

Dufflet's Sweet Digs

Iris Benaroya, National Post · Friday, Nov. 12, 2010

Some entrances refuse to be found. Certain bars, for instance, forgo signage as an act of rebellion against the mainstream. And builders of unusual residences will often contrive subterranean dwellings that leave the postman wondering where to drop the mail.

Marty Kohn and Dufflet Rosenberg's home in the epicentre of what's become the coolest strip in Toronto -- Ossington Avenue in Queen West -- has that vibe: A fortress of cedar trees screen what one feels should be the front of the two-storey house, with its two private gardens and a roof-gardened garage. Instead, you enter through a side door, if you can find it. Oh, there it is, around the fence.

When the couple (he's a principal of Kohn Shnier Architects; she owns Dufflet Pastries) bought the home, it exemplified drab 1970s architecture -- it was all about utility.

Unlike Victorian structures, such houses were not intended for sipping tea in pretty rooms with stained glass windows, but for practicality and to accommodate a family or two.

Similar ugly infill homes are everywhere in Toronto (just follow the angel-brick road) and, today, can be purchased for renovation relatively cheaply. And, bonus, there's no knob-and-tube wiring.

When Mr. Kohn and Ms. Rosenberg initially walked through the corner-lot home, it was parquet central, the staircase an eyesore, the ceilings low, which Mr. Kohn, who did the redesign, actually liked. "I don't mind them. In fact, the ceilings are lower here because we poured a concrete topping.

"It's nice to have a bit of a relief to have more volume in other parts of the house," he says, referring to the east section where there's a large living room with a Niels Bendtsen sofa (room for 12), a coffee table with a ping-pong table surface for a top (Mr. Kohn's dad made it, so it has sentimental value, he says) and cardboard boxes for legs.

But even in the home's original state, its redeeming qualities were obvious. "One of the big attractions were the cedars -- without much effort we could make this private," Mr. Kohn says, sliding open the glass wall on the east side (where the original entrance was). "We had to change our street address because people were getting confused."

The door leads to a concrete deck covered by retractable awnings, a plot of hardy plants and the circle of cedars. "It's nice on a hot day in the afternoon because it's the shady side," he says. "This time of year, we read here or have coffee in the morning because it's sunny."

It's a secluded, enviable oasis that is hard to come by in this part of town, where residents (such as this writer) have resorted to barbecuing on the front porch, neighbours be damned!

The home embraces the principles of balance and light. There's also no air-conditioning -- they adjust the awnings to control incoming sun -- and in winter, in-floor heating keeps the economical concrete floor toasty.

His firm is designing a LEED approved kindergarten and childcare facility that's much different from the drafty energy hogs of the past. This one employs extensive shading systems, natural ventilation and in-floor hot water piping.

"Seeing the outdoors from every vantage point is also something we try to do in our projects," Mr. Kohn says. "In our home, in every direction you look, out of the corner of your eye you see outside, and from one end to the other," he says. "It's a real Dutch phenomenon."

An identical configuration of windowed walls and deck is on the opposite (west end) of the house, off the slick Bulthaup kitchen, where a Superellipse Fritz Hansen table has been the scene of many parties, Ms. Rosenberg says.



"The great thing about the kitchen is that we can finally entertain," she says. "For years, we never reciprocated invitations. Our other place was dark and Victorian. The dining room and the kitchen are very casual here, and it's nice with the glass doors open."

The room evokes alfresco dining, without actually being outside. Nature, however, is just a pull of the sliding door away, and it's fruitful. Today, the garage roof garden yielded a batch of lumpy tomatoes -- the tastiest kind.

With that, Mr. Kohn leads me upstairs. Light filters down from a skylight as we clank up the metal stairs--grip that handrail, if you're in heels. "You can't take anything away from that stair," Mr. Kohn says. "For our objective, I was thinking of the simplest possible design to occupy the least volume."

Upstairs there is an office, a master bedroom, Ms. Rosenberg's walk-in closet and a marble bathroom; the exact closet and bathroom set-up is in the basement for Mr. Kohn. "The marble was an indulgence," he admits, "but Dufflet and I are fortunate to have travelled on bicycle trips through Europe, and one of the big pleasures on bike trips -- after a long, hard day -- is arriving at nice hotels with a really nice bathroom to shower in. The marble tile reminds us of that."

There's also a snug nook for guests, which the couple calls "the cell"--a wall-to-wall bed occupies the narrow space, with a cubby at the foot.

The upper level is all well-designed minimalism, yet with the haphazard bookishness of a Woody Allen apartment. There are low shelves stuffed with art books and literature; doohickeys from travels; a typewritten note from a friend as arcane art.

Art, mostly the work of friends, is propped against the wall in the hall. "I'm lazy. They've been there for ages," Mr. Kohn says. About a dozen sculptures made by his mother, Anna, are on the floor.

Is that a cat shrine in the master bedroom? "Most of that is a Fastwurms piece," says Mr. Kohn, gazing at a fake cat head. "The candle was part of it, but the Bauhaus cylinder has the ashes of our first cat in it, so I suppose it's literally a cat shrine," he laughs.

With that we head downstairs to the basement, which is devoted to all things two-wheeled, including a bicycle-washing station, which is a nook with nozzles on the wall and steel grids on the floor with a drain: "I compete, poorly, in something called Cycle Cross, and that involves a lot of washing up, so this is nice," Mr. Kohn, an avid cyclist, says.

It's also practical for visiting dogs with dirty paws, although the couple's pets, Smokey and Laszlo, aren't the showering type. However, they weren't forgotten in the design of the home, as a cat flap leads off the kitchen.

Mr. Kohn calls the basement the "boy's area," which might account for the success of the couple's 35-year partnership. There's a marble bathroom, with a nifty glassed-in moss garden in the shower and a dressing area. Best of all, he says, is the lower entrance: "My stuff is here. I can come in through the basement, shower, change, come upstairs."

Separate entrances -- perhaps they're the secret of a happy home.

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