

A home whose parts are like ‘little pearls inside the shell’



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Flow House, by Dubbeldam Architecture + Design is a master class on adding a third storey to a heritage home with no impact on the street level view of the house.

RILEY SNELLING/RILEY SNELLING PHOTOGRAPHY

For a master class on how to sneak an entire third storey onto a heritage home with absolutely no indication of said storey from the street, look no further than Dubbeldam Architecture + Design’s “Flow House.”

Sure, the house sits in a heritage conservation district (HCD) next to the University of Toronto’s Spadina campus, which meant an unaltered street face was a requirement

Toronto's Spadina campus, which meant an unaltered street face was a requirement, but the addition is so expertly executed it should be required viewing for homeowners in neighbourhoods where rumblings of an HCD have been present for years but hesitancy reigns (I'm looking at you, Don Mills).

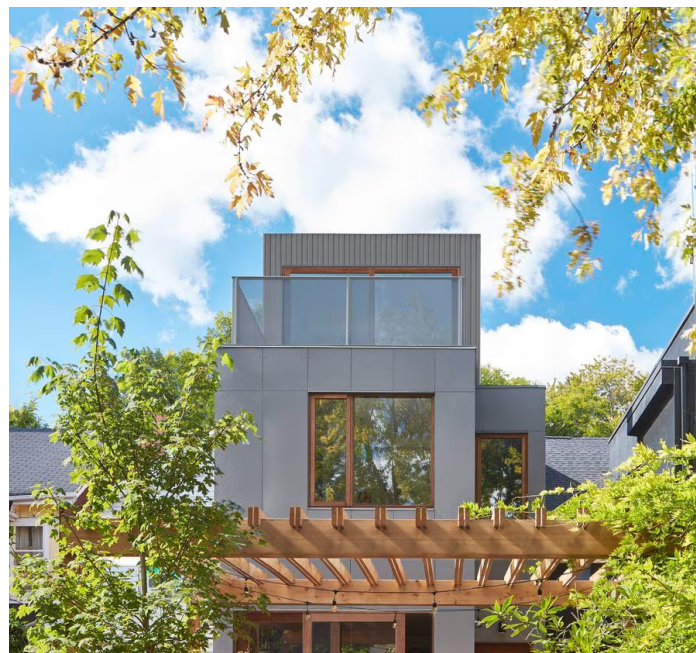
From the front, Flow House is the picture of Victoriana: two storeys of polychrome brickwork; a bay window lording over a front porch made for lemonade-sipping; and a tiny gable that's shared with the semi next door. In the back, however, the 21st century is on display via a series of stacked, cement board clad boxes with big mahogany windows, massive sliding doors on floors one and three, and an outdoor room defined by a trellis overhead and, underfoot, a razor-sharp grid of brick-like pavers that demarcate the different spaces people and plants congregate.

A perfect, Janus-faced building to please heritage-minded generations of the future while still fulfilling the needs of a five-person family today.

For a master class on how to win interior design awards, see if you can get invited over for a dinner party. If not, these word-pictures – and the actual photographs that accompany them – will have to suffice.

Let's start first on the street and peer inside the new, glassy front door.

"It is nice at night, just to see that little peek," says Ms. Dubbeldam. She's talking about the swirling, soft-serve-ice-cream-like, sculptural staircase that can be spied from the sidewalk. And it's quite the magnificent sight, even from here. And while it may look effortless, associate architect Andrew Snow admits "that was a tough one to draw."





Flow House, by Dubbeldam Architecture + Design

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Trot up the front steps, creak over the old porch-boards and step into a foyer of herringbone patterned warm terracotta tiles and a wide, welcoming bank of closets and cabinets. And while it's a little tight (most Toronto Victorians are narrow), Dubbeldam has 'borrowed' space by installing a bench backed with a mirror and created a gap above the millwork to allow living room light to wash through.

Since the staircase's gravitational force will undoubtedly pull a visitor towards it, try to resist enough to take in the vertical slats that cap the cabinet-wall and, below, the absence of switch plates – light switches are buried into La Fabrika's millwork – and, perhaps, quickly look over at the Norman Cherner dining chairs assembled around the Dubbeldam-designed table, which is purposely narrow to fit the room. Sublime details such as these are why the project was an honoree in the "Residential Transformation" category for Interior Design magazine's 2022 awards (U.S.), a 2021 residential "Best of Canada" from Canadian Interiors, and received platinum from Int. Design's Grand Prix du Design (Quebec), among others.

After stroking the stair wall (one can't help oneself) and ogling its curves, walk the space and note other things, such as the general lack of right angles: the stair's handrail; the barrel vault ceiling in the short hallway between dining and living areas; the curve of the kitchen island; the arch over some inset shelves; and the family-sized banquette for informal dining. Curves cost more, but they change the mood.

"It creates such a warm, soft feeling in the house, and you do feel so enveloped," says one of Ms. Dubbeldam's clients, a ceramicist, who declined to be further identified. "And when you're moving through the house there's just this really beautiful, fluid feeling to it, you feel contained within it – I always say we feel like little pearls inside a shell."

"It's called Flow House for a reason," Ms. Dubbeldam says with a laugh.

Notice, too, the tactility of so many things in the “shell” beyond millwork or flooring. Pendants over the kitchen island (by DA Ceramics) display finger depressions and child-like rings that recall Play-Doh. The marble kitchen sink that begs to be stroked. Grooves or depressions between different materials “so they can speak separately, so they’re not jamming into each other,” Ms. Dubbeldam says.

And speaking of not jamming things into other things, this house is unusual for avoiding sensory overload via Instagram-worthy vignettes every few feet – something this writer sees far too often – but rather allows the eye to rest periodically. “We’re the editors,” Ms. Dubbeldam says. “We’re constantly refining and saying ‘well let’s take a bit of this but not that’ – it’s part of the process.”

Upstairs, this family is no longer “packed in like sardines.” The second floor is for children’s rooms, the laundry pair, and bathrooms, and a light well allows for windows facing two directions.

The new third floor, however, is the adults-only space. But since this is a rear-only addition, it’s not a yawning chasm requiring rest-stop seating from bath to bed; no, it’s a cozy, Goldilocks ‘just right’ space with the same warmth and tactility as the rest of the house. Space is created by higher-than-average ceilings and by connecting to Mother Nature with the simple slide of a big glass door.

Flow House, say all concerned, really did flow rather effortlessly from initial conversations, through the design stage, and all the way to completion. “It was very exciting how it all came together,” the homeowner says. “There were moments where [my husband] and I would come to a meeting with an image and Andrew and Heather would have the same image...it was just a wonderful feeling that you’ve got this group very much on the same page.”

A master class not just in building a house then, but also in building relationships.