

Sylvan Retreat in the City

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This relaxed Oakville house, by Toronto architecture firm Superkül with accompanying landscape design by Kate Fox-Whyte, fits so beautifully into its site that it's easy to overlook how cleverly it addresses certain challenges common to many suburban properties. These can range from addressing drainage (a more and more pressing problem in recent years across the GTA), to dealing with the ubiquitous front-and-centre garage door, to being blessed with a beautiful property but an existing house that doesn't make best use of it.

The property was on a fairly busy main thoroughfare, so privacy was a concern, explains Superkül partner Meg Graham, who designed the home with partner Andre D'Elia and team. The family had been living in an older house on the site for some years before calling in the architects. It was lovely, Graham says, but no longer met their needs, and didn't make the most of the site's assets, most notably a wooded section right next door — actually belonging to the next-door neighbour — that gave the property a sylvan feeling.

“The site is fairly narrow compared to some of its neighbours; and it slopes down from the road in a small dip, then rises again behind,” says Graham. That meant before any work could be started, they needed to draft a water management plan. “There’s a growing awareness in municipalities of the importance of having a proper drainage maintenance program, especially with a house like this that dips below grade,” she explains, noting that neighbouring houses are set on higher ground, which could exacerbate the hazard.

The family had plenty of ideas for their new house as well. Graham mentions that, even with three teens, they were remarkably well travelled – having visited some 80 countries over their lifetime, 50 of them with the kids. The father is in the furniture business, and design is a passion for the whole family. They wanted a home that not only celebrated their love for modern design, but that could display the art and artefacts they’d gathered over their peregrinations. They also wanted it to be equally comfortable for them and for entertaining friends and extended family.



The kitchen is airy. Courtesy of superkül

From the front, the house has a cloistered look, with its vertical cladding of charred cypress boards (alternating with horizontal sections at key points for variety). “The owners liked the tonal variations in the cypress wood, and the dark colour makes the house feel settled, as if it had been there for a long time.” As a side note, cladding the entire front façade in the same wood allowed them to visually integrate that staple of suburban houses, a big garage door, into a balanced composition.

A set of pavers at one side, softened by inset strips of turf, leads to a sheltered front door on the east side, near the neighbour's grove. (A row of young birch trees on one side, and a low Core-ten steel bulwark on the other, help guide the way.) At the rear of the portico over the entrance is a tall garden gate, also clad in cypress, which swings open to reveal a sheltered side courtyard just beyond. For summer gatherings, the gate can be left open to allow guests to walk straight up and join the party without entering the house, or left closed for more privacy.

"The main floor is designed to be contiguous, but to give each area a certain definition," Graham explains. Past a small vestibule lined with closets and other storage, the house opens up to the light. Straight ahead, a white oak dining table ("Radii," by the Canadian manufacturer Bensen) in classic mid-century style flanks a view of the inner courtyard, through a wall of windows that rises to ceiling height, and then continues as a broad clerestory one flight above. The clerestory window is shaded by movable slats of cypress on the outside for light control and privacy; on the inner face is a bridge that leads past bedrooms, which overlooks both the courtyard and the floor below.

The kitchen, directly across from the dining area, receives its own share of light through a big window over the prep counter, and a glow of indirect light through the risers of the staircase, tucked behind a bank of cabinetry on its inner side. The kitchen walls and counter are clad in Carrara marble, a beautiful but not always practical choice, but one the owners specifically asked for. "They were actually fine with the fact that marble counters can stain; they wanted them to develop a patina over time," Graham says.



Each area of the home has its own defining features. Courtesy of superkül

The house then makes a turn to the living room in the rear half, where another wall of windows embraces the inner courtyard from the back. A corner window at the courtyard edge offers another special view of the trees; on the other side a slot window brightens the space even more. Between them, a tall double-sided fireplace clad in slate warms both the living room, and a sheltered part of the courtyard.

Past the staircase and another open area perfectly sized for a grand piano, sliding glass doors open on a second, more private deck, and a modest but smartly proportioned garden.

“The garden isn’t large, but Kate [Fox-Whyte] was able to organize it so that it feels open and spacious, with a variety of carefully scripted plantings that enhance a feeling of discrete ‘rooms,’” Graham observes. Along with a variety of deck seating, there’s a firepit area in the lawn at the end of the garden, colourful but low-maintenance perennial beds, and a fenced-in well surrounding a sunken courtyard (which not only lets light into the lower level, but features an outdoor shower and private pied-à-terre for a guest room).

In the best modern style, it’s the small, thoughtful details that make the design beautiful: a longish side fence made less monolithic by dividing it into a wide horizontally slatted section in natural wood, flanked by shorter, vertical slats in black stained wood; carefully placed lighting, indoors and out, to show off interesting planes and materials; wooden slatted heating grilles,

placed discreetly above eye level; and the way that views are subtly directed towards the woods at the side of the house, enhancing its feeling of being in a country grove rather than a few feet from a busy Oakville thoroughfare.

“It was designed specifically for them and for the site,” says Graham. “It lets them use every inch of the house and the landscape. It’s about being thoughtful and specific – which is what all good design does, really.”



The backyard is great for entertaining. Courtesy of superkül