

Raw discipline

Design of an apartment in a Toronto warehouse expresses the owner's desire for a disciplined existence, and the architect's love of sensual austerity.

A penitentiary is defined as a place for punishment, for reform, but most of all, a place to inspire discipline. When Eric Yolles (son of renowned Canadian structural engineer Morden Yolles) asked designer Johnson Chou to 'think penitentiary', he was concerned primarily with materials – that his apartment would contain no embellishments or gratuitous flourishes. Yolles may not have realized it at the time, but by specifying penitentiary he opened more possibilities than simply working with raw materials (often a given in contemporary loft design); he invited Chou to discipline his space – to create an environment that would inspire and order, define and clarify the way he lives. Housed in a converted warehouse in

downtown Toronto, the 185 sq m volume was a conventional strip with industrial windows at one end. Exploring the notion of surveillance implied by the demands of a prison aesthetic, Chou removed non-structural walls and divided the resulting volume with one large sandblasted glass screen. Space was layered by means of sliding partitions at times inset with sections of clear glass so that one part of the apartment is transformed while another is glimpsed. The largest of these partitions – a dramatic section of stainless steel – separates bedroom from living room; the adjoining translucent glass panel incorporates a strip of clear glass which allows you to see the sunken slate bath from the living areas. Experimenting with the act of viewing, Chou has

turned the bathroom into a stage set for self-conscious performance. Making furniture and fittings an integral part of interior design is an essential part of Chou's philosophy; it constitutes what he calls the 'narrative of habitation'. In this flat, the aluminium-clad bed is cantilevered from the wall so that it appears to hover in mid-air. Aluminium floor-to-ceiling storage cupboards span the entire length of the bedroom, holding and hiding all of Yolles' belongings. Chou's seamless design demands order and an ascetic way of living. He creates simplicity, but also a serenity that derives from harmonious proportions and materials. Though bare and elemental, liberal use of aluminium and

concrete lends a particular glow to the interior, one specific to the materials themselves. Subtle nuances and reflections in slate and metal are revealed by illumination, which playing off surfaces lends a sculptural, ephemeral quality to the bed and free-standing washstand, their austerity and refinement recalling Donald Judd's sculpture. Using luminance as a theatrical element, Chou has employed halogen and fluorescent luminaires in a variety of ways to re-define space and create mood. In two sculptural gestures, recessed fluorescents cross the ceiling, and luminaires underneath low slate stairs create a subtle glow, in softer contrast to material severity. In relinquishing control of his environment to Chou, Yolles has received more than ordered,

practical living. By designing every aspect of this apartment, from the arrangement of space down to details, like a bedside command module in sandblasted glass (sliding open to access light switches, thermostat, telephone), Chou has injected hedonism to create a penitentiary that is ultimately close to theatre. CARLY BUTLER

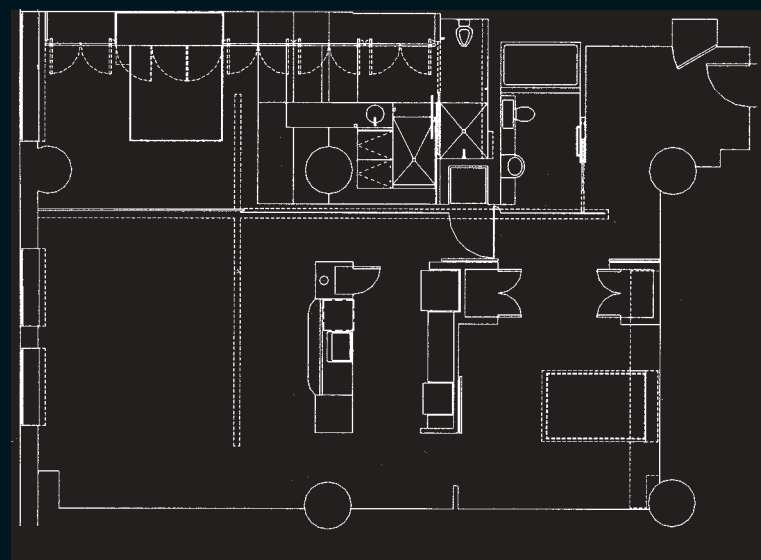
Architect
Johnson Chou, Toronto
Project team
Johnson Chou, Steve Choe, Michael Lam
Metal fabricators
Serious Stainless
Tredgar Kennedy
Millwork
Highgate Fine Cabinetry,
Lee Custom Millwork
Glass
Proto-Glass
Interior construction
Chiltern Contracting
Photographs
Volker Seding



1



2



80 | 3 plan (scale approx 1:150)



3



4

APARTMENT, TORONTO,
CANADA
ARCHITECT
JOHNSON CHOU

- 1 Stainless-steel sheet separating bedroom and living room ...
- 2 ... slides back so the two volumes can be made one. Recessed fluorescents cross the ceiling.
- 3 Full-height cupboards, clad with aluminium panels; furniture designed by the practice.
- 4 Panel inset with 250mm strip of clear glass to reveal sunken slate bath from living room.