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Modest modernism for Mom and Dad’s new house

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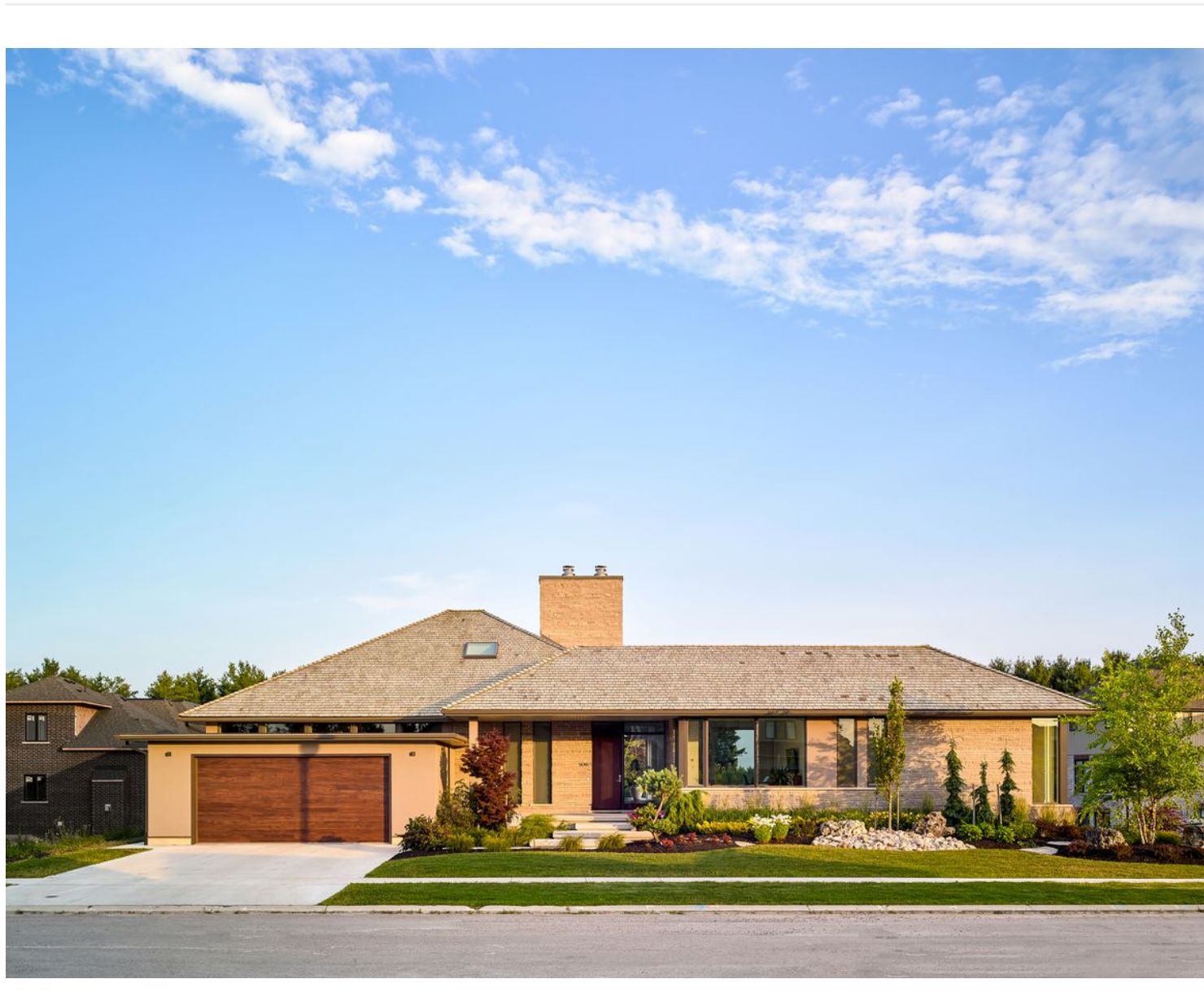

The home of Mary and Maurice Micacchi in Woodstock, Ont., designed by their architect son Rob Micacchi.

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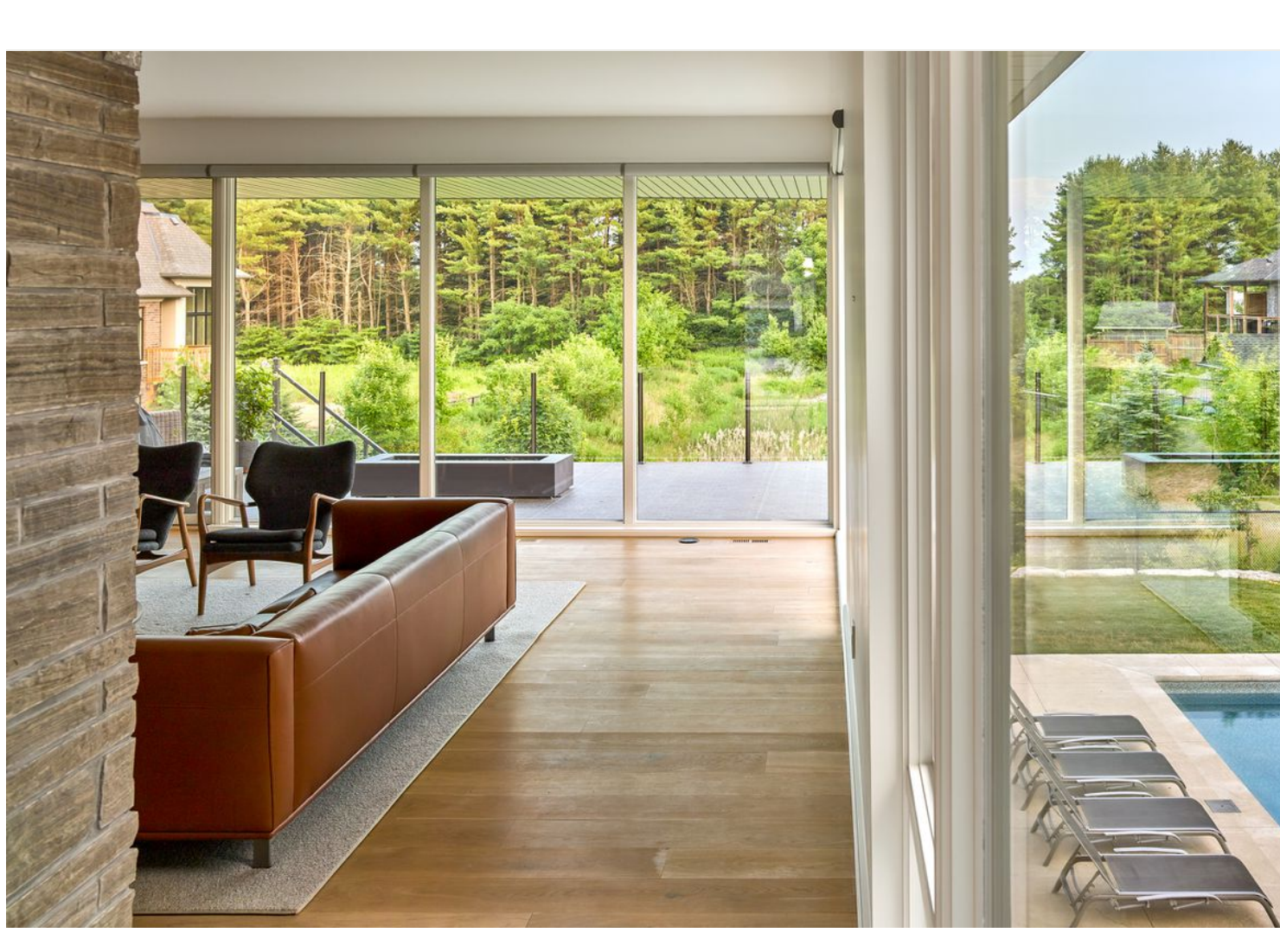
When Mary and Maurice Micacchi decided to build a new house in their hometown of Woodstock, Ont., they were upgrading from a small, 1,100-square-foot place. It’s where both Maurice was raised himself, and where he and Mary raised their own kids. The cramped size of the old home was one issue. Their biggest grievance: no garage for Maurice, an engineer, to store his many toys, cars and motorcycles.

To upgrade, the couple did what many do. They selected plans from a predrawn book of contractor-ready options. It had a garage, for Maurice. Mary admired the overall look of it. “I like French country,” she says. The windows, though a bit poky, were arched, with stone detailing at their tops and planter boxes at their sills. She had grown up at a farmhouse outside of Peterborough, a quaintness she wanted to replicate.

Those preset plans would have been the easy route. And they very nearly happened, except that the Micacchi’s son, Rob, a Toronto-based architect, intervened. “They wanted to put a 20-foot-wide house on a 100-foot-wide lot,” he says. “The design had no consideration for the site, the neighbourhood, for solar orientation.” According to Rob, the scale, proportions and layout were all wrong for the property they had selected, one that backed onto a leafy conservation area – a forest best seen through big windows, not little arched openings.

Also, Rob Micacchi does not like French country. Prior to launching his own, eponymous firm in 2017, he worked for modern design studios such as Diamond Schmitt and ArchitectsAlliance. At his own office, he sticks to muted colour palettes, clean lines. Everything is crisper than a Tom Ford suit. “I would have designed my parents a John Pawson, minimal cube,” he says. “Though that may have looked like a space ship, dropped between suburban homes.”

The divergence in tastes might be why the Micacchis senior didn’t simply ask their son to scratch-make their home from the outset. But after Rob persuaded his parents to bin their off-the-shelf idea, his next step was to persuade them to take some aesthetic risks. It wasn’t easy. “My father was annoyed I wasn’t doing exactly what I was being told,” he says. “I kept trying to make the home too modern for them.”



Glass walls let plenty of light in and offer expansive views of the leafy conservation area that the lot backs on to.

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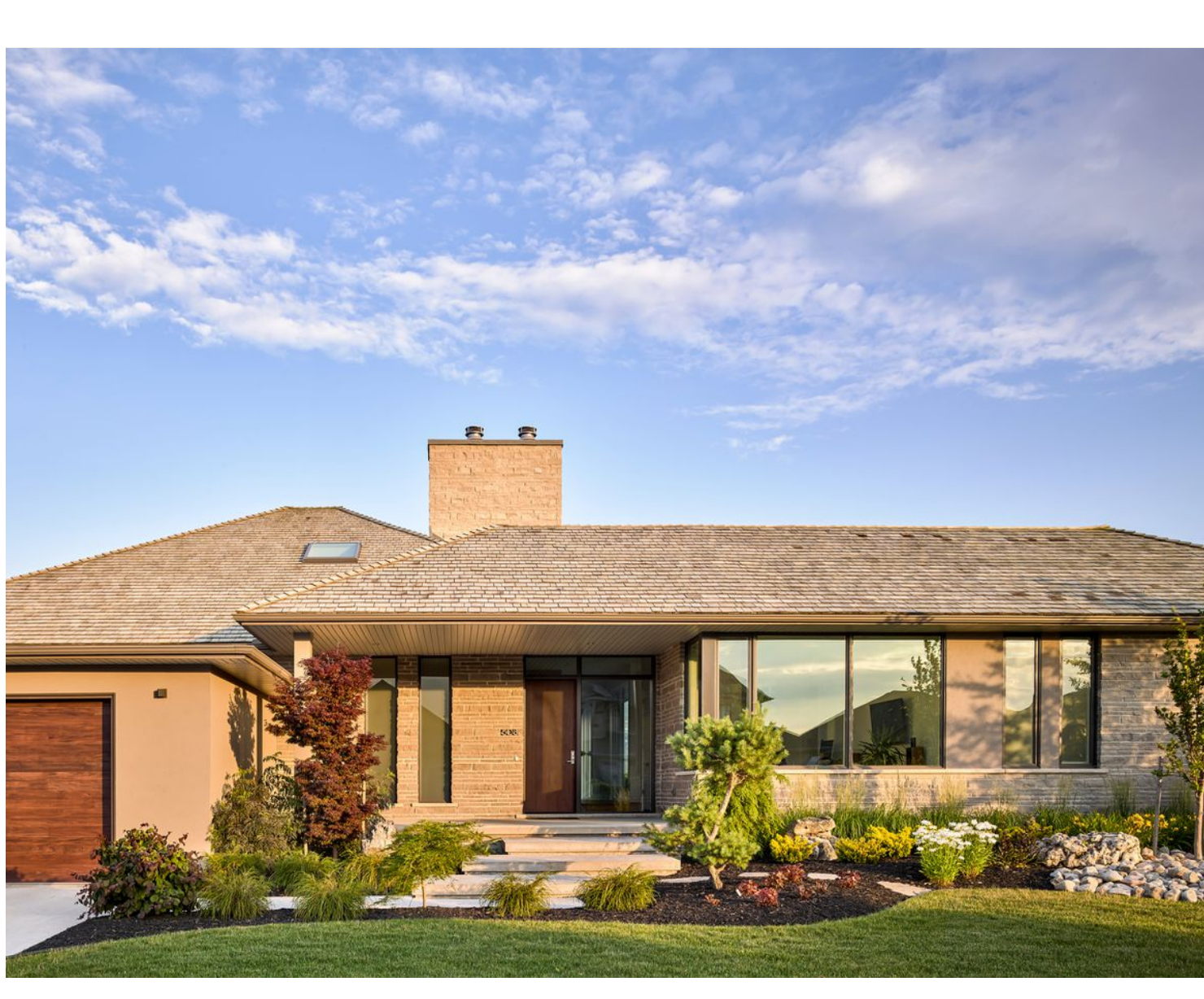
That all changed after Rob built his parents detailed, 3-D computer models of his design ideas, showing how the sun filtered in, how views were framed to the outside. “They began to see the advantages of what modernism could provide,” he says. “A glass wall let in a lot more light and views than any of those arched windows. A glass wall would not work with the French country look.”

Not to say that Micacchis senior went full minimal cube. From the sidewalk, the house has the air of a long-and-low, postwar bungalow, the kind of thing that’s common in suburban Woodstock. The honed limestone cladding is a nice balance of rustic and modern, muted grey.



Deep overhangs shade the windows, helping keep the house from getting too hot.

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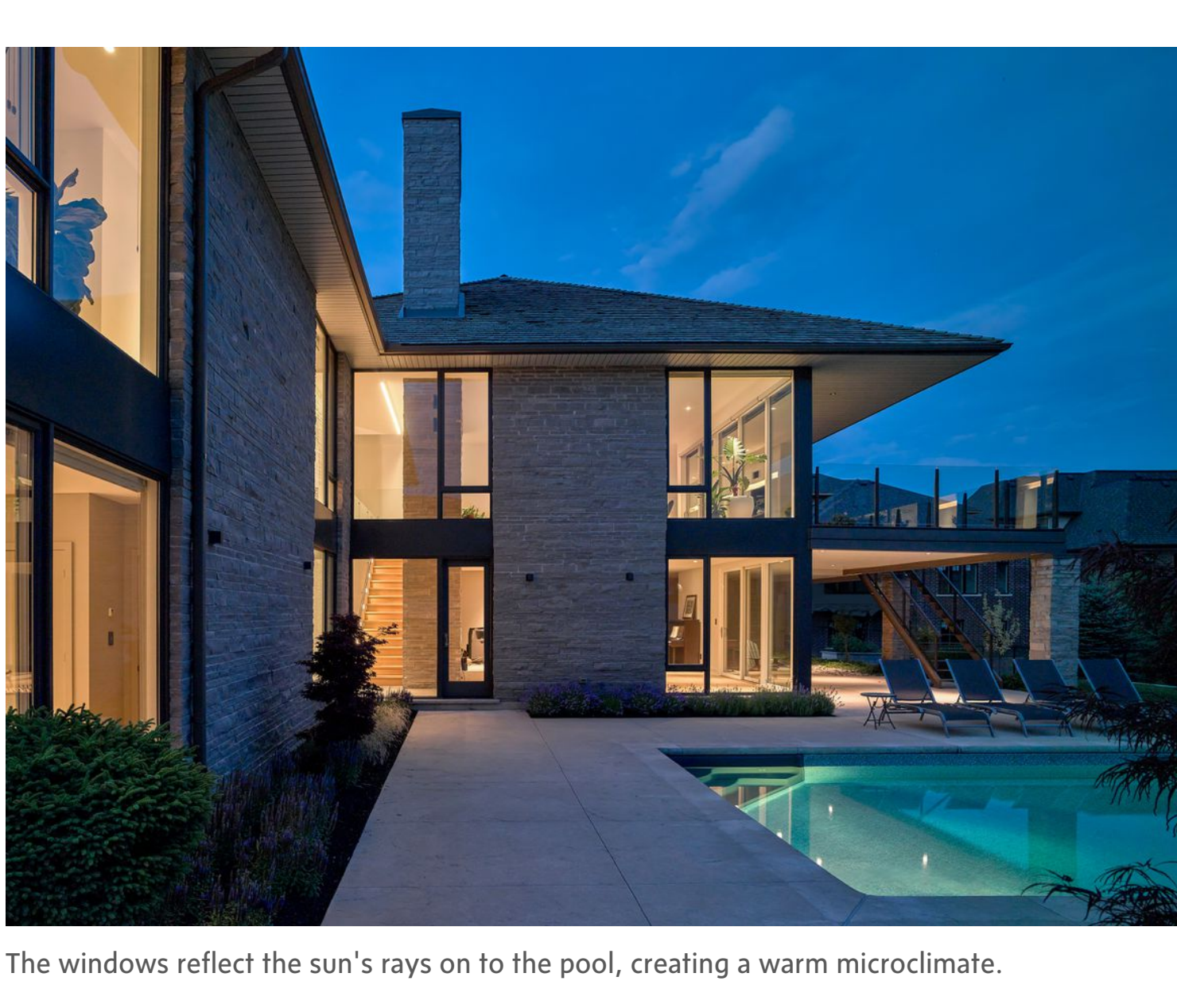
The exterior is also thoughtful in other ways. Deep overhangs jut out from the cedar-shingle roof, shading the large windows to prevent the house from getting too hot in the summer.

There is a huge garage – space for four cars, several motorcycles. It could easily appear hulking. But outside, it looks like all the adjacent garages, as though it only has space for two cars. “All the extra room is because the garage is very, very deep,” Maurice says. “You wouldn’t know it walking by.” (Inside, it’s all bright white, with clerestory windows that bring in diffuse light – a bit like a gallery. “Now this is a garage!” Maurice exclaims, clearly proud to show it off.)



The windows reflect the sun's rays on to the pool, creating a warm microclimate.

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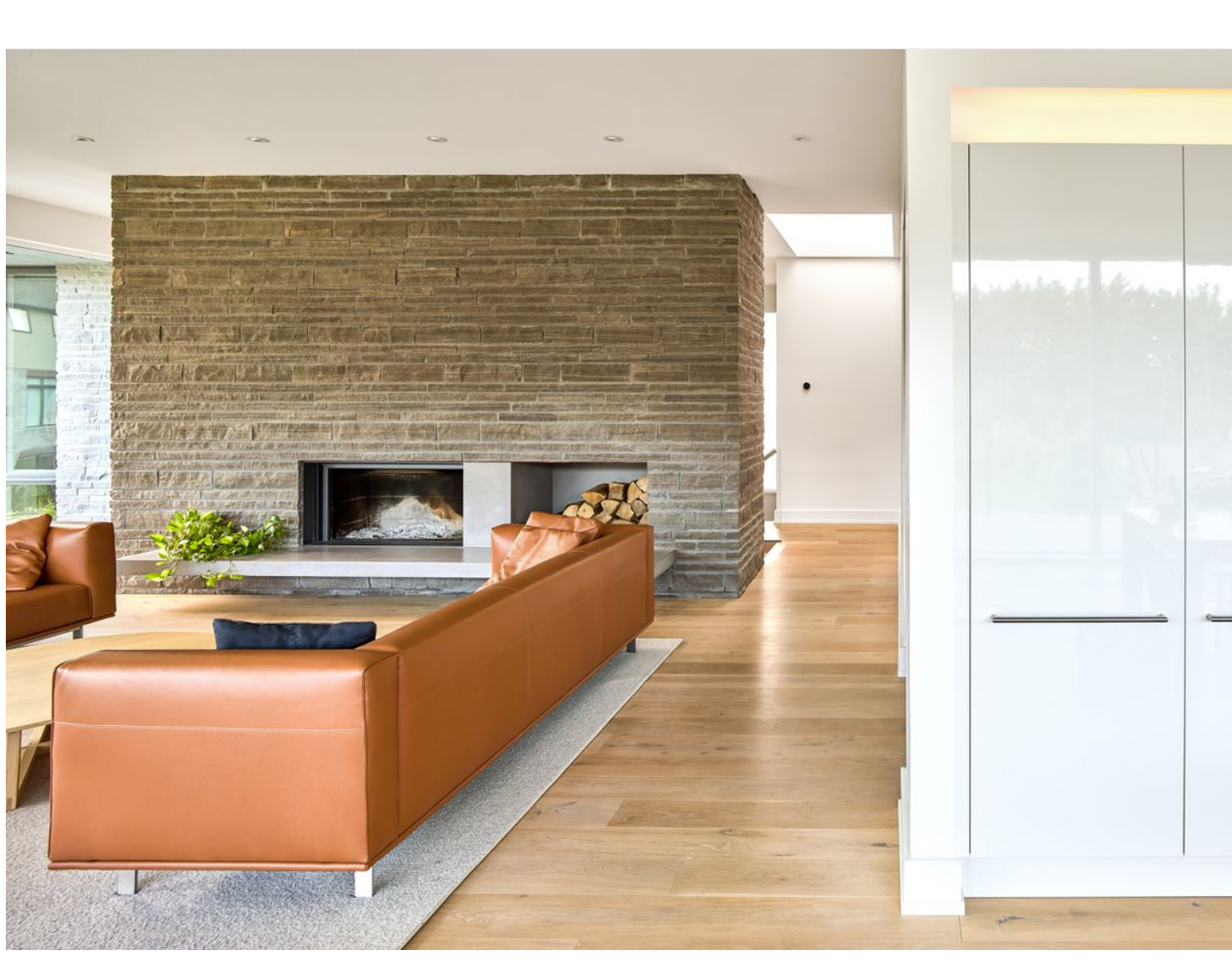
At the back of the house, Rob’s solar studies led him to line an L-shaped massing with large expanses of glass. The windows reflects rays onto a pool. “The pool is in a microclimate,” he says. “It’s protected from the wind, sunny from mid-day to sunset.”

“It’s nice and warm back there,” Mary adds.

Inside, Maurice and Mary have no regrets with going for custom over cookie cutter. Both Mary and Maurice are healthy and mobile now. But the main floor, which is roughly twice the size of their whole previous house, was geared toward them aging-in-place. From the skylit foyer, they can either turn right and go to their master bedroom, or head straight, past a limestone fireplace, into a living room that bleeds into a dining area and kitchen. All along the back, vistas of trees.



A limestone fireplace highlights the spacious living room.

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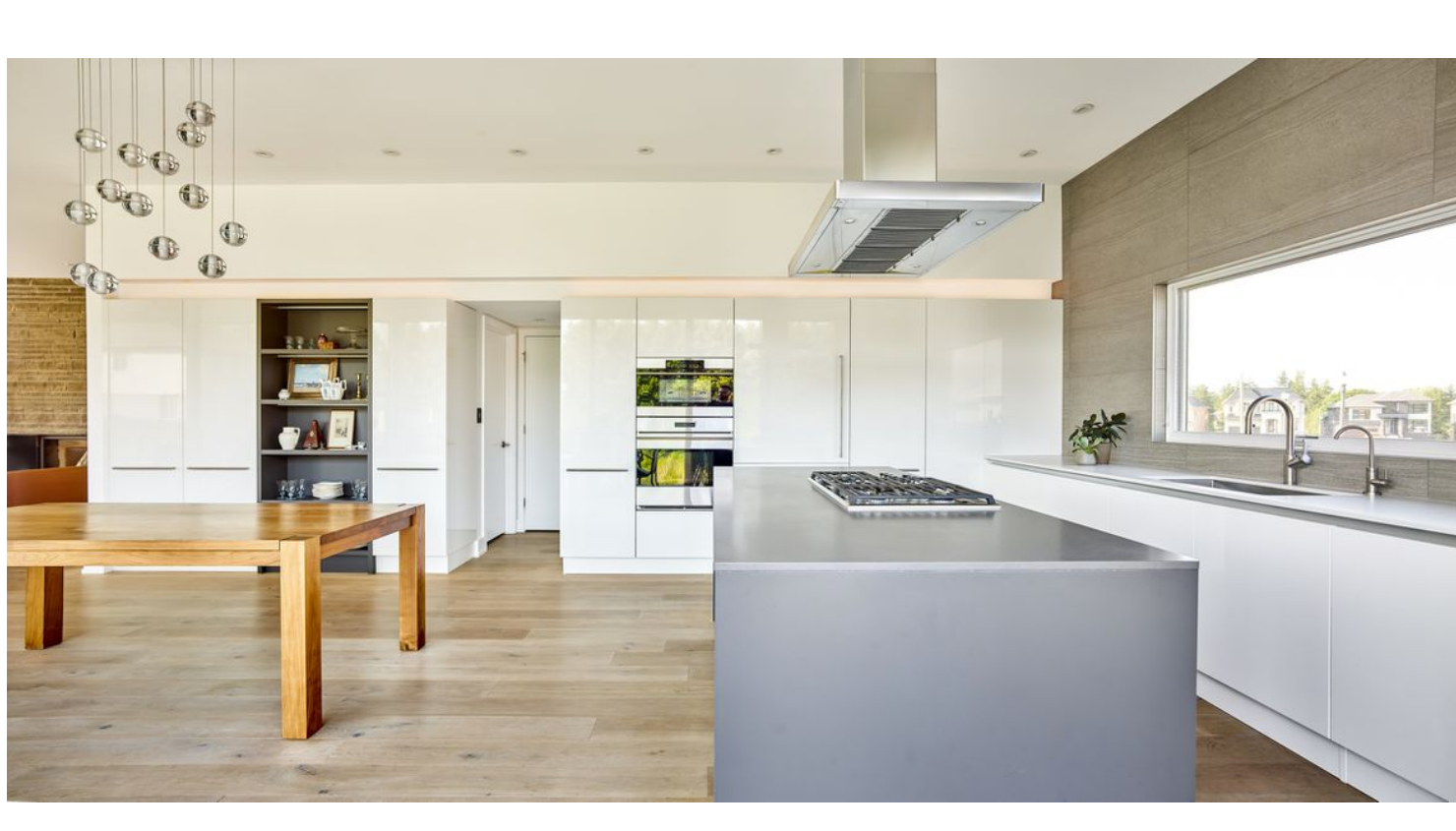
Overnight guests can head down a set of stairs to visitor’s quarters or the sauna. “The sauna looks out to the pool and the greenery beyond,” Maurice says. “We just wouldn’t have been able to get that view without all the thought that went into the plans.”

For her part, Mary didn’t get much of in the way of French country style. She wanted a traditional china hutch in the kitchen. Rob persuaded her to go with jet black shelves inset into white, Scavolini cabinets. An old, wooden dining table, surrounded by farmhouse chairs, is a minor exception.



The wooden dining table is a small exception to the kitchen's modern design.

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That said, Mary is now a convert to modernism. “The other design we were considering would have been too dark,” she says. “In the winter, Maurice and I pull our chairs up to the windows in the living room, have our coffee, enjoy all sun.”

And even if her son didn’t recreate the farmhouse Mary grew up in, he still, with kindness and care, rebuilt its most important attribute. “What I really loved about the old farmhouse was the size. The whole family could get together,” she says. “That wasn’t easy in our last house. It could be very tight. Here, this is wonderful. There’s room for absolutely everyone.”

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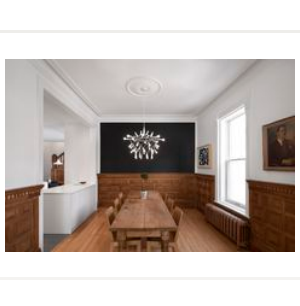

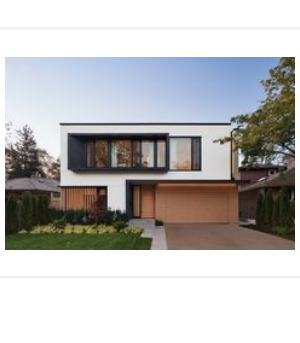

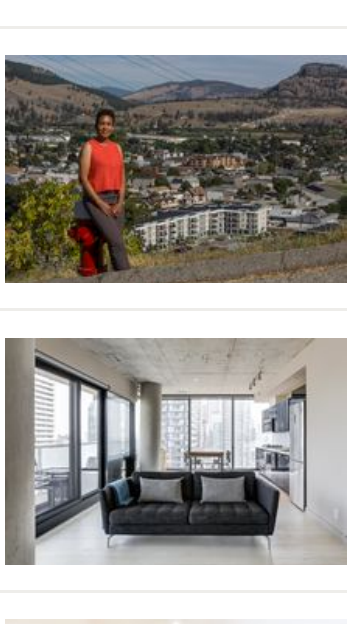

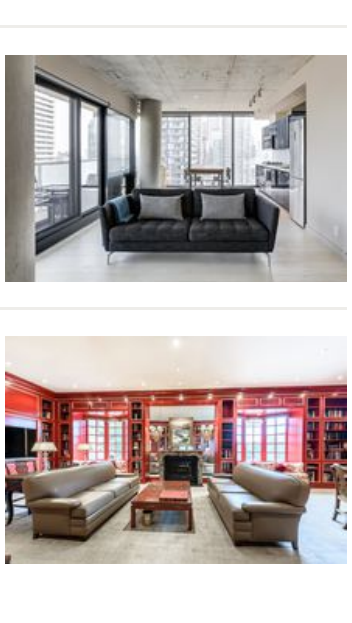

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