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# Serene minimalism

**Waterfront penthouse apartment, Toronto**  
**Kuwabara Payne McKenna Blumberg Architects, Toronto**

A lot of people talk about minimalism and follow that whole philosophy," says Bruce Kuwabara, a partner in Kuwabara Payne McKenna Blumberg Architects. "But the real difficulty is to keep a sense of warmth and humanity." The 3,500-square-foot penthouse on the Toronto lakeshore that Kuwabara and his team designed balances strict modernist ideals with the human need for warmth and comfort.

KPMB's structures are familiar to anyone who shops at Indigo Books at Yonge and Eglinton, has attended any one of half a dozen Canadian universities, or, heaven forbid, spent a little soft time in Kingston's Grand Valley minimum-security prison. The firm's long list of credits is crowned by seven Governor-General's Awards, most of them projects with Kuwabara's direct involvement.

For the penthouse, Kuwabara, partner Shirley Blumberg and Caroline Lee, Paul Rocha and interior designer Karen Petrachenko brought the two-storey space back to its bones. They started over with two central ideas. First, they would bridge the visual transition from interior to open water by surrounding the two-storey windows in massive teak frames. Indeed, wood – teak, oak, walnut, maple – appears throughout, lending a natural warmth to the ascetic sparseness of the interior.

Next, as Kuwabara explains, "We were interested in structuring the spatial experience." The layout was organized around a single, monolithic structure in the centre containing kitchen, bathrooms and a grand walnut staircase, with communal spaces such as living and dining areas arranged loosely around the perimeter.

Kuwabara particularly admires the staircase, which rises majestically, perpendicular to the entrance, through the centre of the space. "I don't like very steep staircases. The cadence of a staircase should always be easy and graceful. I love the rhythm of this one, with its uniform wood treads and risers."

The master bedroom occupies a mezzanine overlooking the main floor, so light, privacy and noise were issues. Sliding, shoji-style glass screens framed in light maple offer a choice between enclosure and openness. Maple was chosen in response to the changing face of Lake Ontario. "In winter, the view is stark and very beautiful, but cold, so the maple frame returns a sense of warmth."

In fact, seasonal temperature variations inform the orientation of the unit as a whole. In summer, open doors to the deck direct the emphasis naturally toward the east. In winter, the focus shifts to the south side, toward the fireplace and the wood-framed windows.

A restricted palette of simple materials, including pale limestone, slate and stainless steel, keeps the eye focused on the simple geometric motifs that repeat through the space. There are the stacked rectangles of the sliding screens, the massive window framing, and the lines and planes of the staircase.

"One of the things we're interested in is the discipline, the rigour, of controlling detail. It's a real complexity to make things simple while supporting the client's lifestyle."



*Above:* The rhythm of the walnut staircase provides one of architect Bruce Kuwabara's favourite visual events in the waterfront residence. *Below:* Amidst the rigorous sparseness, subtle signs of life such as a comfortable, beautifully designed shower stool give the space its mysterious humanity. *Facing page:* Massive wood frames structure the two-storey view over the water; in winter, they warm the icy scene, while easing the transition from interior to exterior in the summer.





