

Taking in the view from a rejigged Toronto Special

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Globe and Mail Update

Published Thursday, Sep. 08, 2011 12:16PM EDT

Last updated Thursday, Sep. 08, 2011 1:37PM EDT

Martin Kohn and Dufflet Rosenberg often sit on their dock, feet dangling, newspaper in hand. Sometimes, they wave a hello to the neighbour, just a few feet away. Much further is Lake Ontario, about 2½ kilometres as the crow flies.

The absence of chairs on “the dock”—really a cantilevered concrete slab floating about four feet above their front yard—explains the dangling limbs: a casual pose to ensure the couple doesn’t lord over others in their Queen and Dovercourt neighbourhood. But it also explains a great deal about Mr. Kohn’s inspiration for the design: “I’m very concerned about eye-level,” says the architect slowly, choosing his words. “I think that’s really an important thing because it’s your perspective on things.”



PHOTOS

Inside a transformed Toronto Special

“Perspective” is a good word for this home, but “sightlines” is better: from front dock to living room, staircase at the midriff to lowered kitchen, or window placement and fence-height, it’s all about line of sight. What began life as an uninspired mid-1970s “Toronto Special” with nary a thought to sightlines is now a showplace of them.

Toronto Specials, for the uninitiated, are the milk crates of the architecture world. They’re bland, but also incredibly strong and versatile (remember how LPs fit perfectly into milk crates?...or how they made great shelving?). Often, they’re quirky: hell-bent on an eight-foot ceiling height for the basement but unwilling to dig any deeper than necessary, the unknown builder of the Kohn-Rosenberg home raised the ground floor up. In essence, the house sits on a platform.

Built in the thousands from the 1950s - 1970s by immigrant builders to infill older neighbourhoods, Toronto’s ubiquitous red-brick-and-angel-stone bunkers, quirky or not, are easily adapted to fit twenty-first century lifestyles. Mr. Kohn, one half of the award-winning Kohn Shnier Architects, was acutely aware of this when he first spotted his particular example four years ago. He also liked that it was only a few blocks north of the “dark, dank” 1890s row house he and his famous baker wife had lived in for over a quarter-century.

While this Toronto Special wasn’t much to look at—“Dufflet walked in the door and she turned around and walked out and yelled at me ‘Marty, you decide,’” he remembers—and it occupied a challenging corner lot to boot, Mr. Kohn whipped out his architectural scalpel and got to work. “We basically took the ends off,” he says. Indeed, the east and west end of the 1000 sq. ft. rectangle were lopped off to create window-walls, and rigidity was regained with steel “moment frames” further inside the structure. With wonderful sightlines created at the ends, Mr. Kohn cut a hole into the roof for a skylight to crown the stairwell and then sliced away brick for a long transom above the side door.



(Deborah Baio/The Globe and Mail)

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Martin Kohn and Dufflet Rosenberg on their “dock” as they call it, the front porch of their new home in the Queen West and Dovercourt area of Toronto.



(Photo by Tom Arban)

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Home of Martin Kohn and Dufflet Rosenberg. West elevation, dining area.



(Photo by Tom Arban)

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Home of Martin Kohn and Dufflet Rosenberg. Backyard at night.



(Photo by Tom Arban)

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Home of Martin Kohn and Dufflet Rosenberg. NORTH ELEVATION, note the house number is a cut-out in the wood fence; also this side door is now the main door of the house (front door was removed).




(Photo by Tom Arban)

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Home of Martin Kohn and Dufflet Rosenberg. Foyer looking to kitchen.

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About that door: It's no longer the side door, it's the main door. The original front door and porch were removed when the window-wall and dock were created. Because the couple didn't want to climb a lot of steps to get to the new main door, the foyer and kitchen/dining area were lowered by 'borrowing' a few feet of ceiling height from the basement; instead of stairs, a shallow ramp fashioned from metal grillwork carries feet up to the door (and sheds snow before entry). Now at "seat height to the yard," the back slab is less a dock and more a deck. Regardless of what to call it, "it's very nice to have the option of two places to sit depending on what the weather is doing and what time of day it is," offers Mr. Kohn.

Two other items were determined by sightlines. The height of the backyard fence gives seated individuals privacy from the street while those standing are in plain view. The former two-car garage at the end of the yard became a one-car garage; this allowed Mr. Kohn to blow away the structure's side wall to visually extend the yard and gain a shady seating area.

The best place for line of sight, however, is the light-drenched foyer. There's a view to each transparent end of the house; one that goes over and through the bulthaup kitchen cabinetry, another down to the basement and Mr. Kohn's bicycle washing station (he's an avid cyclist), and, finally, the eye makes a beeline to the second floor, since there's practically no staircase to get in the way. And what a staircase! Two pieces of half-inch steel plate for the stringers and half-inch steel for the treads, all held together by simple welds. "How could you have less, and it still be a stair?" he asks cheekily.

At the top of that effervescent stair is a "living hall" where bookshelves and a big space to spread ephemera are ideas that stayed with the 1979 Waterloo graduate after a school trip to Chicago's 1887 Glessner House by H. H. Richardson. Completing the second floor: a big master bedroom at one end, a study/television room at the other, and Ms. Rosenberg's bathroom and dressing area in the middle (Mr. Kohn's equivalents are in the basement).

"It's got a quiet normalness," says Mr. Kohn with finality about the design. While the home still possesses some of its humble Toronto Special qualities, it transcends normal with sightline-specific design to reach the sublime.



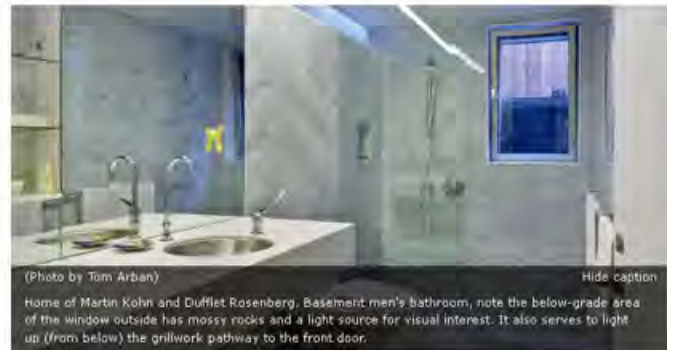
(Photo by Tom Arban)



(Photo by Tom Arban)

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Home of Martin Kohn and Dufflet Rosenberg. Lowered kitchen looking east to living room.



(Photo by Tom Arban)

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Home of Martin Kohn and Dufflet Rosenberg. Basement men's bathroom, note the below-grade area of the window outside has mossy rocks and a light source for visual interest. It also serves to light up (from below) the grillwork pathway to the front door.



(Photo by Tom Arban)

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The master bedroom.



(Photo by Tom Arban)

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Home of Martin Kohn and Dufflet Rosenberg. Living room looking to lowered kitchen.



(Photo by Tom Arban)

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Home of Martin Kohn and Dufflet Rosenberg. 2nd floor study.