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HINTONBURG HEROES

A bold six-unit development in Ottawa offers a new vision for low-rise housing on tight urban sites.

By: Project The Hintonburg Six, Ottawa, Ontario Architect Colizza Bruni Architecture Inc. TEXT Janine Debanné Photos Peter Fritz

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In a remarkable transformation last year, six funky houses took the place of a single humble dwelling in a working-class neighbourhood in Ottawa. There was a time that Ottawa was the scene of forward-looking experimentation in residential architecture: Modernist houses were built in great numbers in the mid-1950s, and the '60s and '70s brought innovative CMHC-sponsored checkerboard and cluster row-housing. As the decades passed, however, more predictable townhouse forms became the norm. The emergence of condo towers then pushed aside all experimentation in higher-density forms for living close to the ground. This new development by local firm Colizza Bruni is thus a welcome and refreshing return to housing experimentation in the nation's capital.

The Hintonburg Six occupies a pie-shaped lot at the corner of Pinhey and Armstrong Streets in Hintonburg, a district just west of downtown, adjacent to LeBreton Flats. A more typical contemporary replacement to the existing single-family house would have comprised five beige stucco-and-brick row houses, with large garage doors on the street, bloated rooms and exaggerated ceiling heights. Instead, Colizza Bruni built four crisp detached dwellings and one semi-detached house, each unit ranging between 800 and 1,100 square feet. While these relatively modest floor areas recall postwar family houses, the Hintonburg Six proposes an entirely new lot massing outside and a reinterpreted dwelling inside.

Around the project site, modest clapboard houses and light industrial buildings line a street grid made irregular by the nudgings of the Ottawa River. After long quiet years on the fringes of Ottawa's more established brick neighbourhoods, Hintonburg has become a dynamic and creative nexus, one where new thinking about urban dwelling seems to happen naturally. Architects James Colizza, Anthony Bruni and intern architect Nic De Socio of Colizza Bruni all live in Hintonburg or neighbouring Mechanicsville, and have completed several other projects nearby. Their affection for Hintonburg is clear.

The ensemble of compact houses balances open and closed volumes, places tall elements discreetly behind shorter ones, and organizes through-block continuity of yards, creating a complex massing that is both sculptural and collage-like. Each house combines a central silver staircase tower with a two-storey black volume, both clad in metal siding as a tribute to the area's industrial history. Although coloured clapboard might have established a more playful sympathy with the neighbouring houses, the completed project fits perfectly into Hintonburg's jagged seams. Eschewing developer logic with respect to garages, cars park in the outdoor spaces between the houses in a casual arrangement reminiscent of existing neighbourhood patterns. Gazing out the window of one of the houses, Bruni reflects: "If you look at this street, nobody has garages. They park outside and yes, they get snowed on. Many developments try to shoehorn a suburban development into an infill lot; they try different articulations, but they never seem to fit. It's just the wrong way to live in an urban environment."

Instead of a full third floor, each staircase culminates in an 8' x 10' crow's nest suffused with daylight, which frees space for a generous outdoor terrace. Decisions like these, in which inspired spatial experiences and sensitive massing prevail over gross square footage, give the project unusual qualities. The project consistently recognizes "what this place is about, and how people live here," to use De Socio's words. Where so many other developments clash with their surroundings, the Hintonburg Six's architecture and massing recover the casual tone of its working-class neighbourhood's vernacular houses without superficial imitation. The project exudes a kind of courage as a result.

In its simplest form, explains Colizza, "this is a single-family house—with living space, gardens, sheds and fences, and a parking space—which does not impose itself. Car, house, ground. One thousand feet, plus or minus. That's basically it. How small can you get for a single-family house that is very liveable?" Colizza, the eldest of 13 children, grew up in a three-bedroom house with one washroom in Sault Ste. Marie, his uncles living in the backyard. He reflects: "Is it inside me to live small? Probably it is. Did we all live? Yes. Are we all okay? Yes." For Bruni, compact houses counter the tendency to segregate family members. They also require dwellers to pare down possessions, inviting a sort of closeness in everyday living.

Although compact, the Hintonburg Six condenses the pleasures of light and privacy typical of large detached houses. Daylight enters from multiple directions, and a roof terrace provides a private refuge within a strongly communal site plan. Bedrooms possess perfect, historically decanted dimensions that are both minimal and generous: the rooms measure 10' x 11', not including the closets, similar to the smallest bedrooms in Mies van der Rohe's Lafayette Park dwellings, as one example. Unlike many shoebox condo developments, there's room to flow around three sides of a queen bed, and enough space for bedside tables and dressers. Dining and living rooms are well formed, contained by properly positioned walls and half-walls, yet expanded by well-conceived openings. Since there was no wiggle room, kitchen and washroom cabinetry is custom-built as handsome minimalist pieces.

The three designers, all of Italian heritage, share recollections of lessons learned at early ages from their respective families of builders and machinists, spending time around family construction sites. "My father put me to work as a mason-labourer as soon as I was strong enough to carry bricks," recalls Bruni. As a result, the project refrains from laborious detailing, balancing spatial inventiveness with matter-of-fact construction. Generous punched windows (rather than floor-to-ceiling window walls) and narrow door trim with flat-profile baseboards kept costs from escalating. Steel angles welded to C-channels at floor edges serve as staircase stringers while also providing an edge for the Levelrock poured floors and their epoxy finish. The open-riser stairs' steel structures were installed early on and fitted with temporary treads during construction. Upon project completion, these were simply replaced with finished maple treads. Throughout, such details demonstrate foresight, building intelligence, and economy of means.

Unlike in conventional developments intended for unknown future buyers, the first group of owners knew each other. Colizza bought and severed the lot into six, selling them before the project was completed, and thus inviting the participation of owners in the design. These owners included Bruni, De Socio, and two of Colizza's daughters. Each owner was their own builder: contractors sent out six bills, not one. To economize on costs, owners took responsibility for tasks that fell between the trades, such as erecting temporary railings, daily cleaning of the construction sites, framing bulkheads, and later, landscaping and building fences and sheds. Together, the owners located backyard screens that provided privacy but also captured nice views. "It's a very hands-on thing that happened here. People were out here cleaning and nailing," says Colizza. This participatory approach gave the construction site a dynamic life, and brings back to mind architecture's potential as a social catalyst.

Can this kind of project can be repeated in more normative conditions? This remains to be seen. But so far, Ottawa's intensification boom has yielded too few creative responses that give sincere consideration to context, and too many medium- and high-density developments with inferior spatial arrangements. The Hintonburg Six optimistically opposes such trends, and honours daylight and proper room sizing as necessities of living well. In grouping compact detached houses and gardens in relational patterns, where yards and parking are generated by patterns of assembly, and in revisiting the smaller footprint of the postwar family house, the Hintonburg Six begins to provide new direction to Ottawa's confused urban housing scene.

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