

# Lot 424: A Triptych of Exquisite 'Machines for Living In'

*Daniel van der Merwe, architectural consultant at the C&CI, visited the houses in Norwood, Johannesburg, and interviewed the architect, Gregory Katz.*

## **Modernism Revisited**

Early twentieth-century architects such as Le Corbusier, Niemeyer and Kahn created a new Modernist architecture suited to the Machine Age, which changed notions in architecture and engineering forever. This new epoch introduced opportunities for concrete as an appropriate material; however since this early introduction, the sins of the grey buildings of our past have left a boring legacy. And as a result no other building material has had a more ambivalent perception than this liquid stone. Yet appreciations have changed; concrete today is again held in high esteem as a particularly aesthetic material which proudly supports a tendency towards honesty and integrity in buildings. Concrete informs us that it is not about a 'style' but that it is in the dialogue of space and materials in which true architecture is created. The time for a more timeless unadorned, clean and powerfully 'cool' contemporary architecture has arrived.

Lot 424 as a triptych of homes re-investigates the private building typologies of early Modernism through open-plan layouts; volumetric interactions and disciplined but well proportioned façades based on the 'golden section' or 'Modulor'.

### Innovation

Concrete as the material of choice informs the ideology of this design by allowing reference to Le Corbusier's Domino to be extended into the bold idea of a structural 'skin.' By putting all the structural support onto an external load-bearing wall and floor slabs, the internal spaces are uninterrupted and brightly lit because large spans and openings are permitted. The strength of concrete as a structural material is dramatically illustrated by the long ribbon windows on the first floor facade, floor-to-ceiling stacking doors on the ground floor and the cantilevered upper level which creates a covered patio. When folded away, the glass doors allow the boundaries between inside and outside to become blurred. And Living becomes extended from its open-plan lounge/dining room onto the protected patio and concluded in a garden courtyard with a long narrow lap pool.

Ideas of sustainable dwelling are re-enforced through the flexibility of a modular design which allows for future re-configuration of spaces and adaptation to different functions. This is also made possible by the absence of internal load-bearing walls. As Gregory Katz states: "If you put all this energy into a building, it must be cheap to maintain, be extremely durable and must be able to be around for a long time. Using concrete as a mass material adds the additional benefits of delayed thermal radiation, thereby ensuring a home that is cool in summer, warm in winter and energy efficient."

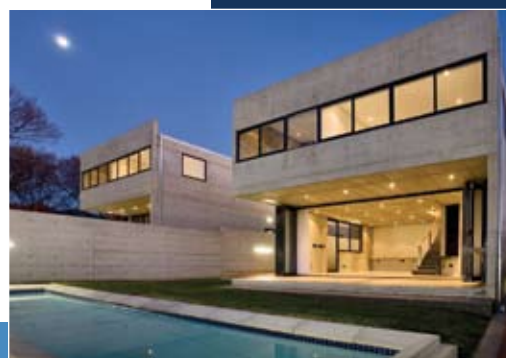
### Aesthetics

The project was cast in situ, using ready-mixed concrete, to facilitate speed of installation which, at the time of construction, allowed the building to be as cost effective as conventional block and mortar. In addition, it eliminated the usual plaster and screed cracks and patching up. This



required an unusual rigorousness but not unexpected discipline from the architect; who had to pay attention to the position of every duct, opening and conduit prior to casting, to avoid chasing and surface mounted services.

Katz used a combination of steel shuttering and Nutec planks as formwork to create a proportioned and modular rhythm enriched by its imprints and textures. The concrete surfaces became interspersed with the stains and streaks of installation imperfections and interruptions. Katz comments that he wanted to highlight the defects and coarseness of the mass concrete work, as "it celebrates the scars and memories of the time of its making".



The concrete aesthetic as a theme is continued into a palette of surface possibilities. The monochromatic concrete tones become a tapestry of exposed concrete textures; where smooth wall and the high ceiling's rough surfaces contrast. Precast roadside kerbing blocks – installed as a swimming pool edging and skirting the base of the house – sit comfortably against the backdrop of a cast-in-situ textured boundary wall. In the kitchen; matt bright yellow kitchen cabinets float above high-gloss sealed concrete counters. And in the main living space a ground and polished concrete floor slab acts as a terrazzo finish to expose the flecks of its black granite aggregate. This is to allow a perfect plane from which the dramatic and self supporting free floating black pigmented staircase ascends to the bedroom and private studio spaces above.

### Conclusion

By using concrete as the exposed and dominant material a unique visual continuity is created. Gregory managed a stark but calm and withdrawn atmosphere to a place called home. The association of the material in a domestic scale and context feels unfamiliar, but fitted out with furniture and fittings it is supportive and warm without losing its unadorned sensuality and poetic qualities. This is truly an architectural statement fit for a contemporary lifestyle. ■

More information from cell: 083 444 5515 or  
[info@gregorykatz.co.za](mailto:info@gregorykatz.co.za)



## About the Architect



**G**regory Arthur Katz matriculated from King David High School Linksfield in 1991 with a distinction in art. He then completed a Bachelor of Architectural Studies at the University of Cape Town from 1991-1993, being awarded the John Perry Prize for best work done in third year. This was followed

by a Master of Architecture at Columbia University, City of New York from 1995-1998.

His professional experience is extensive and varied. It includes a student internship with Dennis Fabian, Berman and Hackner, Cape Town; followed by stints with Zvi Hecker Architects, Tel Aviv and Berlin, 1994; Studio Daniel Libeskind, Los Angeles, 1994-1995; O'Malley Moses and Associates, Johannesburg, 1995; Omni-Zygo Comprehensive Design Science, New York City, 1998-2000; OMM Design

Workshop and Urban Solutions, Johannesburg, 2002-2003.

He established Gregory Katz Architecture, Johannesburg in 2004 and some projects have included:

- Loft Hamburger (conversion), Mountainview, 2004
- Fuel Café, Newtown, 2005
- House Rosin (refurbishment), Forest Town, 2005
- Tucker Residence (refurbishment), River Club, 2005
- Copans Residence, Benmore, 2006
- Lot Four Two Four, Norwood, 2007
- Goldbar, Rosebank, 2007
- Metz Residence, Morningside, (construction)
- Cellular House, Craighall Park, (design)
- House Bloch, Linksfield, (tender)
- King David High School IT Classrooms, Linksfield, 2008
- QV Trading (office refurbishment), Marshalltown, 2008

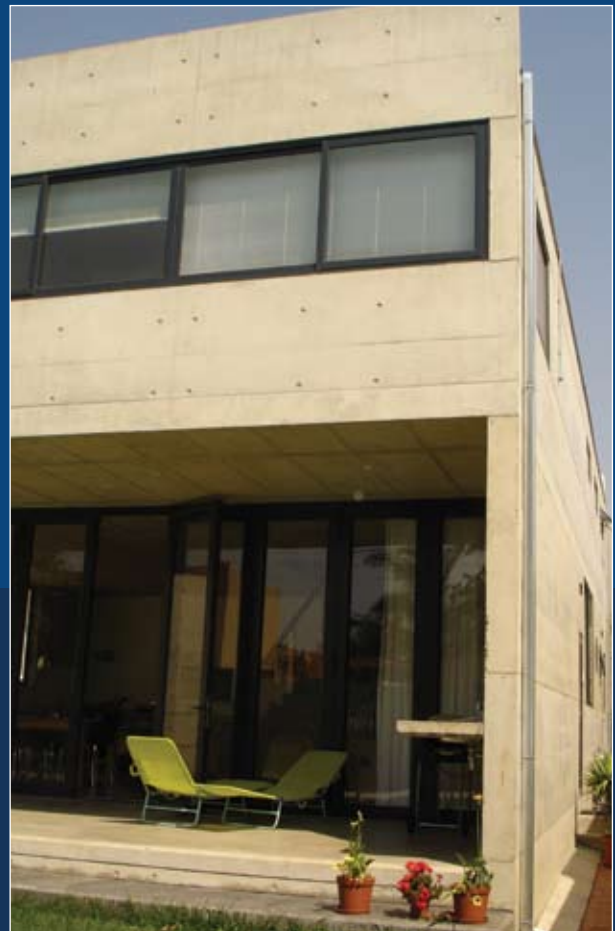
He has also designed a number of products:

- **39 Bottles TM:** Acrylic modular bottle storage system.
- **Caterpillow TM:** Modular seating designed for the catering industry. It combines removable backrests and



ottomans on lockable castors to form daybed, lounge, and banquet seating.

- **Vesda-Lamp TM:** LED lamps encased in clear silicone rubber for a child-friendly, impact resistant, no heat, tactile, low energy, bedside lamp.
- **Situ Diamond Jewellery TM:** A patented range of jewellery in which diamonds are encased in clear and coloured epoxy resin. The stones are magnified by the domed resin.
- **Comfi-Table TM:** Designed for confined spaces, this table uses a simple threaded system for height adjustment from 45 cm to 75 cm. It can be used as a coffee table, dining table and anything in between.
- **Constitution Hill Streetlights:** Designed for the Constitution Hill precinct, Johannesburg. The poles are made of wound fibre-glass with a band of clear gelcoat. Light from a luminaire inside the pole is emitted through the clear band at pedestrian eye-level. ■



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