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Divine GATHERING PLACE

STORY **MARY HATT**
 INTERIOR PHOTOGRAPHY **JASON HARTOG**
 EXTERIOR PHOTOGRAPHY **ELITE POOL DESIGN**

Though it's been a while since its doors were open to parishioners, Birr's historic United Church is still bringing people together. Just not in the same way. After extensive renovations inside and out, the 100-plus-year-old church is now a stylish weekend retreat for its new owners, their family and friends.

The gothic revival influences of the original church building have morphed into a head-turning piece of residential architecture in this sleepy village just north of London, due largely to the dramatic curtain wall by **Eco Architectural Glass Inc.** that now details the yellow brick backside of the original structure. Working with **Brad Skinner** of **Skinner & Skinner Architects Inc.**, the owners opted to replace the hexagonally-shaped church apse with Eco's modern glass structure, leaving the original archway intact for striking interior detail. Brad says the glass cube offers a new sense of spirituality and peace, connecting the church interior with its surrounding countryside.

The owners drew inspiration for their home's unique architecture from the look of black steel and glass that dominates the Ludwig Mies van der Rohe-designed Toronto-Dominion Centre in Toronto. *Continued on page 24*



ABOVE: Stephanie Williams of Eco Architectural Glass oversaw the design and installation of the home's magnificent glass-curtain wall, which includes folding doors that open the lower-level family room to the pool and patio. Inspired by the look of Toronto's TD Centre, the exterior glass becomes an artistic canvas reflecting the beauty of the landscape. **LEFT:** Mike Hammer's playful acrylic blobs form a blast of colour within the neutral hues of the main-level interior.

feature

“Curtain walls are engineered to span massive openings,” says Eco Architectural project manager **Stephanie Williams**. “They can be a real complement to old architecture. People today are looking for open-concept living spaces and glass can achieve that in many ways.”

Inside the main level of the home’s interior, the glass extension provides a commanding view of the property and its surrounding countryside. The owner says it’s her family’s favourite place to relax in the house.

“This gives us the option of looking out at the fields beyond the property,” she says. “It also allows us to get a great view of the interior architecture when looking into the church.”

Andy Constantine of **Rebel Creek Site Management and Construction** was the general contractor and expertly quarterbacked the project, executing the owners’ wishes to restructure the church interior with a blend of classic modern style and Art-Deco influences, such as the sweeping curve of the new staircase designed by the owners and supplied by **Pro-Stair & Railing** and Eco Architectural Glass. *Continued on page 26*



The inside of the curtain wall offers a place for comfortable lounging and views to the countryside as well as the interior’s architectural features. **OPPOSITE, TOP:** The entryway to the home takes its shape from the original church vestibule, updated with sleek new finishes and a bold front door. **BOTTOM LEFT:** Custom windows, the sweeping staircase and the original ceiling beams make a strong architectural presence in the open-concept living area. **BOTTOM RIGHT:** The glass walls of the home office establish a quiet work zone without eliminating sightlines.





bedroom suite. Replacing the original stained glass was a must. It was in rough shape and did not fit well with the grey tones of their décor. The stained glass was installed by Rebel Creek over the new upper window created by Synergy.

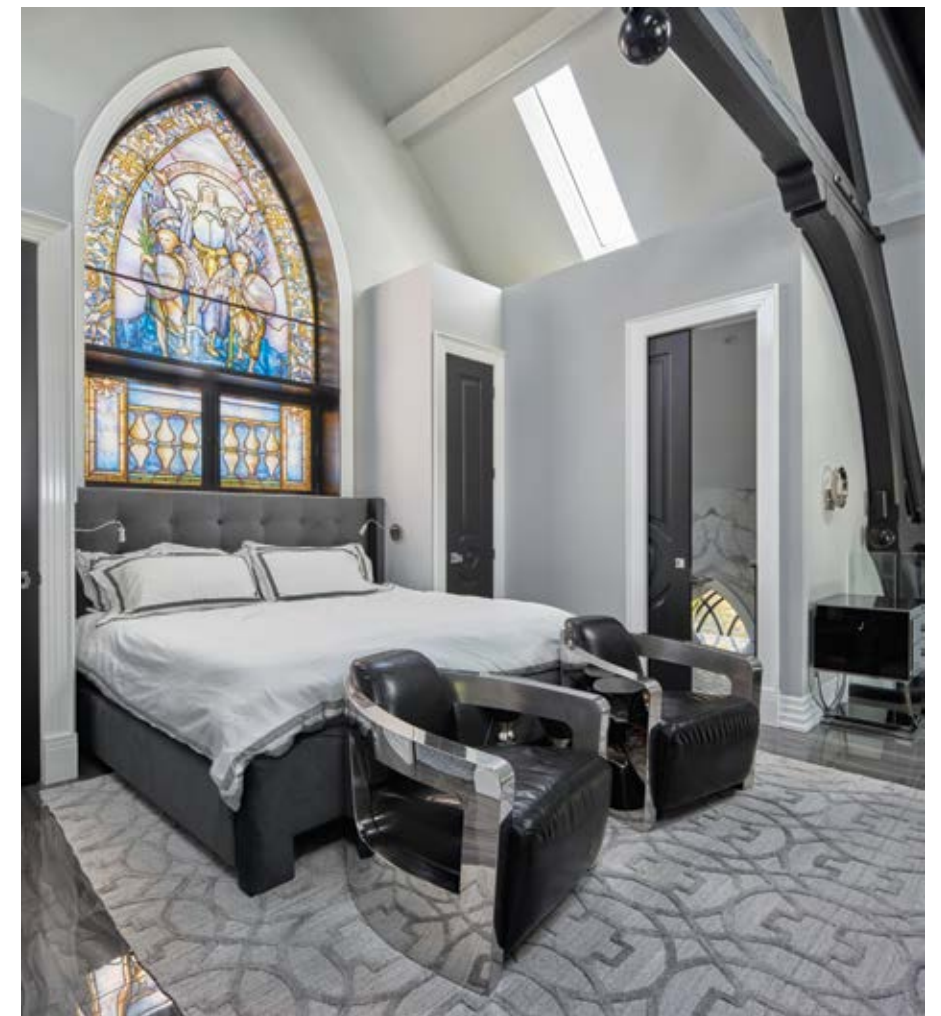
A glass-walled home office (Eco Architectural), tucked into a corner of the main level behind the stairway, was also inspired by the TD Centre, this time by boardrooms in the owners' former workspace. "We felt the glass would provide some sound barrier without blocking the sightlines within the main floor," she says.

High-gloss porcelain floor tiles were chosen for both practical and stylistic reasons throughout the 3,500 sq. ft. interior. The owner says, "We were looking for something that looked good, was durable, could conduct heat well as part of the heated flooring system and was not expensive on a price-per-square-foot basis."

It's also a floor that stands up to statement furniture pieces, lighting fixtures and accessories, as well as contemporary kitchen cabinets by **Braam's Custom Cabinets**.

The fireplace surround, as well as all en suite bathrooms, feature a Carrara marble-look porcelain tile, installed by **DMH Flooring**, whose crew hand-mitred the corners of the surround for a seamless look.

Continued on page 28



"The interior design was created by my husband and me," explains the owner, adding that the former church basement has been converted into comfortable guest rooms and luxurious bathrooms for visiting family and friends, as well as a family room. "This was a fun project for the two of us and a welcome distraction from our day jobs."

She adds, "We're big fans of black, white and grey and have used this colour theme in our other projects. We wanted to maintain a fairly neutral and uniform colour scheme so as not to overshadow the inherent architectural features."

The church's original roof beams, for instance, were simply updated with black paint for a crisp contrast to light grey walls and ceilings. Adding further standout detail, **Synergy Windows & Doors** retained the shape of the original church windows, which required replacement due to age.

"We saw this as a great, albeit expensive, opportunity to enhance the beauty of the original structure," says the owner, adding that she and her husband got out their graph paper and sketched the same circle-and-cross design that's in the windows of their city home. Synergy worked from their sketch.

Window work continued in the upper-level loft where new big-scale pieces of stained glass, in a design the owners sourced through a supplier in Texas, dramatize the primary



ABOVE: The church's stained glass window was replaced, forming an arty focal point in the primary loft suite. **LEFT:** The primary bathrooms include striking marbled porcelain tile and glamorous Art Deco influences. **OPPOSITE, TOP LEFT:** The contemporary aesthetic of the fireside sitting area is quietly compatible with the home's gothic windows and ceiling beams. **TOP RIGHT AND BOTTOM:** The blend of gothic and contemporary continues in the kitchen where the owners' own circle-and-cross window design takes centre stage. Kitchen cupboards by Braam's Custom Cabinets are painted Benjamin Moore Black Panther.

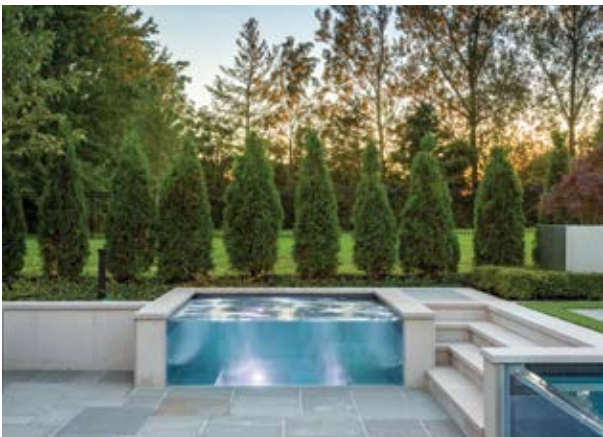
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One exception to the neutral palette of the home's main level is a piece of striking artwork at the top of the stairs in the front vestibule. In fact, the ceiling height of the hallway was designed to accommodate it.

"Because everything else was so neutral, we felt empowered to go a bit crazy with colour," says the owner of artist Mike Hammer's vibrant acrylic blobs.

While the owners love their home's spacious open interior, the living areas they created outside are just as important to them. Thanks to folding doors, the lower-level family room portion of the glass curtain wall opens completely to the exterior living space. In keeping with the couple's minimal aesthetic, they opted for a landscape design involving clean and simple linear movement to complement a large eating area and multiple seating settings. *Continued on page 30*



TOP AND ABOVE: The lower level includes two guest suites, each featuring a luxurious bathroom with marble-look porcelain-clad walls and Rubinet faucets. **TOP RIGHT:** An acrylic window makes the hot tub a showstopper. **RIGHT:** Folding glass doors allow a seamless connection between interior and exterior living areas.



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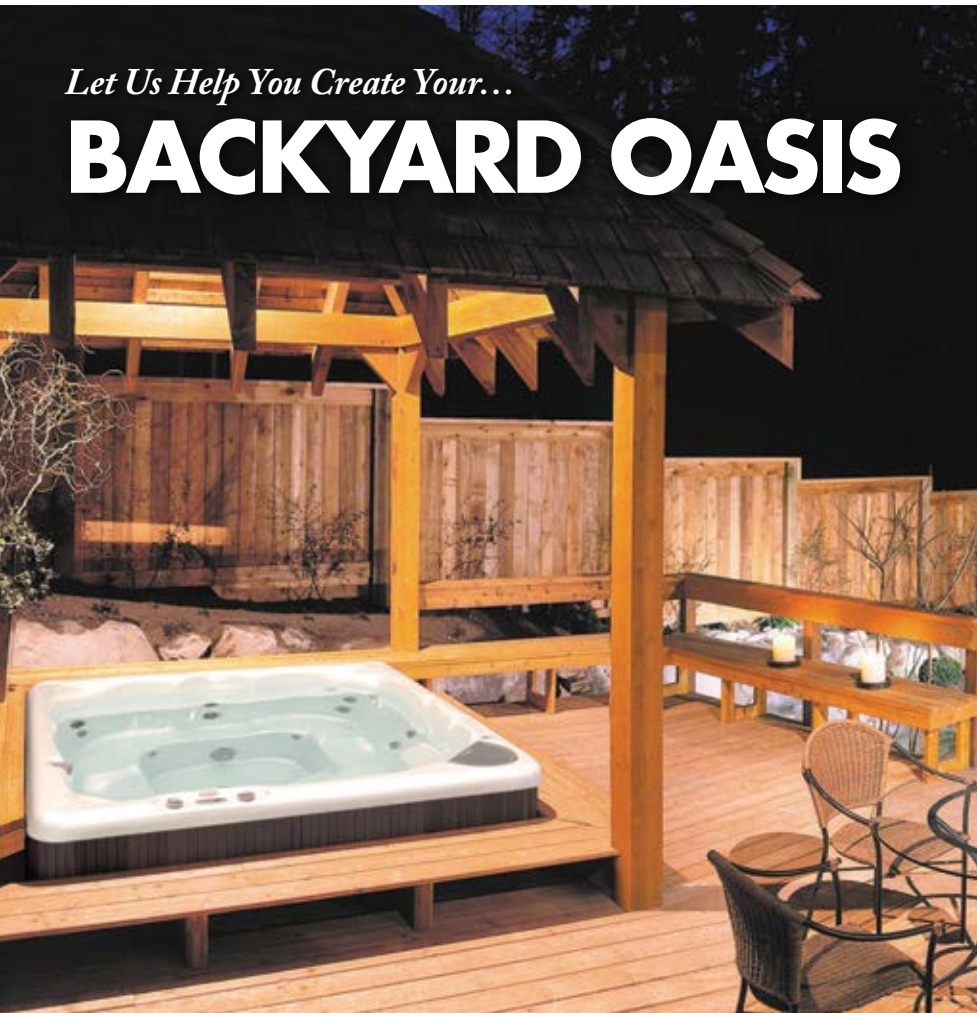
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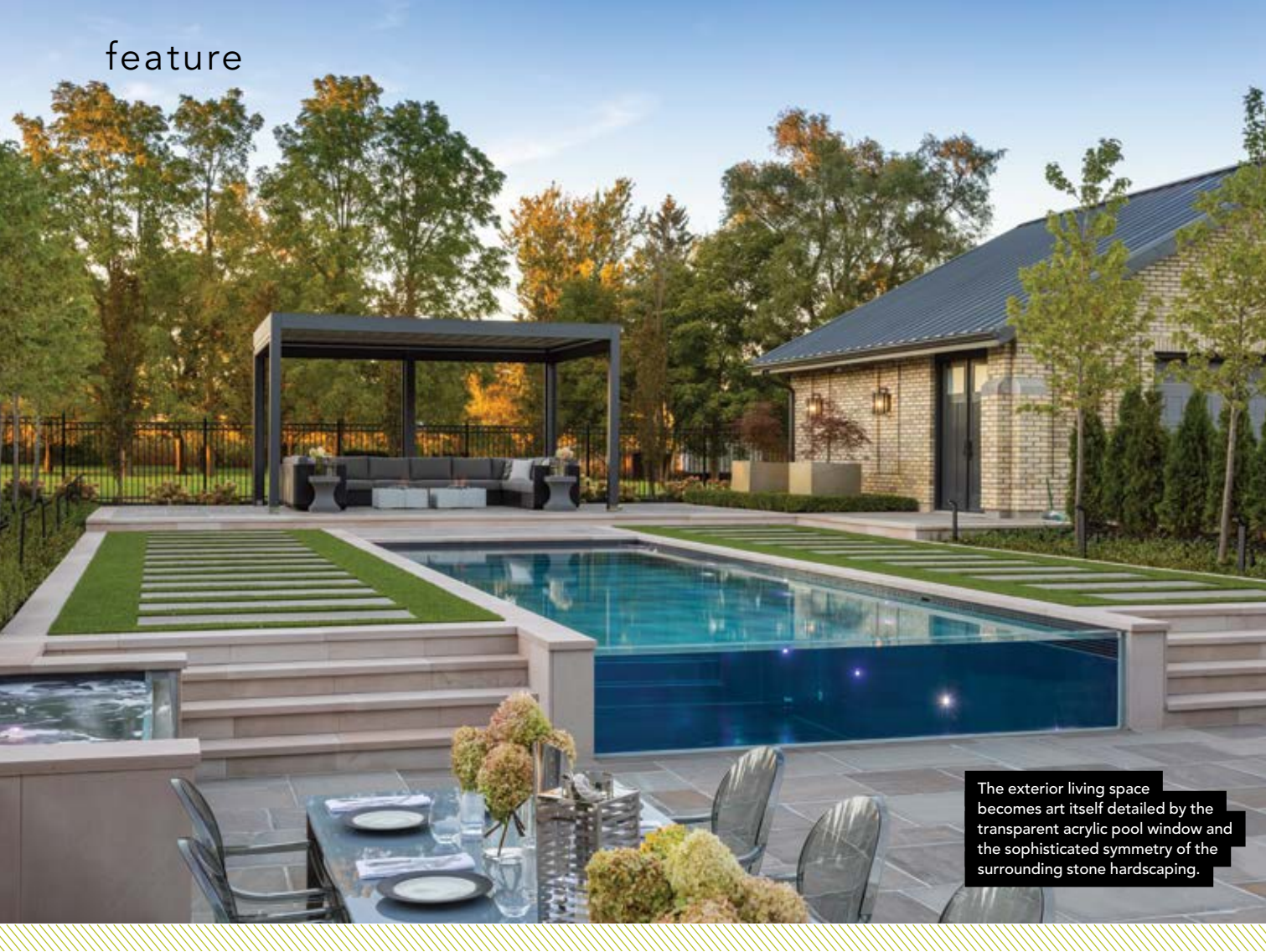
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The exterior living space becomes art itself detailed by the transparent acrylic pool window and the sophisticated symmetry of the surrounding stone hardscaping.



They also wanted a pool, especially since they plan eventually to downsize from their city home to a condo, spending more and more of their summer months in Birr.

The initial idea was for a standard concrete pool. “However,” says the owner, “as with the rest of the project, we ultimately decided that we wanted to find something a little different.”

During an internet search, they came across projects by **Elite Pool Design** featuring stainless steel pools with transparent acrylic windows. While visiting a Toronto design show they had a chance to see one of Elite’s stainless-steel spas with acrylic windows. Liking what they saw, the couple had Elite design a similar pool and spa in Birr.

After making literally thousands of design and decorating decisions to move their project from start to finish, these owners can finally reflect on the special home they’ve created. Their love of art and design is evident everywhere, but perhaps most importantly, they’ve built a welcoming space in which to enjoy gathering friends and family. Really, just as a church should be. **OH**



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