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THE LAP OF LUXURY

Designing an exquisite home pool

By John Bray

Few property features are more mesmerizing than the presence of water. Whether that means a natural stone pool beneath a mountain fishtail palm or the graceful curve of a contemporary infinity edge, water adds unmatched depth and life to any view and is part of who we are as people. That could help explain why designers and architects continue to produce breathtaking pool spaces and water displays around the world by pushing boundaries and playing with the endless fluidity of water. From the world's largest rooftop infinity pool at Marina Bay Sands in Singapore to the glass-bottom pool in the penthouse at The Keefer Suites in Vancouver, British Columbia, beautiful design is easy to find.

Fortunately, these luxuries are not reserved for hotels, spas and resorts. Jaw-dropping private pools can be an everyday reality for the discerning homeowner. And for that, it's important to strike the ultimate balance between the pool, the property and the home itself.

FLAWLESS DESIGN, INSIDE AND OUT

"In well-designed houses, a pool is not a pool," says Antón García-Abril, principal architect at Spain's Ensamble Studio. "It's really part of the soul of the house." García-Abril's own home, known as Hemeroscopium House, fully embraces this concept. A lap pool, easily accessed by opening a large window, is cantilevered in an almost impossible manner off the side of the house and over the yard. There's also a more traditional pool nestled below, intended for entertainment and play rather than exercise.

Cantilevering a pool is never easy, especially considering that 1 cubic meter of water weighs 1 metric ton, but with Hemeroscopium House this challenge is mitigated in part by García-Abril's use of a prefabricated canal piece; it's the perfect blend of form and function. "It was a way to use a standard structure in an unprecedented way to obtain an unprecedented space," he recalls. His approach produced not only a

house but a work of art. Then again, in the world of pool design, maybe those are exactly the same thing.

"Pools are pieces of art," says Wallace Cunningham, founder of the San Diego-based architecture firm Wallace E. Cunningham, Inc. "I use them to make the house float into space." Cunningham's work definitely reflects this approach. With organic shapes designed to reflect light from the house and the sky ("a mirror to the sky," as he so eloquently puts it) and knife edges that allow the water to seamlessly blend with its surroundings, every design is both functional and breathtaking. But often, this melding of art and design is possible only when the pool lives harmoniously with both the house and the property it sits on.

When a pool is built outside the home, it becomes, in many ways, one with the landscape. "Atmospherically, the environment is going to tell you a lot," says Cunningham of early-stage design considerations. He also stresses the importance of knowing what you want to see when you're in or near the pool. According to W. Garrett Carlson, a Beverly Hills-based landscape architect, one simple way to ensure that the environment complements the pool is by involving a landscape architect. "The sooner the landscape architect can be brought in, the better," says Carlson, who feels that the further into the design process, the more rigid the property becomes.

By including a landscape architect in the earliest stages, the property's landscape and hardscape can be made to blend seamlessly with each other and with the house. In other words, working out a large master plan that encompasses the ideal design, inside and out, for everything on the lot, is the way to go. "You have to pick up the character of the house into the site," Carlson says of what makes for the most visually appealing designs. That doesn't mean a pool can't stand out for all the right reasons—and from timeless styles to the newest trends, there are plenty of ways to make this happen.





THE FINEST FINISHING TOUCHES

This year, according to Master Pools Guild, “the edge” is everything—infinity, vanishing or razor—with other trends including travertine tile, moving water and the inclusion of fire. Regardless of how these trends shift with time, the options for customizing a one-of-a-kind pool space are endless. For Michael Murillo, sales director at Barrington Pools in Illinois, those luxury touches should be added only to the best possible foundation: “The only pool that I build is shotcrete ...[because] it is the strongest pool you can build.” A blend of pneumatically applied concrete and steel rebar, shotcrete creates a lasting foundation (stronger than the foundation of most homes) that is ideal for holding everything from imported, hand-set stones and gold-inlaid tiles to islands with swim-through tunnels.

Murillo always recommends using a slip-resistant material on the stairs, but other than that, the materials depend entirely on personal taste, function and cost. Glass-tiled or beaded surfaces help increase water’s natural reflectivity. Marble slabs and travertine tiles provide textural contrast and luxury underfoot. And large, raw boulders create a natural focal point. But, Murillo notes, it’s the little things that make or break a design: “Tiny details make a tremendous difference when done right.” To most homeowners, of course, these details, such as swim-ins, tanning ledges (sometimes called Baja ledges) and even waterfalls, are anything but tiny and can greatly enhance usability without obstructing or distracting from the overall design.

Whatever the form of the finished product, a pool must fit well with the house and the lot. Fortunately, when the blueprints have been put away and the construction crew is gone, fit becomes more a matter of preference than anything else. That’s because a swimming pool means different things to different people. It’s a personal experience. After all, as E.E. Cummings wrote, “It’s always ourselves we find in the sea.” 