



The Mississauga home designed by architects Melana Janzen and John McMinn has an urban vibe in a suburban setting.

Shai Gil

A lofty suburban Mississauga home

Toronto— From Friday's Globe and Mail

Published Thursday, Dec. 01, 2011 11:47AM EST

Last updated Thursday, Dec. 01, 2011 11:57AM EST

Oil and water, Mars and Venus, Mayor Rob Ford and Councillor Adam Vaughan: that's suburban and urban, right?

At least that's what some journalists or television shows would have you believe.

But what if there were a way to mix them together?

Architect Melana Janzen and her partner, architect and University of Waterloo professor John McMinn, have pulled it off for a professional couple in south Mississauga. On a quiet, unassuming street lined with two-storey 1970s suburban ranchers, there now sits a twenty-first century urban loft...in house form.

"Initially I looked at tons of houses in Mississauga and I was really disappointed," says one half of the couple, who wishes to remain anonymous because of the sensitive nature of his work. "Even houses that are very expensive, they're all with the crown mouldings and just really finicky - too much, too busy and too much stuff all over the place."

It was "too much" because the couple had come from a high-ceilinged, bright, open-concept industrial loft at Dupont St. and Lansdowne Ave. in Toronto. Large-format work by German photographers Candida Höfer and Thomas Ruff, along with cheeky collages by American Barbara Kruger and powerful images by Canada's Edward Burtynsky had graced their gallery-like walls. It was a space - transformed by Mr. McMinn in the early 2000s after he'd met the couple through "a friend of a friend" - that they'd grown to love for its less-is-more aesthetic.

“Whenever I take trips, I often go to design destinations,” says the homeowner after confessing he wanted to study architecture but didn’t have the chops. “So I’ve seen the Barcelona Pavilion and the Farnsworth house, Fallingwater, the Villa Savoye, I’ve seen some Mies [van der Rohe] apartment buildings and houses in Germany...it’s been kind of a hobby and some of my art [collection] reflects that.”

But, with a growing family and a new position accepted in Mississauga, it was time for change. After finding a vacant lot backing onto a heavily forested conservation area for \$400,000, McMinn + Janzen Studio were handed the challenge of designing “a loft space in the suburbs,” says Ms. Janzen.

“They came with a lot of images,” she remembers. “There were ideas of what they liked but not always a clear method of how to get there.”

There were problems to solve as well: In big spaces with hard surfaces, pesky noises carry to where they’re not welcome; also, while these urbanites weren’t enthusiastic about the yard work that accompanies suburban life, they didn’t want a lot-maximizing monster home, either. Then there was the issue of ceiling height, since at well over six feet tall, one half of this couple (the male half) needed a usable basement. A tall order for a relatively small lot.

Since the houses on either side would come close even with a modest, under-2000-square-foot floor plan (the lot was created by a neighbour severing his wide lot), no windows were placed on the sides except for a strip of clerestories in the laundry room; rather, all views have been directed to the street or conservation area. In fact, there is so much glazing at the rear, the architects had to marry a steel cage to the traditional stick-frame structure for stability; naturally, the steel has been left exposed.

To create ultra-high ceilings in the living area behind that window-wall, the roof has been ‘popped up’ like that of a travel trailer; from the street, however, the home reads as an average two-storey on par with its surroundings. In the backyard, a large, bowl-shaped hole was excavated to turn two storeys into three: here, the basement level becomes the first floor and a sheltered, low-maintenance play area welcomes little ones.

Above that play area, dual indoor and outdoor dining areas stretch out, pavilion-like, to practically touch the trees. “It’s nice to have that removal from the hustle and bustle of the house,” offers Ms. Janzen. For a touch of whimsy, a biomorphic ‘cheese hole’ cut-out in the roof lets the sun or stars shine down onto outdoor diners. On the other side of the cheese hole is a green roof accessible from a second floor study.

Inside that study is an interesting architectural moment. Because of the level change to accommodate the living area’s high ceiling, an ankle-level strip of semi-opaque windows runs the length of the room; when the study is occupied, an ambient glow signals this fact to those down below.

Radiant concrete floors inside and gorgeous custom stainless steel wire mesh screens by Ferrier Wire Goods outside complete the loft look.

Kudos to McMinn + Janzen Studio and contractor Edward O’Flanagan of Lewitt Construction: the home delivers on its urban promise while addressing the needs of a growing family leaning towards a suburban lifestyle. While there are gallery walls, there are also private rooms; while strikingly modern when viewed among its neighbours, its scale respects their precedent.

But success didn’t come easy, says Mr. McMinn. The first contractor couldn’t mix oil and water and was let go. “When you’re doing something to a higher standard and not regular construction in terms of mouldings and stuff that covers up all the [mistakes], it requires a different kind of skill set.”
