



What stylish homes are wearing

BY SHERYL STEINBERG

For many, Toronto's Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts is the place to go for opera and ballet. But for others in this historically red-brick clad city, the two-year-old cultural mecca's boxy black-iron brick exterior serves as a tangible point of reference for homeowners toying with the idea of outfitting their homes in something different.

"There's a broader palette that people are seeing and are [becoming] interested in," says architect Meg Graham of Superkül Inc. of the growing number of cultural and commercial buildings sporting darker, polychromatic bricks. While brick is traditionally flat in hue, these newer bricks are "quite textile-like" and offer more texture, she says.

"We have a lot of single family housing [in Toronto] and a lot of people who care very much for their gardens," she adds. "Darker bricks work really well to offset the greens and provide a really nice background."

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ABOVE Glazed reddish-purple brick on a home designed by architect Greg Dunn: 'Traditional roots with a twist on it.' D'ARCY MCGOVERN

Materials hampered by being typecast

» In the city's Bloor West Village, architect Greg Dunn and his wife, Heidi, veered away from the combed red brick covering their half-century-old home (and most in the area) when they decided to build a more contemporary brick home nearby.

Mr. Dunn, a partner at Adamson Associates Architects, works on large-scale commercial projects in London, Milan and San Francisco, and says the once-popular grooved brick "wasn't an entirely appealing finish" to them. Over the years, airborne particles have settled onto the rough surface, making the brick appear dirty.

Given Mr. Dunn's professional background, he had no problems visualizing the new dark reddish-purple brick covering his new 3,000-square-foot backsplint, though he takes no credit for its conception. Superkül came up with the colour scheme, he says. "This [brick] has more of a glaze, more colours ... it fits well with what I had hoped for – a brick house with traditional roots with a twist on it."

Calgary architect James Andalis says most new ideas in the residential industry take their cues from commercial and industrial applications, though the filtering-down process can be lengthy.

In exterior materiality, affordability is typically a huge stumbling block. A managing partner with Sturgess Architecture, Mr. Andalis has seen composite products, such as Spanish-made Prodema re-engineered plywood panels, used as siding on commercial buildings. The high-density panels, designed to be water and UV resistant and last longer than wood panel siding, tend to be out of reach for most Canadian consumers renovating or building custom homes.

More popular in Europe, the panels are priced at about \$28 a square foot (compared with \$6 to \$8 for wood) in Canada, he says, largely because of "horrendously expensive" shipping costs.

Changing public perception in how people typecast materials is another challenge. Galvanized metal panels, while unabashedly modern in look and feel, are ideal for the residential market. They are clean, easy to install and relatively inexpensive. "The only real issue is getting people to realize that just because you've only seen them used in commercial, doesn't necessarily mean you can't use them in residential," Mr. Andalis says.

His firm recently designed a residence in downtown Calgary using zinc panels as its primary exterior material.

Currently under construction, the home's grayish-green zinc panels will become deeper and richer as their patina weathers.

Made from Canadian-mined zinc, the panels are being manufactured by a U.S. company who has started producing the panels in more consumer-friendly sizing, a great development Mr. Andalis says.

Superkül has also used metal in residential applications, most notably to renovate a former industrial laneway shed turned single-family home in midtown Toronto. Paying homage to its origin, Ms. Graham says, "we wanted to retain as much original metal cladding as we could. We replaced what we couldn't with new metal."

As captivating as the rusty, orange quilt-like exterior may be (the reno recently won an Ontario Association of Architects award for design excellence), Ms. Graham acknowledges "brick is still the most desirable" exterior for most homeowners.

With sustainability gaining importance, consumers want durable finishes such as brick. "People are increasingly interested in things that are, in fact, less faddy and things that are more durable that are going to stick around for a long time," she says.

Prefab homes – built in a factory and reassembled onsite – will also continue to gain popularity, she says, especially in production housing. Prefab can deliver better quality control and reduced waste. In the custom building market, however, it doesn't always make sense financially.

Designer Sarah Richardson clad her Georgian Bay island cottage with Cape Cod finished wood siding because it came factory-painted and sealed on all sides, and is guaranteed to stand up to the elements better than traditional wood siding. "Your exterior shouldn't be an ongoing adventure in maintenance," she says. "Do it once, do it right and coast for the next 15 years."

Ms. Richardson also went with factory-painted wood windows "to fully protect them inside and out."

For the Duns, deciding between aluminum and wood windows "was one of the bigger gut-checking moments" they had while building. They ultimately went with teak to maintain the character of the house, even though they will have to oil them every couple of years. "The windows make [the house] come alive," Mr. Dunn says. "If you imagine it with dark brown aluminum windows, it's a very different house."

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