

On the cutting edge in Parkdale

Two spacious new Hintonburg homes share a narrow lot and a unified look on the outside. But inside Victoria Colizza and Anthony Bruni's new digs reflect their owners' distinct personalities

BY RHYS PHILLIPS, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN JULY 9, 2011



43-45 Grant St, designed by Colizza Bruni Architecture.

Photograph by: Peter Fritz

OTTAWA — Few would question that after decades of being tagged as an “up and coming” area, Westboro Village has finally emerged as arguably Ottawa’s trendiest neighbourhood. A tipping point of specialty shops, eclectic restaurants and modern mid-rise condos has been reached, supported by a surrounding neighbourhood of quality housing.

Further east, and not incidentally closer to downtown, Hintonburg’s Parkdale neighbourhood has been slower to cash in on the rising demand for inner city living. But this mixed community of modest 19th-century workers’ houses interspersed with vestiges of light industry and a past reputation for street crime is rapidly undergoing significant transformation.

The small but long-running and much-loved Parkdale farmers market, the arrival of the Great Canadian Theatre Company’s performance venue, upscale bistros, converted lofts and new low-rises are having an impact. Two years ago, taking advantage of a fortuitous lag in land prices reflecting the area’s emerging “bohemian” potential, architect Jim Colizza purchased a tight 25-foot by 80-foot side yard just two doors east of the market on Grant Street.

Along with long-term employee and now firm partner Anthony Bruni, Colizza’s objective was to design affordable duplex units of 1,200 square feet each for his daughter Victoria and Bruni. Designing the units was a collaborative process. Not only did the two Carleton University architecture graduates work closely, but Victoria, who attended interior design classes in Florence, Italy, had

considerable input. As a result, while the exteriors of the two residences fuse seamlessly into a singular and robustly sculpted volume, each interior reflects the distinctive character and personality of its owner. Both, however, share a sense of spaciousness and are washed by natural light, despite the narrow lot allowing no east-facing windows.

The primary form of the building began as a simple three-storey box at the rear of the lot (the back unit) with a second box grafted on to the front (the front unit). This latter "tower" was then eroded at its base to accommodate a car park and a separate access to the back unit. Victoria's rear unit inhabits largely the private realm of the backyard with no public face save for its entry door. Conversely, Bruni's unit aggressively engages the public realm of the street. This engagement is achieved both through a large, unshaded window exposing the stairs to the second level living space, as well as a generous cantilevered terrace partly shaded by a boldly balanced canopy roof. This sculpting and fragmenting, which increase the houses' kinetic energy, also reflect proportions found on nearby houses. The unity of the two residences is achieved through their cladding, a mix of durable but richly coloured mahogany marine plywood and corrugated metal panels that reflect the area's industrial heritage.

But if the front unit appears the most dynamic on the exterior, the roles are somewhat reversed inside.

"When you approach the rear unit," says Jim Colizza, "there is a transparency on the first level that lets you see right through the first floor, an idea taken from my first experience with Dutch urban housing."

Entry to the rear unit is directly into a soaring, double-height corner dining area separated from the galley kitchen by a handcrafted concrete-topped island. Above, a living room mezzanine overlooks the dining area. This dramatic composition of space celebrates the unit's backyard orientation by creating one continuous and playful space with visual connections to the exterior and within the units. Large windows fill the double-height north and west walls, allowing crisp northwest light to animate the space with multiple shadows on the sculptural white walls.

"Light," says Colizza simply, "really makes a space."

Simple cantilevered maple stairs connect the three levels of the home behind a -inch by three-inch white metal grid, a "veil that both subtly screens the stair while also projecting delicate moving wall shadows through the advancing day," says Colizza. The living room loft focuses on a simple black melamine fireplace resting on a concrete hearth that maintains the textures and materials of the kitchen below. Two bedrooms and the home's principal bathroom occupy the third floor.

If Victoria Colizza's unit is spatially dynamic and rich in tone, giving the interior a somewhat feminine esthetic, Bruni's interior has a studied calm with more masculine overtones. With only an entry vestibule (and small den) at the ground level, his primary living area is a piano noble, an all-in-one 500-square-foot space elevated a level above the street. The generously glazed south wall opens on to the terrace, thus providing direct contact with the street but also a protected exterior living space.

The fully open interior space is Bruni's take on his Italian family's home in Sault St. Marie, where life rotated around a large kitchen-cum-gathering spot. In this integrated multi-purpose level, where space is continuous and not compartmentalized, the kitchen flows into the dining area and merges with the living room. The custom-crafted and hand-stained maple cabinets stitch together the different zones by stretching along the kitchen walls, sinking down to become a dining area commode and finally transforming seamlessly into the room-focusing fireplace. This last is constructed from cold- and hot-rolled steel plate stained and etched with a gun-cleaning fluid that creates different colours on the two types of plates.

"My preference is for the understated but not necessarily the subdued, especially when it comes to light," Bruni says. After watching how the sunlight hit the west wall, he introduced carefully placed punched windows, necessarily narrow but situated precisely to maximize the sun's impact.

Both designers emphasize the need for an absence of design clutter in modest spaces, an outcome that involves considerable reflection during the design process. To increase the perception of space, for example, Bruni tucked the most bulky kitchen cupboard in a corner, eliminated any bulkheads and rotated the kitchen island to run parallel with the room's length. The unit's stairwell is uncluttered by balustrades. Instead, two floor-to-ceiling transparent glass panels screen the kitchen from the stairs. The stairs' stringers are simple black I-beams with maple stairs attached using narrow metal fixtures that make each step appear almost to float.

Despite its unique presence, the Grant Street duplex has been well received by neighbours as well as picking up an Ontario Association of Architects 2010 Design of Excellence Award. The two architects, who recently saw their redesign of the public park behind the Parkdale Market realized and are completing six equally eye-catching housing units (four free-standing and a duplex) on nearby Armstrong Street, are betting Parkdale will emerge as Ottawa's cutting-edge design community.

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