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creates a Thames River
home unlike any other

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WHAT'S ON FOR FALL

Tripping the Light Fantastic

Inspired architecture meets urban sanctuary. Architect Brad Skinner creates a showpiece home on the river **BY MARK KEARNEY**



IT'S HARD TO IMAGINE a residential project that has elicited more comments or sparked more conversation.

For countless motorists passing by on Riverside Drive, it's been the mysterious onyx blue cube—a neighbourhood anomaly for its height, shape and modern, acute lines.

For those viewing the proceedings from across the river, it's been the house of glass, a crystal abode erected on an idyllic perch above of the Thames and

sheltered by a canopy of mature trees.

But for architect Brad Skinner and his wife Leslie Coates, their new home is all of that and so much more. It's an environmental gem, a haven from a busy world and a playpen for ever-shifting angles of light. Seen from the inside out, it is all about openness and complementary textures. And, of course, that magnificent view of the Thames.

"On a simple level, the building has walls, windows, doors and a roof, as other houses do," says Skinner, "but they are not organized within the same architectural language."

Indeed, the home is built on design principles the average person may not even consider, or for that matter, easily identify. Skinner experimented with different proportions to make the design work, using common building material specifications while incorporating the "golden ratio"—a mathematical principle that has influenced architecture, design, art and music for centuries. Proportioning elements according to the golden ratio created an overall sense of continuity; elements of the home in rhythm with one another interplay with those that have what may seem like irregularities. Says Skinner, "A lot of interest was created by the overlaps."

Skinner and Coates purchased the infill lot about four years ago with an eye to creating something unique to the area. Set among trees and offering a view the couple describes as "just incredible," the property was not without its challenges. Most notably, the slope of the land and the required setback restricted the size of the home. But, as Skinner notes, "being an architect, you can turn your problems into opportunities."

Conforming to municipal setback rules and not encroaching on the ravine at the back left a 30- by 30-foot foundation to work with. "[It] made building three storeys an obvious solution to address both the constraints and opportunities of the site," says Skinner.

Bounded by busy Riverside Drive, the

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PLASTIC SURGEON

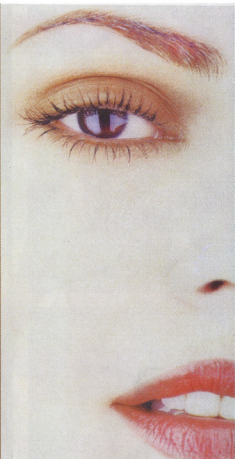
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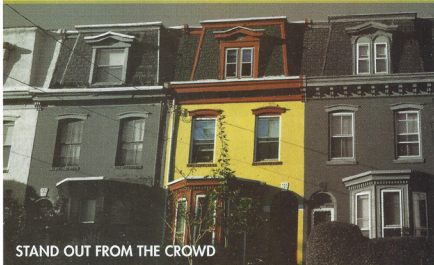
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The passive design principles are age-old and largely lost in current building practices that rely on large, mechanized units for heating and cooling



home's street-side exposure can seem at odds with a design driven to welcome in the natural elements. But a closer look reveals some architectural magic at work. To filter out the street noise, for example, the front windows are recessed four feet from the main façade and acid-etched to maintain privacy but allow light to flow through. This recess, explains Skinner, is further sheltered by horizontal strips of cedar extending up the façade to give the appearance of a

light-filtering wall. "There is still over 135 square feet of glass at the front of the house facing the street, a far greater area than in most new, residential houses."

The home also employs a number of innovative and environment-friendly construction features to address the most energy-intensive parts of the house. Passive design, imbued in the three-storey, south facing window wall, is used to flood the house with light, eliminating the need for day lights. The windows also provide tremendous solar heat gain in winter but are shaded in summer by existing trees. The venting windows on three sides and operable roof skylight create a stack effect—allowing a breeze to enter and warm air to escape out the roof. The passive design principles are age-old and largely lost in current building practices that rely on large, mechanized units for heating and cooling.

All of the home's energy systems—lighting, heating, cooling and appliances—are electrically powered. The active technologies, including geothermal heating and cooling, radiant in-floor heating, grey water recycling and energy efficient European appliances, are supplied by renewable energy purchased from Bullfrog Power. "The house has completely green footprint," notes Skinner, "which I don't think you can say about too many other buildings."

To truly appreciate the home's unique design, however, one has to step inside. In an instant the less apparent becomes the obvious as natural light floods the interior from almost every direction, playing off the walls and dancing on floors.

Entering from the side glass door, you first encounter the kitchen and dining areas, which spill into the main floor great room. Cherry wood cabinets line the kitchen, echoing materials employed on the second and third floors of the house, and the dining room is contained by a standard and more intimate eight-foot ceiling, making the great room's cathedral ceiling an impressive contrast.

SMART WOMAN

LADIES FASHIONS



RABE

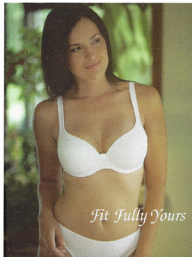
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Cover

Skinner has created an architectural showpiece — a residential exclamation mark in a town that often seems a little too bent on suburban sameness

Once you enter the great room, you grasp the *raison d'être* of the entire design: a 240-square-foot window wall, measuring 14 by 17 feet, not only provides a stunning view down to the Thames and above to treetops and sky, but also acts as the gatekeeper of light throughout the day.

Skinner says his design was always about bringing in light and experiencing what is going on outside in each of the seasons through shifts in the play of light. Watching this unfold as the home was constructed, Skinner recalls, "Fall was just incredible with the colour of the trees."

But there are numerous other focal points as well. The polished concrete floor, for instance, lends surprising warmth to the main level. And a centre partition housing a television and fireplace serves to disconnect the great room from the dining area, yet it doesn't interrupt the flow between the two spaces. "It's the one element inside the house that is centered," Skinner notes. Coates likens it to a sculpture that provides function as well as aesthetics.

As much as light is a constant, so is attention to detail. And one of the standout features of the home is a floating concrete staircase leading to the second level. The cantilevered stairs are an example of how Skinner designed every square inch of the house, customizing as he went and engineering features that, while contributing to openness and light, were also strong and functional. "It makes for a ton of work to figure out," Skinner says, a smile hinting at the thrill

"It's all about the fit."

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lurking behind the challenge. A witness to the struggles, Coates adds, "It's very hard to make things look simple."

The second floor is divided into office space for Coates and Skinner respectively, and remains dominated by the massive window wall. "Any time you come up and down the stairs, every time you move around the house, the view is always there," Skinner says. While Coates won the coin toss and enjoys workspace looking out on the river's sweep, Skinner's office overlooks another unique feature—the "green" garage attached to the home. An existing structure when the couple purchased the lot, the couple opted to keep the garage and refurbish it to retain some of the vernacular of the street and help mesh with surrounding homes. Topped with ground covering sedum that changes colour with the seasons, Skinner says the garage roof "extends nature while softening the look."

Still something of a work in progress, the third floor is home to the master bedroom with ensuite. An operable roof skylight furthers the commitment to natural light and enhances ventilation, and the rooftop features a wooden patio framed with the same ground covering as the garage. Elsewhere on the third level you'll find a laundry room and bathroom featuring a polished concrete countertop, an extension of the building materials established on the main floor.

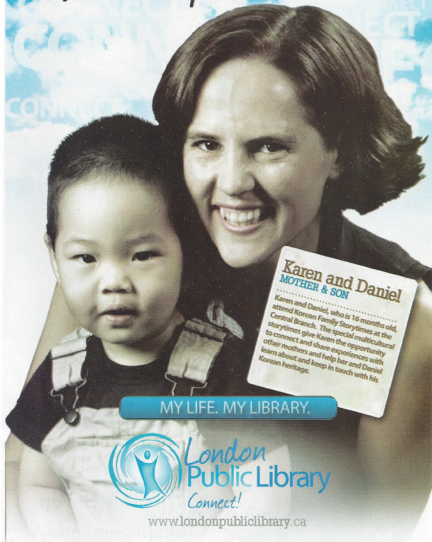
A house unlike any other in the city, Skinner has created an architectural showpiece—a residential exclamation mark in a town that often seems a little too bent on suburban sameness. But it's first a home, a residence that is ideally suited to Skinner and Coates. "The space feels right," says Coates.

Skinner speaks proudly of a friend who described the home as "an incredible mix of simplicity and complexity." However you describe it, the couple believes all the time and effort has paid off.

"It takes a lot of decision making," sums up Coates. "It takes a lot of time and courage to be unique." *CC*

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Karen and Daniel, who is 16 months old, attend Korean Family Storytimes at the Central Branch. The special multicultural storytimes give Karen the opportunity to connect with other mothers and share experiences with them about and keep in touch with his Korean heritage.

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