

Blue sky thinking

The winner of the best residential project of 2018 at the prestigious Regula awards at the Accademia di San Luca in Italy is an expression of freedom in all its forms.

TEXT: PENNY McCORMICK

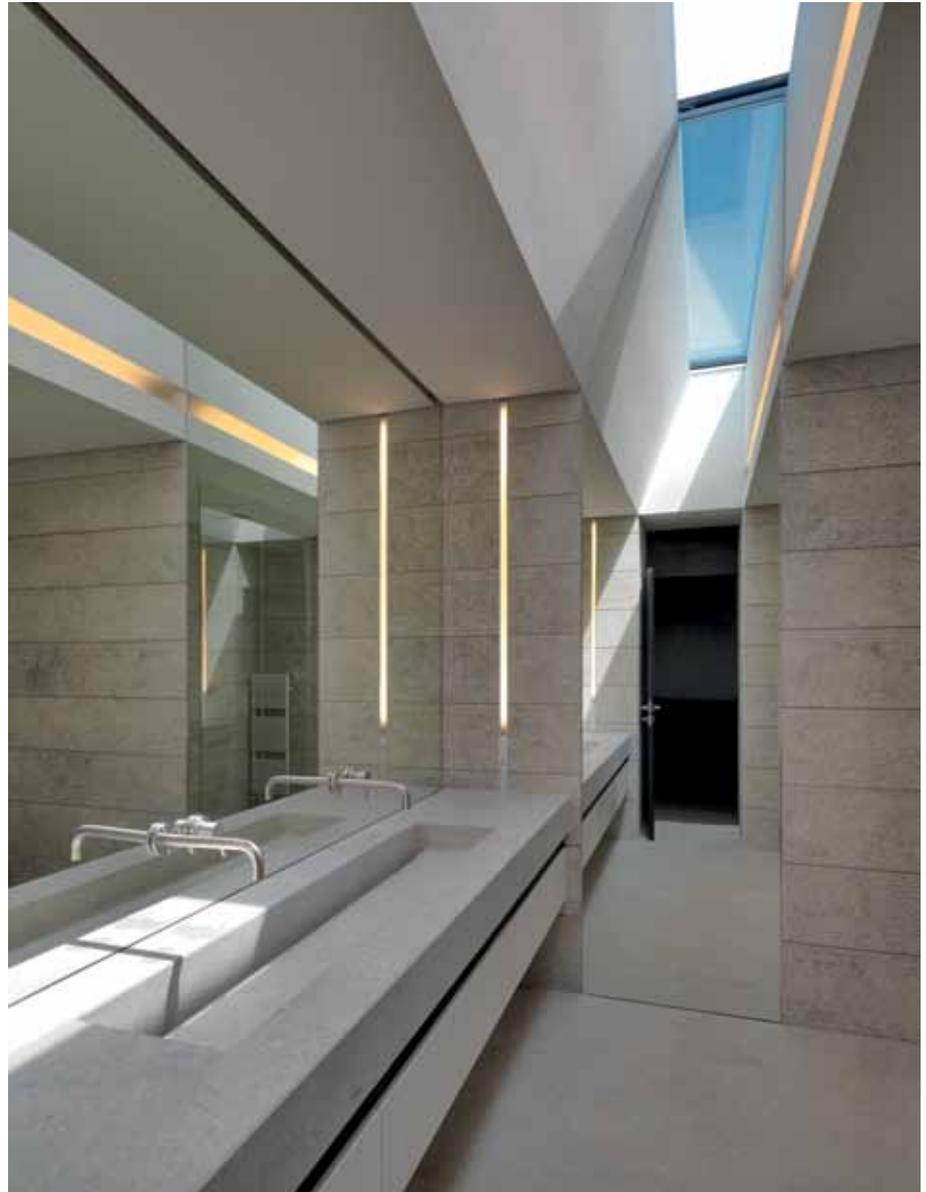
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Slicing through the skyline on the outskirts of the Italian city of Parma is a dramatic horizontal building designed by Pietro Zanlari of Studio Zanlari. Its distinguishing features include the extensive use of scratched grey Alpine stone as cladding and paving on the exterior, and also inside – where it is found in the showers, sinks and interior walls. The stonework is balanced by the use of glass, notably in a suspended corridor leading to a blue gallery, which houses the owner’s art collection, and from which the villa receives its name: ‘La Casa Blu’. All rooms in the three-bedroom, triple-storey villa are filled with light – even the housekeeper’s accommodation in the basement. Surrounded by water features and a sense of spaciousness, the house has been designed with the elements in mind. More than that, it also adheres to the architect’s guiding principles.



Pietro Zanlari



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Adopted from Ben Vautier, 'No Art Without Freedom' is the corporate motto of Studio Zanlari, and in the design of La Casa Blu freedom is expressed from all its pores: freedom in language, in form, in materials and in colours.

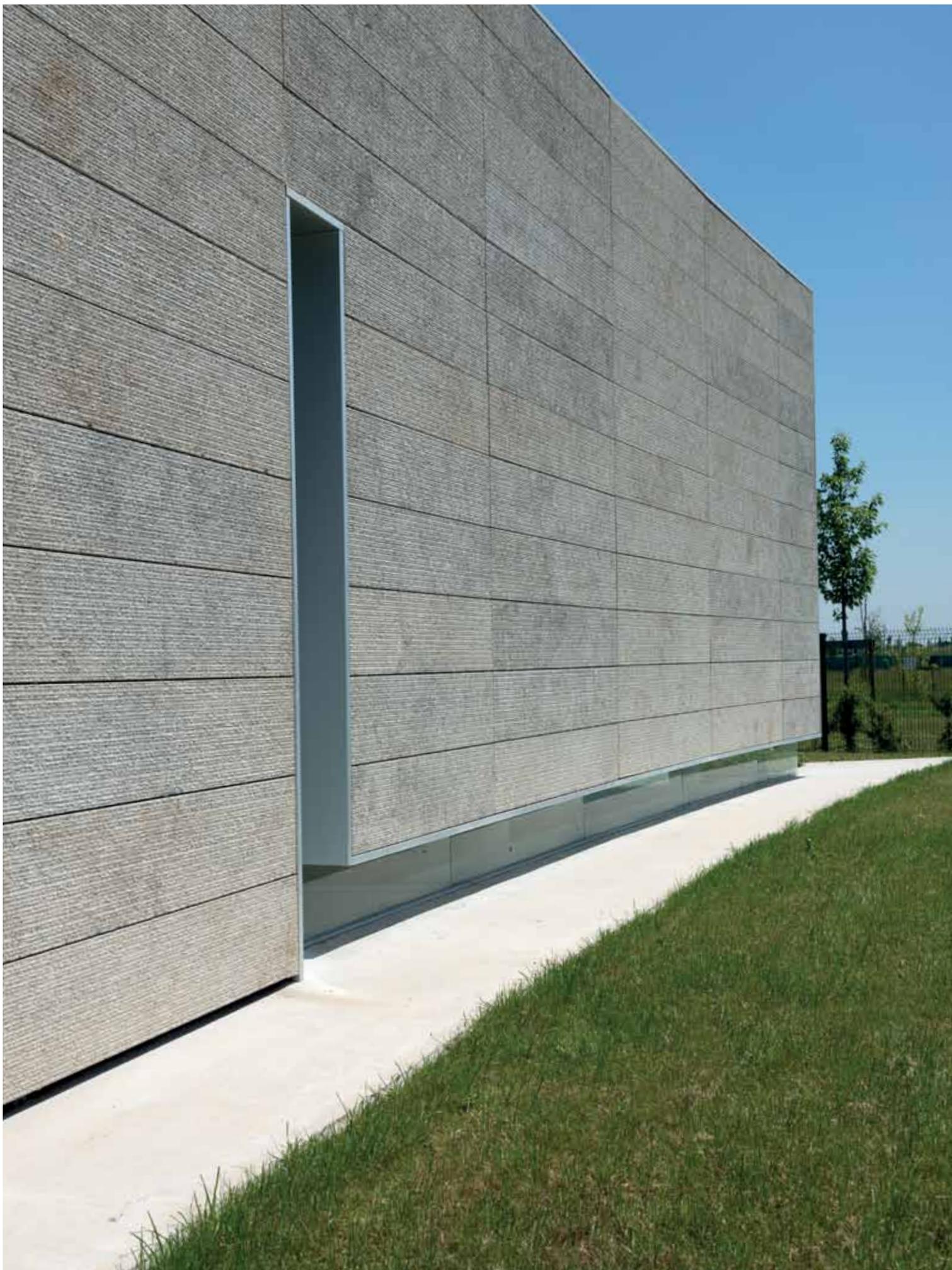
Zanlari's priorities are threefold when designing any property. First is for the environment: "We must always verify if what we build is something useful and necessary for the quality of life of the owner, without compromising the environmental balance," he says.

Secondly, light is crucial. "The right orientation of the building, the differentiated shape of façades according to the orientation [are important]. I believe the shadowing on exposed façades defines the quality of the project. Artificial light can compensate for natural light and highlight inner corners too, with the help of colours. Each of our projects is identified with an unequivocal colour."

Thirdly, details: "Klaus Koenig, a professor at Florence University, once told me: 'Pay attention to details, because there is a short distance between roaring and braying.' You must know how to be original without unnecessary exaggerations. It means searching for a balance between the general sense of the project and the details [needed] to realise it."



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The project boasts impressive environmental connections, including an automatic air exchange and photovoltaic panels.



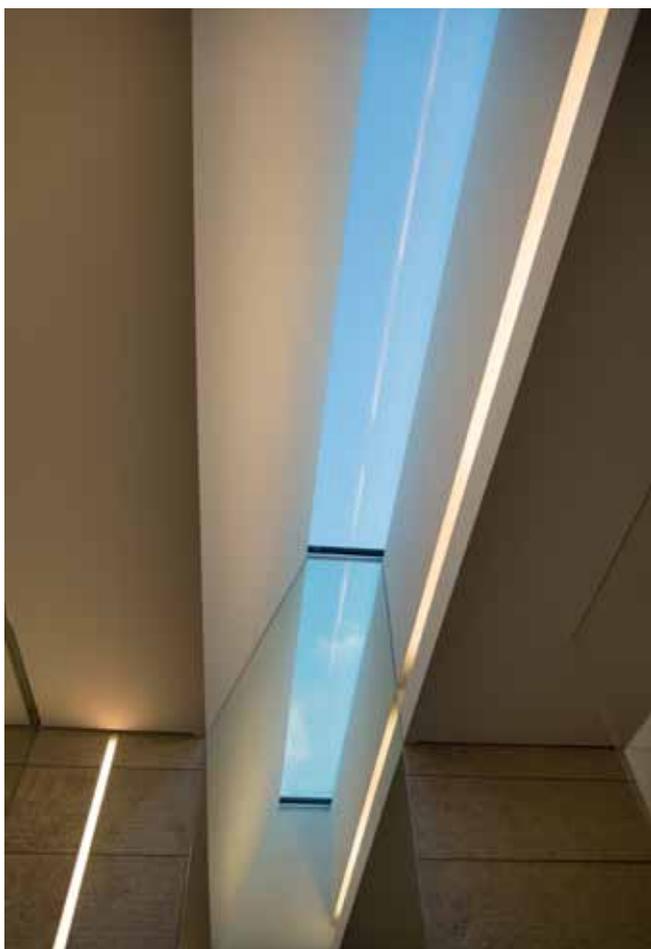
The blue gallery above the building above the building focuses attention on the art works inside.



The truncated circular staircase is enclosed in stainless steel - a surprising detail.



The vertical green garden symbolises material and spiritual lightness.



There are unexpected curvilinear elements within the rigorous structure.

Taking into account these three principles, the environment in this instance is the outskirts of Parma, Italy – an elegant city synonymous with tailoring and cheese (and a now-famous sartorial scent). The house looks towards the city in one direction and the countryside in another. It is surrounded by an extensive private garden. Zanlari explains in more detail: “This house lies on the boundary between town and countryside: the front facing the town has a green façade, incorporating the inherent idea that getting out of town anticipates green fields. On the other side, the external wall is made from scratched stone. Symbolically this represents town walls, the border between inside and outside. The blue room suspended above the building is the path of the culture – the client is a collector of contemporary art, crossing the border.”

As for the details, they are also symbolic. Water, symbolising purity and renewal, passes through the design: there is a swimming pool in the garden, wellness facilities inside, a welcoming decorative basin at the entrance, and a rainwater recovery system. Of the walls, Zanlari says, “The naturalness of the scratched stone of the walls is clearly expressed in relation to the light that hits it. Yet the volumetric spatiality from inside, deriving from curvilinear elements combined with a rigorous structural mesh, leads to unexpected interior environments. The green façade, suspended from the ground, denotes material and spiritual lightness.”

It's no wonder La Casa Blu won the Regula 2018 award – recognising its layers of meaning, impressive structure and sustainability credentials. As for his next projects, Zanlari says they are many and varied: “A public garden comprising a lake and a field for archery; the restoration of a beautiful palace; a commercial centre; and three villas.” The project name for the latter is ‘No Place Like Home’, and the hope is that even before opening the door of the property the client will feel at home. 