement-bonded particleboards, finished with waterproof alder plywood – which resembles wood widely found on surrounding houses and barns, making it fit well into the landscape.

The fence, that unites with the movable walls, is the same 2.2 mt height, and is covered with an identical dark plywood. The interior, to stay in contrast, is kept in white. The floors are made of concrete and whitewashed oak. The walls and ceilings are finished with concrete and whitewashed cement plates.

Wide glazings behind the movable walls let the building acquire energy during the day in winter, or prevent the sun's heat from going into the house in summer. At night, when the house is closed, the thick outer layer helps the building to accumulate the gained energy. Such a solution, together with the hybrid heat system (most of the energy is gained from renewable sources – heat pump and solar systems supported with gas heating) and mechanical ventilation with heat recovery makes the house become an intelligent passive building.

Every day the house acts in a similar way – it wakes up every






Safe as houses: the concrete panels on the first and second floors can swing or slide shut.



In the best tradition of contemporary architecture, the line of view is unobstructed. Powerful hinges on the closable concrete panels are visible in the foreground.





Open mode: with a spacious interior, extensive use of floor-to-ceiling glass, a wrap-around veranda and both indoor and al fresco dining areas, it looks nothing like the high-security fortress which it is.

FACT FILE:

Architect: Robert Konieczny

Collaboration: Marcin Jójko Łukasz Zadrzyński

Interior design: Magdalena Radałowicz-Zadrzyńska

Site area: 2500 sq mts

Usable floor area: 567 sq mts

Volume: 1719 cubic mts

Design: 2004-2005

Construction: 2005-2009

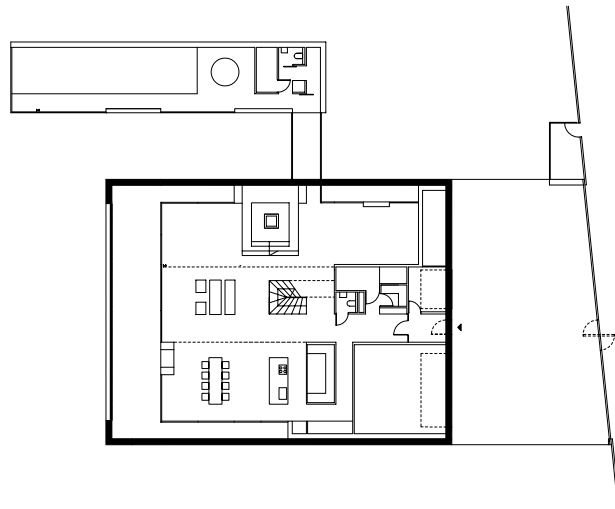
morning and closes up after dusk, in a routine reminiscent of the processes occurring in nature. It resembles a plant in its day and night cycle, the architectonics making it all possible.

Now which law-abiding citizen needs this kind of security in a country which is not ridden by strife, is a question which naturally comes to mind. After all, we're not talking Africa, where the social climate and crime rate might merit this kind of home. Robert doesn't speak English, so his office informs me that 'The owner needed such safety, because somebody broke into his previous house, and in his new one he wanted to feel maximum safety.'

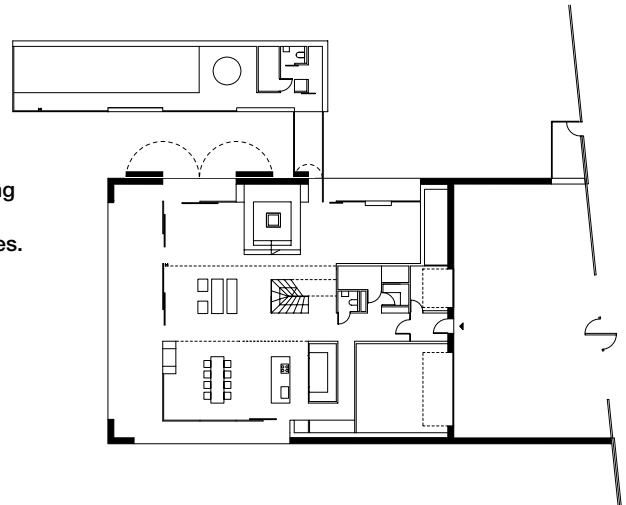
Right. We'd love to know what got stolen, though. Let's hazard a guess. Er...the Mona Lisa? 'It's only designed to prevent intruders from breaking into the house, and the way it looks is determined by the owner's feel for architecture and design,' they add. Really? The elite US military SEAL team which nailed Osama bin Laden might have had a much tougher time if he'd been holed up in Robert Konieczny's Safe House. It could possibly be easier to break into the Tower of London and walk away with the Queen's jewels!

I am also told that it takes less than a minute to completely close the house. Whoa! You don't want

to get any fingers caught in there when a window or door is slamming shut. How do they ensure that everyone is standing clear? Do they have a CCTV with cameras installed at every point of entry, to ensure that some unsuspecting soul doesn't suffer an unplanned amputation when they hit the 'Close Sesame' button? Or even more macabre, an impromptu Marie Antoinette type decapitation? How about a PA system to make warning announcements? Do the doors and windows clang shut? Or do they just discreetly 'whoosh' into place? Now my imagination is running riot – is there a secret underground escape



The indoor swimming pool has no special lockdown capabilities.



tunnel in case of a siege? I don't know. And the prospect of entering into another prolonged string of emails with Robert's office dissuades me from finding out.

Without trivialising the function of this home or its architectural bravura, I venture to say that it belongs to the realm of fantasy, taking us back to childhood days and fairytales, where doors opened and shut in just such a magical way. And, like snazzy sports cars, it has the potential to be many a grown up man's toy. I'm only guessing what Osama's reaction might have been, if Robert had deigned to hand him the remote control to this baby.... 'I'm lovin' it!' 📺

