



Space, light reinvigorate Island home

Joanne Hatherly, Special to the Sun
Published: Saturday, February 25, 2006

Some houses nestle into Victoria's James Bay; Jim Parker and Heather Cairns's house invigorates it.

Where Queen Anne, Edwardian, British arts-and-crafts and Gothic revival homes make up the architectural garden that is James Bay, Parker-Cairns home is the exotic import, a hot pepper of design and style.

Their home, one of three located into a converted plastics factory, radiates an arid American southwest atmosphere with its mesa silhouette and sunbleached desert hues.

A courtyard border of cast-concrete wall that resembles sandstone and solid wood gates ensure privacy and provide an enclosed play space for the couple's 48-kilogram rottweiler, Judd, whom they've dubbed "rock-weiler" for his favourite pastime: rolling a large rock over the patio.

Parker and Cairns bought the condominium unit after it had been converted but, as dreamy as the home was, Parker and Cairns still found room for improvement. "The funny thing is you look at a place like this and say it's really cool, and yet we still changed it," Parker says.

The couple enlisted Zebra Design, a design-and-construction company headed by Rus Collins who, together with design team Dianne Kennedy and Adriana Sharoun, created a new plan for the unit. Zebra has more design and construction awards than can be listed here, but it was seeing Zebra projects firsthand that sold Parker and Cairns.

"We were familiar with their work, and they have a whole design and build team, so it would all be in-house," says Parker. "That makes it so much easier. They bring a fabulous team together, and we weren't stuck chasing trades around or worrying about who would show up when."

Sharoun, who has since moved on to Coastal Construction, remembers the original layout of the house. It was choppy and lacked any natural flow, she says.

The team created instant economies of scale by eliminating a superfluous eating nook, a move that opened "breathing room" in the kitchen.

"You can't waste real estate by having two large eating areas, that is, a dining room and breakfast nook," notes Sharoun.

Light played a large part in the renovation. While the home's exterior has an arid Arizona look, the interior was starved for sunlight. Skylights were an obvious solution, but Collins says the team was challenged by an absence of reliable building schematics.

"We couldn't be too sure where we would punch through to the roof or into the suite upstairs," he says. A little exploration revealed that the master bedroom stood beneath a second-storey suite, ruling out the skylight option.



Instead, Zebra designers introduced natural light into the shadowy room by punching out a large swath of the wall between the dining room and bedroom, replacing the upper portion with a wide-spanning grid of sandblasted glass framed in bamboo. Now, daylight floats in from the living room skylights, sky-tube and east-facing wall of glass.

Noting that Parker and Cairns were eager to re-use materials, the team incorporated glass blocks that Parker salvaged from his parent's old Ontario home, inserting the blocks into the walls and along the kitchen backsplash to add more avenues for natural light. The main entry opens to a sunwashed great room, where industrial-chic design mixes with objects ranging from Lake Simcoe folk art to collectibles from Europe, Syria and the Far East. The furnishings range from stream-lined modern chocolate leathers to old Canadiana pieces.

The couple's hand-painted boxes, old irons, canoe paddles inscribed with hand-lettered text and horn instruments are all remnants of family history. Highlighting rather than hiding these objects softens the home's defined urban edges.

Bamboo plays a leading role in the house's eco-industrial style.

"We wanted a green renovation," says Parker. "And so we went for bamboo because it's the material of choice in ecological design."

Sharoun says the vertical-grain bamboo plywood used in the renovation is a relatively new and unexplored material. Cabinetmaker Ron Scott showcased bamboo's textures, exposing the grain in striated cuts in cabinets, window frames, bookshelves and custom furnishings. The bamboo adds an organic element to the concrete finishings and studio-style monorail lighting.

Built-in bamboo cabinets also line the master bedroom's west wall, creating a tropical contrast with the old exposed-brick factory walls. Bamboo flooring nestles within concrete borders in the living room and appears elsewhere in the home.

The structure's old factory incarnation comes across in the vaulted ceilings of exposed trusses and criss-cross rafters, now painted in a soft, light, neutral hue.

In the master bedroom, Parker sweeps aside a bamboo-and-opaque-glass barn door to reveal an ensuite inspired by a spa visit. White over-sized subway tiles match the deep, jetted tub. The glassed-in two-person shower features a giant overhead rainshower and dual body sprays.

A concrete-encased island divides the living room from the kitchen. The counter, crafted by Victoria concrete artist Nathan Scott, wears blackened depressions that run stream-like through the raised bar top.

The kitchen's minimalist architecture is complemented with wrought-iron and bamboo barstools featuring scrolling frames custom-crafted by Mike Cato of Wrought With Envy.

Stainless-steel backsplashes punched out with bamboo-framed glass brick pair up with the bamboo cabinets. Under-cabinet lighting adds to the room's glow. Custom stainless-steel, hinged rolling shelves inside the deep pantries allow easy access to items normally stored at the back of the shelf.



As Parker walks me through the kitchen, he points out the high-set double wine racks and not one but two under-counter wine fridges, accompanied by a deep-set drawer filled with hard liquor.

"You would think we drink a lot from this," says Parker.

"No you don't," I observe. "The bottles are covered in dust."

"Ah, you caught me," says Parker with a smile.