

This transparent Modern House appears to be one with its setting at the edge of Lake Ontario. But beyond the natural drama, the home's subtler characteristics reveal themselves.

Interview

The first thing you notice, when you step inside this Toronto home on a clear June day, is the wide, deep green landscape ending at the calm blue ribbon of Lake Ontario. You're right outdoors again, or so it seems, since the back wall of this house is a two-storey expanse of windows, interrupted only by dark charcoal-coloured mullions that blend easily, almost invisibly, into the scattering of tall, weathered tree trunks beyond

The front façade doesn't really prepare you for what's to come. The face it presents to the street is crisp and appealing, with a clean simplicity and compact dimensions that allow it to sit quietly alongside the various styles of the homes populating this 1950s-era street. An elegance of detailing speaks to the efficiency and modernity of this house, but doesn't hint at what's on offer inside.

Michael Taylor, a partner at Taylor Smyth Architects, spoke to IA&D about his design of the home, finished in 2011, and built, like many new houses in established neighbourhoods, in accommodation of various restrictions and limitations. Those obstacles became the jump-off point to innovation in Taylor's hands, and the home offers a guidebook to building modern, both with a fresh eye and sympathy to one's surrounds.

How is it that the back of the house seems to disappear when you're inside, and you feel as though you're out in the landscape?

The secret is the dark-coloured mullions. Your eye doesn't stop on them. It lands on the tree trunks. If the mullions were white, or wood, which a lot of people like, they become elements and the view takes over. Photographs don't really even do justice to the view of the water, which tends to disappear in them. And in the winter it's just as wonderful in a different way because the water is even more clearly visible.

Aside from its connection to the outdoors, the house has other very modern aspects, such as the way materials like stone and glass have been used on the façade.

We used thick blocks of Algonquin limestone on the front walk and the steps, and as a feature wall beside the door. It then reappears inside, in the entry hall, in a less random pattern. We wanted to do a sort of contemporary version



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of the rubblestone type of stone walls you might see on an older home, evoking them here in a much cleaner, more modern way. The channel glass is a product you rarely see on residential buildings – it's used more commercially. Its channels of U-shaped piece of translucent glass, with insulation between the pieces that helps provide that milky quality, which really has a beautiful glow. It's a nice glass element for the front that provides privacy for those second-floor areas – the master bathroom and the stairwell – without having to use blinds.

What obstacles did you have to overcome in order to build on the property?

It's a sensitive site in that there were mature trees very close to the house – we couldn't dig and upset the roots. It would have been challenging to dig new foundations on the site, and since the property is covered by the [local] ravine-conservation authority, it would have been a lengthy process to get permission. So, we built on the foundations of the existing house – which the homeowner's father built – extending beyond them on only one portion, on the east side, to allow more space inside. This also allowed us to keep costs down and to respect the scale of the other, mostly one- or two-storey homes on the street.

How does the loft-style upstairs layout work?

The idea here was to design the rooms so you could open them up or close them off. We've got sliding wood panels on the bedroom and den that are open most of the time, but they can be closed for privacy when there are guests. The master bedroom area has a floor-to-ceiling sliding door that encloses it, along with its deep walk-in closet and the spa-like master bath. Keeping the bedroom fairly small allowed us to make the living room a double-height space; then opening the panel gives the room a sense of connection with the rest of the house.

What inspired the cantilevered balcony?

It started with the client saying she'd like to have a place to walk out of the bedroom and check out the weather. That was the inspiration to create this framed view that you can see from the bed - like a picture window - yet, when you stand on it you feel like you're out in the trees. To frame the view, we gave it a roof, but it's slatted, rather than solid, to let light in. We wanted the effect that the whole thing had just "slid out" from the wall.

Can you talk about the construction process?

We did a number of things you could almost call "prefab." The wood framing for the house was actually done in large panels. The walls, floors and roof were all prefabricated at a plant in Ontario, and they literally just hoisted the pieces in with a crane and assembled the house very quickly. The windows - shipped as large units, already glazed, except for a few of the biggest ones - were hoisted over from the front to the back, to avoid damaging the trees. This kind of construction is happening more and more, I think. There are a lot of reasons for it. For one, it reduces your construction time, which reduces your labour time, and so your cost. It's also very precise, and so it reduces the amount of waste. It was the first time we've ever done it like this and it was great to see how fast they built the whole thing. It enables us to try to deliver projects on a reasonable budget, which is always a challenge with modern design.

Architects don't always get a chance to "test-drive" their projects, but you did. What is your personal experience of the house?

I stayed here while the owners were away and my own house was being renovated. The bedroom is so high up that when you wake up early in the morning, you look down on the birds going across the lake. My favourite thing to do was to walk out to the edge of the property at dusk with a glass of wine and just enjoy the place. It's fun to stay in a house you designed - and to experience it under different weather conditions. During thunderstorms, there were amazing shows of lightning on the lake. I didn't feel like I was in Toronto at all.