



The Bloor West home of Greg and Heidi Dunn presents an iron-toned brick façade to the street, right, but its multiple levels open up on the ravine side, left. PHOTOS BY TOM ARBAN

A home that stoops to embrace its site

Built on a sloping lot that tumbles into a ravine, this Bloor West home succeeds in knitting nature with architecture



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When Toronto architect Greg Dunn and his wife, Heidi, decided that they and the couple's burgeoning family had outgrown their home in Bloor West Village, their first thought was to buy another old house in this popular Toronto neighbourhood and renovate it. The Duns soon found a property that suited them. The residence on a narrow, long, steeply sloping site lay south of Bloor West, and backed on to a wildly picturesque ravine just west of High Park.

Then the couple took a closer look at the existing house on the lot and did the math. Like several other people I've met who were considering renovation as a cure for space problems, they found that an adequate overhaul would be scarcely less expensive than building from scratch. But financing the scheme wasn't the only concern. Even a thoroughgoing makeover of the extant house would not yield the new square footage they needed for themselves and their three girls.

So it was that the Duns resolved to tear down the house and reconceive their small lot as an integrated piece of architecture and landscaping. To help them realize their ambitions, they turned to architects Margaret Graham and Andre D'Elia, principals in the Toronto firm of Superkül Inc. (Mr. Dunn's architectural practice keeps him busy with large commercial real-estate developments around the world, so he decided he had neither the time nor the expertise to tackle the intricacies of a residential project.)

The result of Superkül's efforts – for the record, the firm's project architect was Drew Sinclair – and those of landscape designer Robert Ng, is a refined and lovely rural spot in the midst of the metropolis.

The new house is boxily modern, but it doesn't make a fuss about its modernity, or anything else: the clients did not want a dwelling that makes a statement. Dark, iron-toned glazed brick on the street side façade helps the building blend into its streetscape of mostly older residences. The now-vanished house was perched atop a sharp hillside leading down to the lip of the ravine. The new house and its back garden now step gracefully together down the decline in a series of plateaus, each providing a different interesting perspective on the densely treed ravine beyond. Of the numerous ravine houses I've seen over the years, this one is among the best at knitting nature and architecture into an effective



and attractive whole.

Every part of the 3,000-square-foot house seems fully lived-in by the active young family of five, and no part of it is purely ceremonial. Entering the front door, the visitor finds himself immediately inside the kitchen (with its walk-out terrace) and dining area, which is appropriate for people who like to entertain a lot and who spend much of their time together around the dining-room table. The living room, separated from the rest of the street-level floor by a massive, handsome fireplace, is off to the rear, and commands a panoramic overlook of the garden and ravine below.

The upper level is essentially a conventional bedroom floor, with a master suite at the back, and three additional rooms toward the front of the house. But even within a space mostly determined by a traditional program – giving everyone a place to sleep – the architects have introduced art: The master suite and the children's rooms are connected by an elegant bridge, alongside which a light-well and wall of glass two storeys high invite sunshine into the heart of the house.

Unlike an ordinary basement, the bottom level – the floor below the street entrance, that is – is occupied by far more than heating and air-conditioning units, utility closets and so on. The children's nanny lives there, in a fully

outfitted suite. There is a playroom for Heidi Dunn. And at the rear, opening onto a spacious deck hovering over the lower garden, is a family room.

If the street-side level of the house is a place of urban sociability and society – its relatively small areas speak of intimate encounters and conversations with friends and neighbours – the lower floor is remarkable for its sense of seclusion and refuge.

Which is as the clients wished. Mr. Dunn's job keeps him in airports, on planes and in foreign cities and hotels for much of every working week. When he gets home, he told me, he wants to get away from all that and relax with his family. (Like many other men in mid-career, he has no hobbies.) The family room Superkül has carved from the rear of his house is one of those rare, perfect urban places where one can feel a thousand miles away from the hectic pace of work and city life, and deep inside the green beauty Toronto offers in abundance to those who seek and find it.

ONLINE

See more of the Dunn's home

Additional photos can be seen at tgam.ca/architecture