

The challenging topography of a lot by the river determines an architect's ultimate response

BY MARY HATT

# A not-so-simple PLAN

BRAD SKINNER'S WEBSITE makes a point of stating that his firm is committed to working with "challenging criteria." In fact, there is no better way to describe what this London architect faced when he took on the job of creating a residential design for Finch Auto Group president, Ryan Finch.

Seven years ago, Finch purchased property off Riverside Drive then divided it into building lots. Four lots backed onto the Thames River. They offered ample green space and natural beauty. The fifth lot, however, appeared to be little more than a wasteland. Situated across the road from the river lots, it was really just a leftover parcel with odd dimensions, definitely not a typical building lot. But it was that lot Finch decided to keep for himself. He knew it was important to put up a house here in order to enhance the



**OPPOSITE:** The landscaping, with trees and growings native to the area and the rough-hewn stone wall, embrace both exterior and living spaces, which are connected to each other by a wall almost entirely of glass. Because this property's depth and elevation levels vary from place to place, every inch required careful planning

**ABOVE:** The property's dimensions also informed many design decisions, like putting the house tight to the street in order to maximize outdoor space behind it

potential of his development. He also knew it would not be easy to accomplish.

"When you look at the lot on paper, you can see what a funny shape it is," explains Skinner. The lot is nice and wide, but shallow with a depth that varies considerably from place to place. On average, it's 70 feet deep, but at one point that depth drops to just 53 feet. Skinner also points out that the property tucks into a hill on two sides, creating different elevation levels. What he decided to do was use these limitations as guideposts for determining the ultimate shape of the house both inside and out. By customizing the structure to the site, and by using exterior architectural detail to fill in for the property's lack of natural beauty, Skinner ended up with a fantastic place in a location that was anything but.

"Our main idea became to build the house as close as possible to the street in order to open up space for what was to become the backyard area," Skinner says. "As it turned out, by being tight to the street, the house took on a very European look." With stucco and stone exterior walls that appear low under the steep pitch of the roofline, it would not seem out of place in a French village. This, however, is also a house that exudes the sophisticated polish and intelligence of custom urban architecture.

As well as providing privacy and security on the street side of the house, Skinner's design allows for abundant natural light to flow through clerestory-style windows, which run along the top of the south-facing exterior wall. There are also seven skylights on the front and rear sides of the metal roof. There are, in

fact, no conventional windows on the street side. "The next big urban move we made with this long exterior wall was to create a void between the house and the garage," Skinner says. That void became a courtyard, accessible from the windowed great room as well as through a sturdy wood garden gate that's set into the stone wall. The courtyard, equipped with snowmelt technology, connects the house to the garage.

In fact, the garage became an important piece of architectural detail. Instead of trying to "hide" it, virtually impossible given the size of the lot, the three-car garage became a key part of the property's overall design. "We purposely made its side walls beautiful by using simple triangular stone gables," says Skinner, adding that additional gables on the sides of the house established a further



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## Design



visual link between the two buildings, as do the County Heritage-designed wood doors, which repeat themselves in the garden gate and then again in the front door.

"We were going for the look of a modern ruin," explains Skinner of his inspiration for the horizontal plank doors and massive gables that establish a juxtaposition of clean, modern lines and textural roughness. Owen Sound stone in random shapes and sizes was trucked in. Much of it was split up by hand on-site before being fitted into the gables, as

well as the wall that meanders around the property. Now, with iron ore rusting out of stones, which are set between big, fat mortar joints, the wall and gables ooze character.

When it came to developing an interior plan for the home, designer Myra Tuer started here. "My direction for Ryan's place was to imagine that these beautiful stone walls were the remaining walls of an old building that had fallen away, leaving this structural evidence of endurance and time gone by."

Inside Skinner's "modern ruin," Finch



OPPOSITE, TOP: Even in the bedroom, the garden becomes an interior as well as exterior feature, thanks to abundant glass

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM: Symmetry of furniture placement in the great room follows architectural rhythms. Sofas were made by Scheuneman's

ABOVE: Finch designed his glass table perched on three zebra-wood cubes. Zebra-wood is used throughout the house

wanted modern detail, like a backyard swimming pool. What he got is a lean, elegant strip of water that follows the language of the house and is surrounded by India black flagstone decking. Beyond the outdoor living space is a short, steep slope, which was carefully landscaped by designer Richard Crossman of Parterre Landscape. He planted hundreds of juniper bushes there, then perched emerald cedars along its brow. River birch trees and fountain grasses complete the plan's natural simplicity.

A wasteland no longer, the landscape blends seamlessly with the home's exterior surfaces of wood, stone, stucco, steel and glass, and it provides pleasing vistas from all interior spaces. With maturity, the landscaping will also better conceal Finch's property from the backyards of houses that sit above it.

Finch says, "I was hoping Brad would create a house with a bit of mystery, but behind that mystery, I wanted all the good stuff." And good stuff he got, including a party-worthy media system that lets his 11 TV screens show—simultaneously—whatever he selects from his Apple computer system. A home theatre



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**RIGHT:** Seven generous and perfectly spaced skylights on either side of the cathedral-style ceiling wash with light the loft-like second storey games room as well as the great room below it. Finch selected porcelain tile from Spain after spending months in search of just the right flooring, one suitable for every room on the main and upper levels. The mantra for interior finishes was repeat, repeat, repeat

**BELOW, LEFT:** Floating stairs permit light to bathe the walled stairwell leading to the upper level

**BELOW, RIGHT:** Skinner likes to interrupt clean and lean lines with a little chaos, found here in art and in the stunning light fixtures which Finch sourced at Eurofase Lighting, Toronto



is also in the works on the lower level.

Design-wise, Skinner made sure the home's clean interior lines define comfortable, open living spaces where walls have been kept to a minimum. Instead of a long, narrow hallway/mud room extending into the house from the courtyard entrance, for instance, Finch and Skinner chose to leave the entrance open to the great room and opted for a series of artistically-designed storage units to house coats, boots and other outdoor gear. The original design called for a wall that would rise to the two-storey height of the great room's ceiling. Instead, Finch opted to reduce the height of that wall, thus creating a loft-style second level overlooking the main floor.

Fewer walls mean more natural light, especially deep within the house. Light also pours in through nine eight-foot sliding glass doors installed along the back wall. Skinner says these windows express the "rhythm" of the house, a tempo that starts with the garage doors, which are identical in width to the windows. There is just one foot between each window, creating a wall that is almost entirely glass. The windows enable rhythm to form between interior and exterior spaces, as well.

"The fantastic thing about the length of this house is that



every room gets to look out to the beautiful pool and landscaping," notes Skinner, adding it's why he and Finch decided to situate the pool directly beside the house.

"When I was sketching the design, the courtyard and great room area established how everything else would flow," Skinner says. The great room is a nucleus of living space, even though it sits at the far end of

the house. On one side it opens to the courtyard, outdoor kitchen and adjacent garage, which also houses a small upstairs apartment. On the other side, the great room connects with the kitchen, dining room and master suite.

Exceptional sight lines, created by the landscaping and striking exterior architecture, inspired Tuer to choose an interior palette of minimal colour and finishes. "You can't have everything speak at once," she says. "We decided to repeat and repeat. There is one floor finish, one wall colour, one casing and trim colour and then an amazing accent of Zebra wood in cabinetry and furniture. By keeping everything flowing and

simple, Ryan's furniture, art and dining room light fixtures provide a high contrast and allow his personality to be reflected in them." Most of the cabinetry and furniture was built by Bill Tyssen. Finch, however, designed the dining table.

The simplicity of this home's interior belies the design and build teams' painstaking efforts to make it just that... simple. The floating wood stairs, for instance, could not be manufactured elsewhere then shipped in, as are many traditional staircases. Yet, these stairs, built by Gilberto Oliveira of Pro-Stair and Railing, comprise the key element of the stairwell's sculpted beauty. It is especially appreciated when looking from the front hallway through the stairwell and sliding doors to the exterior beyond. The open spaces between each floating stair also allow further natural light to enter the middle of the house.

"It is editing with a good eye and getting rid of what doesn't need to be there," explains Skinner, adding that traditional staircases often clutter what would otherwise be open, airy space. He feels the same way about door frames, which, he says, are often there to cover up a structural connection. "A door frame used to be a thing of beauty when it was a nine-inch wide piece with fluting. But now it is often a three-inch piece of flimsy wood that doesn't add a thing." That's why Skinner's trademark doorways have no casings. It's a look, he says, that was popular in homes built in the 1950s and '60s. It's not a look, however, that's easy to achieve. "You have to make sure the drywall is perfectly straight."

Minimal lines and open doorways extend to the master suite, where Finch wanted the cozy intimacy of a combined bedroom and office. His suite also provides a long view of the pool, landscaped hillside and rambling stone wall. He placed his bed right beside the windows for a reason. When he opens his eyes each morning, there's always a view to brighten even the duller days. *ccc*

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