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Shadow Play

Casa Tao is proof that the most compelling homes rely on thoughtful architecture rather than spectacle.

Writer **Elia Essen**

In his 1933 essay *In Praise of Shadows*, Japanese author Jun’ichirō Tanizaki reflects on Japanese design, emphasizing the impact light has on everything from tableware to a stage actor’s lips. “The beauty of a Japanese room depends on a variation of shadows, heavy shadows against light shadows—it has nothing else,” he writes. In Casa Tao, a contemporary house in Puerto Vallarta, shadow is as essential to the structure as its walls and ceilings. Created for a couple and their two daughters by HW Studio, based in Morelia, Mexico, Casa Tao’s concept took root

during a trip to Japan, the family’s first time abroad together. The project’s lead architect, Rogelio Vallejo Bores, took cues from *In Praise of Shadows*, incorporating, he says, “how the Japanese lengthen spatial journeys so that time dilates, and movement becomes filled with small, quiet revelations.” In Puerto Vallarta’s climate, shade is crucial to life. “The Pacific sun can be extremely harsh, so shadow became the primary design instrument,” Vallejo Bores says. “Every shade acts as a refuge.” To keep the hot Mexican sun at bay, he limited

exterior windows, instead encasing the home in tall concrete walls that hug the interior. To let light in, floor-to-ceiling windows face interior courtyards, cleverly shaded by the house’s exterior structure. By reframing the home’s focus inward and cocooning it with concrete, HW Studio created a sanctuary, removed from the noise of the city and secure enough that the girls could spend time outside without sacrificing safety—part Zen garden, part fortress. The family—Cynthia, Gus, Antonella, and Mila—were deeply involved throughout the process. “He runs a small seaside

restaurant and comes from a family of ceramic artisans. She is a nutritionist, and together they manage beautifully the demanding vocation of parenting,” the architect says. From humble beginnings with parents with no formal education, Gus is a voracious learner, and Vallejo Bores describes him as “the person I know who has read the most about architecture, philosophy, and music.” This erudition heavily informed the design; the couple joked that they wanted to feel like they were living in a museum—somewhere gentle, peaceful, and protected for learning and reflecting.

From the street, the 5,000-square-foot house cuts an imposing silhouette. Hulking cement walls divulge few clues to what lies within, curving in on the southeast façade, guiding visitors gently into the home. The front door establishes the house as a place of introspection—rather than an entrance facing the sidewalk, Casa Tao’s is tucked away from prying eyes. Though the home is intriguing from the sidewalk, appearances matter little at Casa Tao. Instead, the home focuses on the family within—feel over show, quietude over glitz—making for a space both contemporary and elemental.



HW Studio sculpts a private home from concrete that turns shadow into a defining architectural element rather than a byproduct.

The home's three bedrooms are on the first floor, each opening onto a private courtyard, along with the garage, accessed through towering steel-plate doors. Indoor and outdoor communal areas occupy the second storey. Here, the layout is open, contrasting the intimate hallway and bedrooms of the floor below. Beneath double-height ceilings, compact living and dining rooms flow into one another, while the adjacent kitchen is tucked beneath an overhang created by a third-floor mezzanine that holds the book-lined study.

Connected to the dining room through a wall of glass, the second-floor terrace allows access to the uninterrupted blue of the sky and a narrow pool with a travertine wading lip that invites a peaceful dip. "It's a simple house in its layout," Vallejo Bores says. "But as you walk through it, it reveals itself slowly, full of small and surprising discoveries."

Throughout, walls and ceilings are concrete, serving both functional and aesthetic

purposes—the material's thermal stability ensures the home stays cool even as temperatures soar. Travertine floors, indoors and out, echo the nearby sandy beach. High ceilings, stone surfaces, and windowless walls could make the home feel uninviting, but instead the simplicity is magnetic, a welcome reprieve from the overstimulation of life.

"A space feels cold in proportion to how few textures it contains," Vallejo Bores explains. "So we ensured that the flooring, as well as the furnishings, were rich in tactile variation. We didn't eliminate the coolness of concrete entirely—that coolness is actually welcome in a hot place—but we balanced it with textures and the softness of the stone gardens."

Warmth is incorporated with other natural elements—especially the small terraces and trees that emerge unexpectedly from circular cutouts in the entryway and first-floor courtyard. "Nature is always an

ally," Vallejo Bores says, noting architect Álvaro Siza's philosophy that humans cannot design anything comparable to nature. "Architecture should not attempt to imitate nature. It should simply be itself. And the magic happens at the point of contact between the artificial and the natural."

Architecture "is about precision, about arriving at what is exact, deeply informed by the person who will inhabit the space and by the nature of the place. It is not about 'less,' but about what is necessary," Vallejo Bores says. "Architecture should be the soundtrack of the film called life—never the protagonist."

With Casa Tao, HW Studio's goal was to create a sanctuary away from the noise and chaos of outside life. When asked what he hopes to elicit in the minds of those who step inside, Vallejo Bores's answer is straightforward. "I hope they don't think anything, and that they feel their own inner silence," he says. ●