



A house with a twist: Summerhill reno gets a Gehry-esque treatment

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Architect Tye Farrow says it was all about “capturing something in a moment” when he put drafting pen to paper a few years ago. “It almost has a life – you can almost feel a pulse.”

Maybe the footfalls that regularly fall upon it – ba-dum, ba-dum, ba-dum – count as the heartbeat. Or Frank Gehry’s accelerated pulse, when he discovers he’s been bested, will suffice. In any case, a strong case can be made that this is the most beautiful staircase in Toronto. Walk from foyer to kitchen and it moves along with you. Look up, and its shimmery twin – a reflection in sexy back-painted glass – pantomimes in reverse.



All photos by Kevin Van Paassen for The Globe and Mail



It is, in a word, breathtaking. The rest of the home isn't too shabby, either, but you'd be hard-pressed to pick it out from the sidewalk. Completed in late 2013, the Yonge-Summerhill home of Colin Kelleher and Mary Jo Looby is purposefully reserved on the outside, outfitted in a dignified suit of heritage brick and wide, wooden front porch, and exquisite on the inside, displaying meticulous detail in one thoughtful space after another.

Ms. Looby says “the goal” was to mimic century homes found in finer London neighbourhoods that keep the old architectural conversation alive on the street, while secreting away modern delights behind the front door.

Another goal, of course, was to allow gobs of light to rain down into the home. No easy task on a typical, tightly-packed Toronto boulevard blessed with big trees. Mr. Farrow and Mr. Kelleher’s solution – Mr. Kelleher acted as project manager as he’s a partner in Caliber Structures, a boutique office and condo builder – was to create “two houses by cutting the middle out,” then replace the middle with an indoor “courtyard” capped with a roof of skylights and clerestories, explains Mr. Farrow.





Today, in the middle of that courtyard, a long dining table occupies pride of place; it's also a lovely spot from which to contemplate the wispy staircase. To get even more light into this mid-section, 14 feet of the west wall was pushed out into the yard by five feet; think of a filing cabinet lying on its side, says Mr. Farrow, and it's "almost as if you pulled out a drawer."

To the north of the dining table is the kitchen and piano-equipped family room, and to the south is one of the few rooms with its original footprint intact: "the evening room" has a Rumford fireplace, charcoal grey walls and the original bay window overlooking the street. Tall sliding doors can seal off this room during the day, or slide over to hide the dining area from view while guests arrive in the foyer.

Above the dining table are the glassy balconies of floors two and three; cladding many balcony bottoms and sides are long panels of milky back-painted glass. Funnily enough, say Mr. Farrow and his clients, the many reflective surfaces are anything but cold and sterile. In fact, they are a swirling canvas of multihued foliage or blue, pink and grey skies: "The house becomes very moody in a lot of ways because you're capturing the changing light," says Mr. Farrow, "and you become really connected to it, and by the time it moves to the evening, if the full moon is out, you get the moonlight, which you otherwise wouldn't sense."

"You could stand here all the time," adds Mr. Kelleher in his north-of-Dublin accent, looking up, glass of red in hand.





Also happily lapping up light from above is a living room on the second floor, and a library/reading nook on the third.

Throughout the home, the many drywall reveals, lack of crown moulding and frameless doorways all point to care and craftsmanship. “The money is in the details,” admits Mr. Kelleher. “You can’t just come along and jam the door in with a hammer into the frame, it’s got to be set ... a guy might hang two in a day.”

And yet, demolition and construction took just nine months. To achieve this kind of speed and accuracy requires constant collaboration and quick decision-making, say both men, and putting harder choices on the shelf while other things get done. Ms. Looby was instrumental in this process, of course, but Ken Sandiford of KJS General Contracting and staircase “sculptor” Darryl Milroy get enthusiastic nods as well.





It helps, too, that Mr. Farrow and Mr. Kelleher have been friends for two decades, and have teamed up architecturally before. Still, Mr. Kelleher sounds like a fan-boy when he describes Mr. Farrow's mastery of natural light, and how he even managed to bring it into the radiation "bunkers" at the Thunder Bay Regional Health Sciences Centre (while with Salter Farrow Pilon). Of his own home, he is over the moon: "Every night I go up those stairs I look at all those details, so it's an experience."

"We were trying to create something that you'd feel comfortable in that was emotional," adds Mr. Farrow, who doesn't consider himself a "Modernist" in the tradition of the "crisp and tailored" Mies van der Rohe, despite respecting that tradition of Toronto architecture. "What really makes you feel good?" he asks, rhetorically. "Those are the elements that I think are really important that we have to capture."

Not to worry: they're here, written in light, form and texture.