



a continuum of work

LONG BEFORE CONSTRUCTION began, before they had even approved the plans for their new home, Darren and Cindy Smyth climbed up a ladder in the centre of their lot next to Thames Valley golf club.

The ladder was leaning on a tree that would later be removed. As they took turns climbing up, their architect, Brad Skinner, stood below, guiding them.

"He told us we were standing right where we would standing in our kitchen," recalls Cindy. "He wanted us to see the view from there, looking out to the golf course

and the river, exactly as it would be from the kitchen in the centre of the house."

There were other days when Skinner would walk the lot, a skinny, hockey-stick shape between existing homes and the upper putting green at Thames Valley. He took note of the light and the shade existing trees provided. He assessed what kind of fence would be needed to provide privacy for the Smyth's concrete deck and hot tub without closing off the house to the natural beauty of the golf course and Springbank Park.

Some days Skinner didn't go to the lot at all: He doodled instead.

We all doodle, in meetings or on the phone. Few of our doodles, however, contain the DNA of uniquely beautiful buildings as they do in the case of Brad Skinner. He is London's best-known designer of what by default are called modern homes. He's not a fan of the term modern, and yet he uses it just the same because it is understood by most people to describe his signature home designs.

From signature dream homes to municipal libraries, the guiding principle for architect Brad Skinner remains unchanged: the simple desire to make great buildings

By Christopher Clark

Brad Skinner

Skinner homes dot London and Southwestern Ontario. They are glass and concrete cubes, often with flat roofs where sedum may or may not grow as a kind of pagan offering to Mother Earth. They feature clean lines, always with an unexpected touch of whimsy in the form of something as simple as tiny windows, arranged in a seemingly random pattern along a wall.

There are no baseboards or claustrophobic crown mouldings; if there are carpets, they are lily pads floating on a sea of hardwood and slate floors. Stairways are simplistically grand, chunks of concrete emerging from walls, bookended by industrial sheets of glass.

Every kitchen is spectacular, a mixture of materials and engineering that celebrates the space as the central meeting

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COVER

place of the home, whether for family dinners or weekend parties.

People are fascinated by Skinner's modern homes. They lined up by the thousands to tour his office and home on Riverside Drive, just east of Wonderland—the onyx blue “cube” as it's known colloquially—during last year's London Home Tour.

There's just one thing his fans may not know. Brad Skinner doesn't just design modern houses. He designs everything from offices to libraries to pool halls, some with modern touches and some without. The best coaches adapt their game plan to account for the abilities of the athletes on their team. Skinner adapts his ideas to fit the requirements and desires of his clients, whether that's a couple building their dream home or a municipal library building a library.

The thing each project has in common, however, is the starting point. Those doodles. His initial sketches often fit into the palm of his hand, a few lines on a tiny piece of paper. But the drawing is not as simple as it appears. Each of the lines represents many more lines in his mind: The drawing is a key to unlock a cascade of thoughts as he contemplates a new design, his latest challenge.

“When I meet with people and listen to what they're thinking, I'm part psychologist, part artist and part businessperson,” says Skinner. “We meet several times and then I draw some pencil sketches, completely free hand, little views of various angles.”

Eventually those sketches go into a computer that spits out detailed 3D renderings, but often when he first presents his ideas to his clients, he goes in with just the pencil drawings. “That works for some people, but in other situations it's too abstract,” he says.

He first met with the Smyths on their lot in April, 2011. He was more familiar with their lot than he normally is because they had purchased it from Skinner's father, Paul, an architect himself who designed



many of London's signature buildings, including London City Centre, the Court House and parts of Victoria Hospital.

“He was familiar with the lot, but still it was amazing to watch him do a rough sketch right on the spot,” Cindy recalls. “He had the ladder and a tape measure, and he took in a lot of information.”

A year after that initial meeting, the Smyths and their two kids, Maddy and Cameron, moved into their home. It features three stories of glass backing onto the golf course, white oak floors, a master bedroom and ensuite straight out of a boutique hotel, with clean, industrial lines throughout. It's all tied together by the kitchen, placed right in the middle of the main floor, designed by Martin Jesko, with white cabinets and walnut accents throughout.

“We love the house,” says Darren. “And we loved working with Brad. It's not often you walk away from a business deal and



Skinner initiates the design process with pencil sketches—and the drawings are often the first thing he presents to clients

feel like you've made new friends, but that's how we feel about Brad and Leslie."

Skinner's wife, Leslie Coates, is a photographer and works in an unofficial capacity offering design ideas. "She made a gingerbread house modelled after our house at Christmas," Cindy says.

Skinner's office is on the top floor of his Riverside home and is guarded by a four-year-old golden retriever named Red. He dresses casually and clearly loves his job. Beside his desk is a couch, where he spends time just thinking.

His sister, Suzette, works for the firm, and his father still consults with him on many projects. The Skinner family has been designing and building for generations. His grandfather, Milton, built houses in Port Credit. His uncle, Don Skinner, was an architect in Port Credit, and his son, Don Skinner Jr., is a Bracebridge architect. When Brad graduated from U of T with his BA in architecture in 1992, he went to work at his father's firm for five years.

"I'm biased of course, but the truth is you could see right away that he had a knack for architecture," says his father, Paul. "I would be working on something and run it by him and he would have all these ideas about how to improve it. I really enjoy discussing projects with him."

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Paul Skinner graduated from U of T in 1967 and came to London to build an office tower. He planned to go back to Toronto when he finished, but he never made it. New projects kept coming up, and the more he did, the more he was offered. He worked for Sam Lerner for a while and soon established his own firm.

In 1997, just when he was thinking of pulling back from his full-time work, Brad approached him with an idea: Would he be okay if Brad left the large firm and opened his own place, Skinner & Skinner? Would he like to join him and work part-



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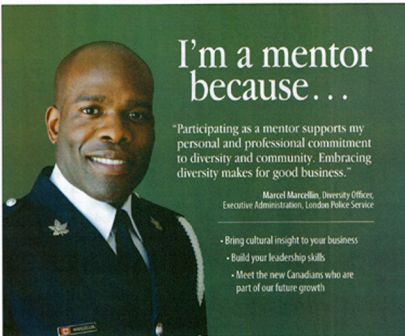
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time on different projects?

It was the perfect move for both men. The original office/home was on Oxford near Waterloo. When Brad married Leslie, Paul bought them the Riverside lot, where in 2007, Brad built the current office/home. Paul still drops in to the office regularly. The extended family went on a cruise last month, during which time Brad turned 45.

There's another family connection in the building world. Brad's brother, Bob, recently moved back to London from the U.S. to become president of McKay-Cocker Construction. (Their father is looking forward to some collaboration between his sons on projects in the next few years, although nothing has been announced or even hinted at.)

Skinner estimates half his work is commercial and half is outside London. That

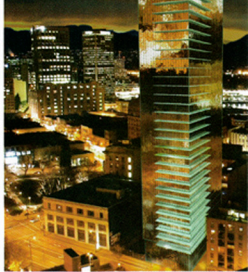


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Half of Skinner's work is commercial and encompasses a wide range of styles. ABOVE A library and post office in Bayfield, to be completed this January, is designed to complement the heritage vibe of the lakeside village. RIGHT A design study for a commercial-residential tower



would include several libraries throughout Middlesex County that he designed from scratch or as a major renovation.

"He impressed me right away," says Carol Roberts, the retired branch coordinator with the county. Overseeing 18 Middlesex libraries, she worked with Skinner on several projects. When it was time to renovate the aging Strathroy library office and museum, he camped out at the library office. "He spent time finding out exactly how we worked. He came out and wanted to see exactly what we did so he could use that information in the de-

sign," she recalls. "It was a complex project because half of the building was a museum and the other half was offices, but there was also storage for the library and museum, with specific needs."

Beginning in the mid-1990s, Roberts worked with Skinner on several library projects. "He has such an eye for detail," she says. "There were always a few extra features that went beyond a standard design."

His latest library project is in Bayfield, where he's replacing the library and post office with a gorgeous fieldstone-clad

structure that fits perfectly with the vibe of Bayfield's popular Main Street. It's not what some would consider a typical Skinner design if they are aware only of his work on modern homes and structures.


What admirers like most about Skinner, however, is reflected perfectly in the Bayfield project. He didn't impose a glass and concrete structure amidst Bayfield's collection of quaint inns and retail shops. He studied the street and designed something beautiful that both fits the existing esthetic and also improves it in a way few might even be able to describe.

That is what Skinner projects have in common, whether they look like something out of the future or something that might have been built in the past. **Q**

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