

How a tiny patio became a lush garden.

Katharine Vansittart

Urbanites cut themselves green spaces wherever possible. Those without backyards might plant their rooftops or designate a tree from a nearby park as their favourite. But if you're architect Michael Taylor, of Taylor\_Smyth, you blend the interior and exterior of your urban plot by amping up its best features.

Taylor lives down a laneway near Dupont and Dufferin - an area of town comprised of postwar duplexes, mom-and-pop corner stores, and the Galleria, a forlorn strip mall that's seen better days. So diverse is the neighbourhood that on the day Taylor's moving trucks arrived, a stray chicken popped by to greet him. What he liked about his new home was the building's patchwork brick exterior and its rough-and-tumble history.

Originally a dairy, circa 1910, the two-storey structure later became a tannery and then a garage, before it was renovated into a home in the early 1980s. But what Taylor loved most was an open space inside the building, surrounded by 2.5 metre-high brick walls. "I liked the mystery of its abandoned look," he says, along with the chance to create a secret garden in the middle of the city.

Taylor has designed some of Toronto's most contemporary homes - defined by clean lines, clerestories and cantilevered additions. His own house only reveals his trademark design sensibilities inside, where a wall mounted, blacked steel fireplace, a skylight-lit kitchen and an expansive living area blend into one large L-shaped space.

But the garden deck is the home's most defining feature. Taylor replaced its back wall with ceiling-height windows and a sliding glass door, creating an uninterrupted threshold. Now when you enter, your eyes are drawn to the 32 square-metre ipe-clad patio, generously planted with drought-tolerant Hakone and porcupine grasses, and English ivy that crawls up the walls and winds itself along telephone wires.

With the city sufficiently blocked from view, one can imagine being in some enchanted Yorkshire garden, but one with contemporary luxuries such as two Solartex weave chaise lounges, slate-clad planters and built-in bench seating.

During the day, sunshine floods both the garden and living areas, and at night spotlights are fixed on the ivy walls to dramatic effect. Taylor revels in the anonymity of his own private oasis, and he hasn't seen that chicken for years.



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