



THE NEW OLD HOUSE

historic & modern
architecture combined

MARC KRISTAL

foreword by **GIL SCHAFFER III**



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CASA DELPIN

san juan, puerto rico

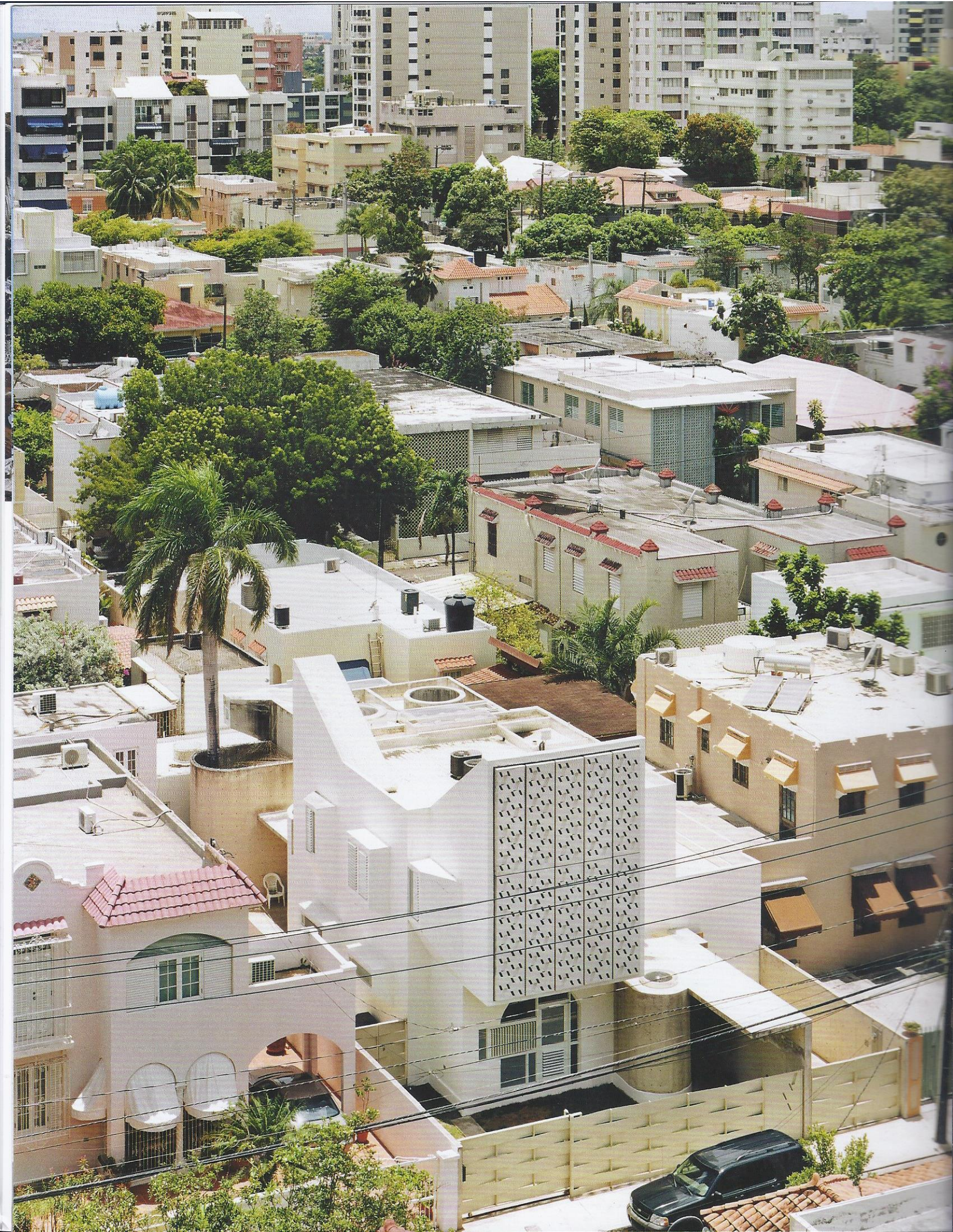
HOUSE OF CARLOS DELPIN AND HIS FAMILY
occupies a narrow lot in the Miramar district of San Juan, the peninsula that forms San Juan's largest, most densely populated borough. "In the scale of the island, it would be like Brooklyn," says architect Nataniel Fúster. "There are a lot of beautiful old houses, but none of them from the late nineteenth century." The Delpin residence, however, is located in a newer extension of Miramar that is, in Fúster's formulation, "very crowded. The streetscape is not the best." The original two-story, three-bedroom house, which dated from the 1940s, typified its era. A shallow front yard separated the structure from the sidewalk, and there was a deeper patio in the rear, and a structure at the lot's end that served as the maid's quarters. When Fúster first toured the place, says Fúster, "the style was difficult to decipher. There were some Spanish Revival elements, like arches, and things that were very local, for example the use of colorful hydraulic tile. But also there were some midcentury modern lines, and the house was made from poured concrete. And someone had done a renovation and added Mexican Revival to the mix. So it was very strange." The interior Fúster describes as dark and dense. "The Delpins wanted larger, more open spaces—a place where they could relax and escape from city life," he recalls, "but it was complicated by the neighborhood's density." The big idea, says Fúster, "was to create a dialogue between the old and the new by using the house's preexisting elements as inspiration. Principal among these was the lively concrete floor tiling the living room and the second-story spaces. "The pattern on the original tiles used in the living room observed in the room abutting the front lawn, the stairwell, and the second-story spaces. "The pattern on the original tiles used in the living room," Fúster says. "We featured a very similar color palette, but

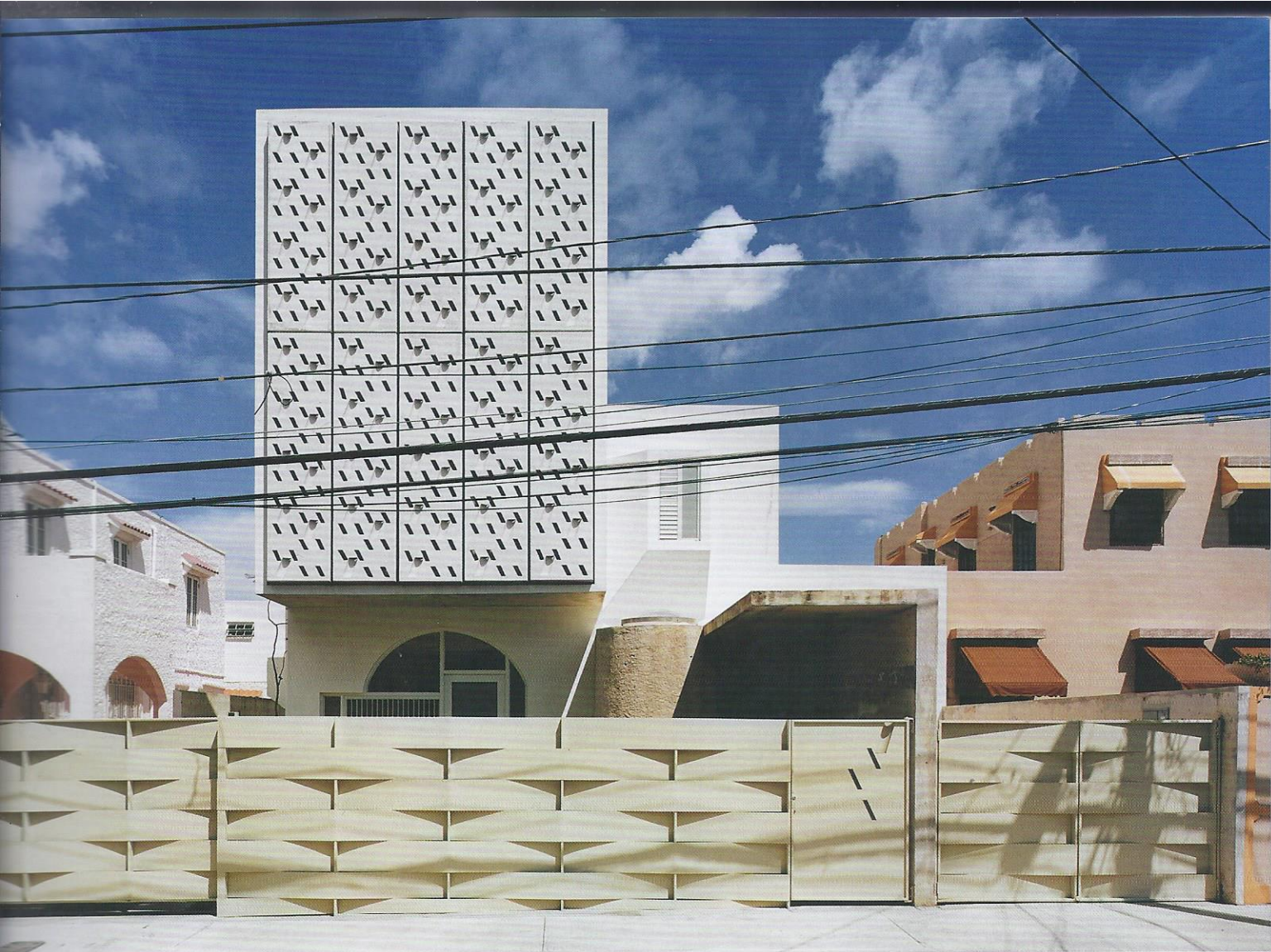
OPPOSITE: A small balcony adjoins the master suite in Casa Delpin. Architect Nataniel Fúster's double-height "vertical skylight" expands the interior space and modulates the strong Puerto Rican sun.

changed the design so that the shapes were more like rhomboids," producing a vibrant, Escher-like arrangement that the architect replicated in the perforations of the large-scale glass-reinforced concrete screen panels he used throughout the house. The outcome infused the entire experience with a very contemporary animation that still recalls the home's, and the district's, aesthetic traditions. This riff on history "synthesizes the design intentions," Fúster says—"bringing the old into

the modern experience by reinterpreting the language."

Fúster's screens are in fact the design's most distinctive feature, and appear in three places. The first two serve as vertical double-height "skylights" on the upper front and rear elevations. Screen number three is horizontal in orientation and covers the lap pool in the new semi-enclosed living room, an architectural tour de force that is unquestionably the house's showpiece. Fúster crafted the space by enclosing the existing rear patio, a counterintuitive gesture that, though it eliminated the backyard, produced a grotto-like retreat from Miramar's density, in which the sensuality of water, ever-changing patterns of natural illumination, and the fresh air and precipitation coming through the screen's perforations (and a semi-enclosed patch of green on the room's other side) combine to very special effect. "A room like this works well in the tropics, because you don't have to close the house—you can have an intermediate, indoor/outdoor area," Fúster says. "It's amazing, because sometimes you have rain and sun at the same time, and the surface of the pool is dancing from the droplets coming in and also reflecting the light." Above all, the architect's screens set what otherwise would be a static object in motion. "The owners say it's like a light show that changes every day," he says.



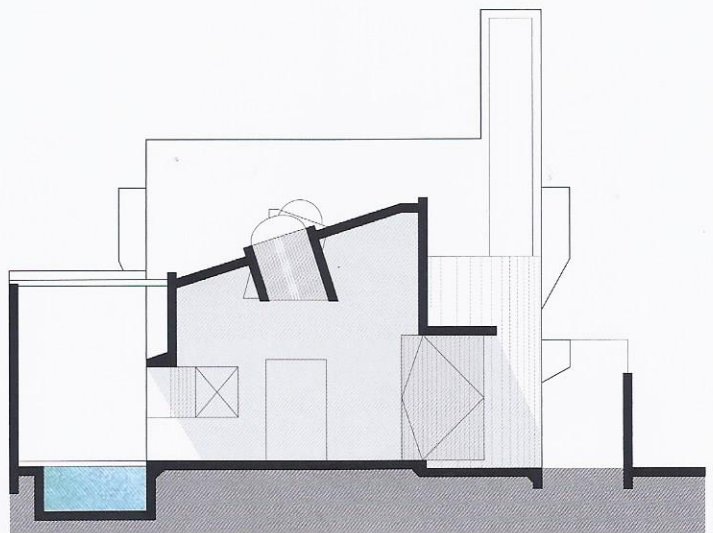
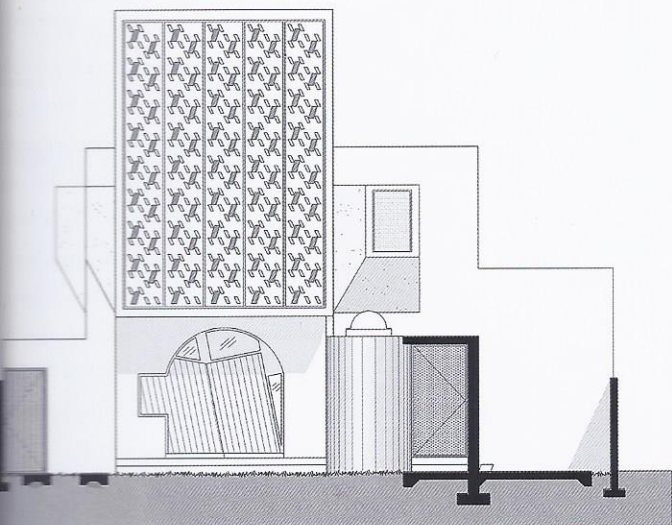


& ABOVE:

ward-turning
which forms a
am San Juan's
incorporated

an existing tree into the
semi-enclosed living
room. Fúster's screen
design abstracts a

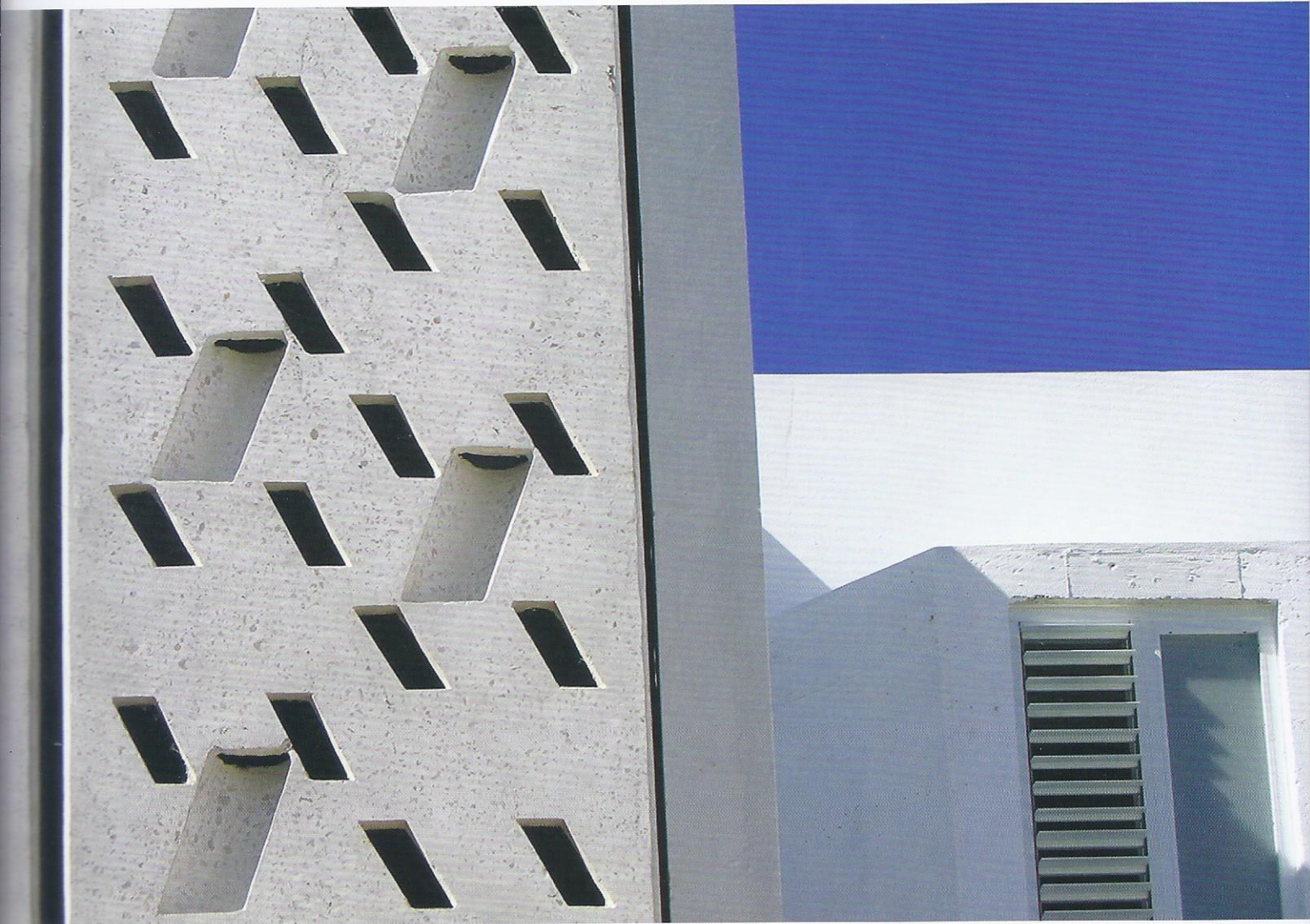
pattern he discovered
in the house's original
floor tiles.





LEFT & OPPOSITE: The broader, street-facing screen covers a five-foot-wide balcony off of what was originally a second-floor family room but now belongs to the Delpins' e

FOLLOWING SPREAD: The screen above the lap pool which abuts the living room and terminates in a new dining area (formerly the garage), lets in sunlight and rain. Fúster based the down-projecting skylight on a design by Le Corbu



need to balance the living room's natural light produced an architectural quotation, a trio of angled, down-projecting concrete skylights inspired, according to Fúster, by ones Le Corbusier's 1960 Couvent Sainte-Marie de La Tourette outside. One of the considerations of working with light in the tropics is so strong that you need to offset it," the architect explains. "If light comes in through the panels above the pool, and if we balance it, you'd have strong illumination on one side and the other side of the room in deep shadow." The skylights correct the problem, Fúster angled them to avoid having unmodulated rays pouring into the space. "Otherwise," he says, "you'd cook." The design—and history—also influenced the design of the four floor windows that project outward from three sides of the building. "We were playing with the idea of depth," Fúster recalls. "In the concrete construction, the wall is very shallow. But if you look at Old San Juan, there is a lot of heavy Colonial construction and the depth is very thick." The projecting windows, which

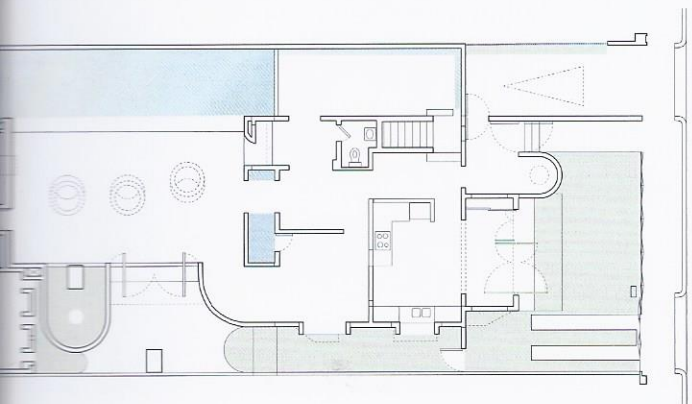
resemble discreet sculptural fins on the exterior but read as angular concrete cones from within, "play with the eye and create the appearance of a thicker wall," the architect says. At the same time, Fúster lets us in on the trick, by cutting away the drywall around the apertures to expose the original shallow poured concrete. "The new construction is there, and so is the preexisting," he says. "It bounces the light and enriches the experience of the room."

Throughout design and construction, the relationship between past and present remained much on Fúster's mind. "In Puerto Rico, aspects of identity are very strong," he says. "We have a very interesting history—our present life with the U.S., and also the Spanish, African, and Indian heritage. I see architecture as a form of cultural expression, and so the way a building becomes informed by these aspects of identity makes it more interesting and layered." Even in ground-up projects, Fúster says, "There should be a dialogue, a connection to identity and history. It makes any building more profound—a richer experience."









OPPOSITE: Fúster out away the drywall around newly installed projecting windows, exposing the original poured-concrete walls.

ABOVE: The breakfast room/kitchen opens onto the newly enclosed street-front patio.