

ARCHITECTURE

A Modernist home built on a borrowed shape

A gabled roof was non-negotiable in this barn-channeling weekend home, but in the end, its inclusion was a triumph

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Rob Kastelic and Kelly Buffey built a barn. Generally this wouldn't be very exciting news, but for architects attuned to the latest thinking in contemporary design, as the two partners of Atelier Kastelic Buffey are, it's a different question. Borrow a shape from traditional buildings, and they run the risk of being called retrograde. Gabled roofs, especially, have been "the pariah of modern architecture," as Mr. Kastelic says, for almost a century.

But Mr. Kastelic and Ms. Buffey want to ask: Why is that? An exquisite house they've designed in Ontario ski country takes the argument further, with a design that is pure and simple in form and yet country-comfortable. And it doesn't have a flat roof in sight.

The owners, a Toronto family of six, wanted a weekend getaway and a gathering point for their ski-club neighbours. Their site is located right at the base of a slope at Alpine Ski Club – so they'd be able literally to ski back to the house. The clients "wanted to make it a place for play," says Ms. Buffey. And among their other requests was a barn door.

The finished house does have a barn door, and the house is barn-like in form, with 4,650 square feet of floor space and an expansive two-storey living room that stretches all the way up to the roof. But by hiring Ms. Buffey and Mr. Kastelic, the clients knew they would get a very sophisticated elaboration of those ideas. They did. This barn has windows with crisp steel frames, and a roof made of copper that shimmers in the sunlight. The house's exterior is absolutely free of unnecessary detail and ornament. "Our buildings bare all," Ms. Buffey says. "Being candid presents more challenges and it also happens to be more contemporary."

As you approach the house, you encounter walls covered in siding of raw cedar, free of knots and arranged horizontally into a tight, clear skin. At the ground, the foundation is wrapped with a layer of limestone. To one side, the cedar boards stand on end to



This weekend house by Atelier Kastelic Buffey draws its form – though not its details – from local barns. SHAI GIL

define a garage wall; to the other side, they cascade down to define a deck and a privacy screen of knot-free boards and precisely poured concrete.

Striding into the house, Ms. Buffey explains a principle of their design approach, developed since the couple set out from their previous jobs at KPMB Architects a decade ago: "We have one big move per building" – that is, one major design decision – "and then we detail it very carefully."

That is an understatement. Take the living-dining area. At the centre is a tall feature fireplace, its hearth and its chute made of Indiana limestone. This element is perfect at a small scale: the stone is mitred – cut on a 45-degree angle – for seamless joints. And it is also remarkable on a grand scale, when you try and figure out what's holding it up. The massive column of stone comes from the

ceiling right to the fire itself, and then veers to one side before it reaches the floor. Thanks to some complex engineering, the fire burns freely with nothing to contain it on three sides.

Such precision finds a counterpoint in rustic textures, like the barn door (on one side of the living room) and the kitchen table, both made of reclaimed hemlock from a Collingwood warehouse. Above the table, Ms. Buffey designed custom light fixtures that employ steel beams for an industrial flavour. And the massive kitchen, where the house's hostess likes to cook for 20, has both the scale and the no-nonsense steel backsplash of a restaurant kitchen. "Because it's a casual house," Ms. Buffey says, "everything is exposed, everything is easy to access."

Upstairs, the family's two girls and two boys each have their own

room. Each pair shares a bathroom with colourful patterned tiles; stripes for the boys, dots for the girls. And in the basement is a rec room of any tween's dreams, with table tennis table, a big TV for gaming, and a Ligne Roset sofa. Everything here is well-designed, but also comfortable.

That includes the house's most elaborate architectural showpiece, the basement spa. Sitting down in the sauna, Ms. Buffey points out the careful geometry of the cedar benches, their linear patterns arranged to intersect and flip from floor to wall to ceiling without a jagged edge.

Back outside, where that cedar finds its echo on the house's decking and siding, it's interesting to note how much more sober and contemporary in appearance the house is than the others on the street, which are a mishmash of middlebrow design ideas. That's

in spite of the fact that they all have gabled roofs. Yes, the one thing that most defines the house's concept and appearance, its barnlike form, is the greatest thing it has in common with its less pedigreed neighbours.

"The gabled roof was not a stylistic choice on our part," Mr. Kastelic explains. In fact it was required by restrictions that the developer placed on the land. And yet, Mr. Kastelic adds, "We came to appreciate that it is a responsible roof form given the site and climate conditions we are confronted with in northern Ontario." On a practical level, it makes sense; a flat roof is possible here, but it needs to be strong enough to hold a lot of snow. And on an aesthetic level, "we felt it was more honest to reference the local barn buildings than to reference the pseudo-suburban developments that have sprung up around the ski hills in more recent years," he says.

There are some examples, in the past few years, of neo-modernist architects turning back to the gabled roof. Toronto's award-winning Superkül Architects are doing so in their current work. The Swiss architects Herzog and de Meuron, most famous for the Tate Modern, recently designed a tower that resembles a stack of Monopoly houses. And their compatriot Peter Zumthor, who usually works close to his home in the Swiss Alps, has embraced traditional local house forms in his work. Mr. Kastelic is a fan of Mr. Zumthor, and the Alpine house owes him a conceptual debt – its mix of pure form and relatively humble materials; the proudly ordinary and the transcendent.

In an architectural culture like ours, which is struggling to find a language that suits 21st-century life, this is an important question. And Mr. Kastelic and Ms. Buffey are eager to expand the bounds of approved good taste. "We believe that architecture has a deep and evolving vocabulary," Mr. Kastelic says. "And ultimately, we wanted to create a contemporary home with the characteristic of timelessness rather than timeliness."