

Bishop Street Residence

It's a little difficult to ignore the transformation Toronto's Yorkville district has undergone when considering this 15,000 sq. ft. urban retreat surrounded by Victorian working-class cottages. The quiet residential suburb turned into the city's 'hippy hub' in the 1960s, nurturing the talents of musician Joni Mitchell as well as then-underground literary figure Margaret Atwood – before finally transmuting from its bohemian manifestation into its current high-end shopping avatar. One would hope Yorkville's cultural sensibilities are still preserved, what with the many galleries and antique stores challenging the commercial landscape. And it's in this context that this Bishop Street residence finds itself.

Previously housing a graphic design company, this post-industrial two-storey home looms large, even a tad high and mighty, with its prominent vertical and horizontal ribbons of black zinc-on-concrete exterior. Evoking the owner's desire for privacy, the solidity evinced by employing glass as a signature material on doors, floors, walls and ceilings. Taking the shape of a double-height cube, a fluid divide between public and private quarters exploits every opportunity to fill the space with natural light. Clear-glass floors aid in streaming light on to ground level through the use of a slot skylight, creating a 'floor-window' or galleria for viewing the activity below and showing off the owner's collection of 20th century furniture, lighting and contemporary art. A low horizontal window in the garage doubles as a showcase for the owner's cars, with the same technique used to open the living room out onto the courtyard, outdoor lounge area and pool.

On the second floor, seamless glass walls create a box-within-a-box effect for the master suite. Electronically controlled blinds shade the glass box for privacy, highlighting the architect's intention for a flexible and clean interior.

The creative manner in which glass is used to tease the boundaries of one space with another is meant to demonstrate the owner's entrepreneurial spirit and love for design.

The Bishop Street residence certainly stands out against its neighbourhood as a wealthy man's playground, but its architect Michael Taylor says the project is more than just a splurge: "It's a valuable model for new home design ... And it demonstrates how a house can be an adventure." An apt explanation, perhaps, considering the site's 'adventurous' transformation over the years.



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