

Tom Thomson builds a city house

Inspired by the Group of Seven, a Toronto architect has inserted a startling home into a bleak urban street, LISA ROCHON writes

By LISA ROCHON
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There you are, slip-sliding your way along an icy sidewalk, trying to stay on your feet even though the weather and the alarming state of the world are rattling your senses. Behind your frozen face there is a clutter of thoughts about Iraq, North Korea and AIDS. "Keep walking," you mutter to your boots.

Ordinarily, the Canadian city offers little solace from our darkest musings. The routine during the winter is head down, nose buried, until you reach some warmth. And, who would have guessed, as you're trudging along that there is warmth to be found and visual delight in a hardscrabble section of Toronto's east end?

It comes in the form of a boldly-collaged totemic house that hovers over a marshy site along Coxwell Avenue. Here's something that looks optimistic for the year 2003.

Architecture capable of bending the mind causes people to stop and stare. Maybe you've finished a game of Bingo up the street or just consumed tandoori chicken in the neighbourhood's Little India. There you are like so many others standing in front of this startling work of architecture house at 157 Coxwell Ave., eyes running over this irreverent house on stilts. Irreverent because of the cedar catwalk that leads to it from the sidewalk, and because it's clad not in brick, not in white vinyl siding, but in colourful sheets of plywood. Also, there's irreverence within the interior: A glass garage door slides up on ceiling tracks to expose the ground floor kitchen to the outdoors. And unusual because the house is designed without ducts; radiant heating has been installed instead on all three storeys in the lightweight concrete floors.

Coxwell Avenue, like countless other streets that crisscross the nation's cities, is weak on aesthetic temptations. The houses are bare-bone Victorian interspersed with cheaply constructed commercial stores and apartment blocks. For this reason, the newly completed house designed by Rohan Walters stands out like a beacon of hope for anyone interested in

inventive, optimistic construction.

"I'm tired of the Victorian solution," says Walters, who graduated in architecture from the University of Waterloo, in Waterloo, Ont., before becoming a rough-frame carpenter and working as a freelance designer for several Toronto firms as well as for his own private clients. "I'm bored to death of it. There are other ways of approaching a site than the same old, same old."

In this case, the site is wedged between a row of Victorian houses and a low-rise apartment building. The new 800-square-foot house rises three storeys above street level. A roof garden has been designed to look over the canopies of several mature trees with views to Lake Ontario.

Below the house is a marsh with water levels only two to three feet under ground. Helical piles measuring 47 feet were driven into the ground to serve as reliable footings. The house sits on top of four concrete columns capped in steel that rest on the piles.

Besides the need to get off wet land, Walters chose the raised pavilion structure to reduce the vibrations that run from the Coxwell streetcar tracks into the neighbouring houses.

Even here, in what initially appears to be a grim urban landscape, Walters was inspired to make a statement about the light in Southern Ontario and how it might be applied like swatches of colour to the Toronto house. During a trip to the Art Gallery of Ontario, he fixated on some of the work by Tom Thomson and A.Y. Jackson. "Out of the light, they saw the mustard yellows, the way that violet was slightly off and how it might be combined with greens," says Walters. He returned to the AGO with colour swatches and copper samples and held them next to some of the paintings. "I had to tell the guard about what I was doing so he wouldn't think I was crazy."

Drawing on site, a series of elevations were prepared by Walters, some using markers and watercolours, others using actual paint colours.

Ultimately, the house is primarily clad in rosin-impregnated plywood that is coloured a deep purple-blue. Other plywood sheets are red, some are yellow, and a handful are pale green. "Blue roots the other colours -- the other colours emerge from the blue," says Walters.

The Coxwell house is not Walters's first radical venture in urban

architecture. Several years ago, he designed his studio house in Toronto's west end at the corner of College and Lansdowne. The site was a difficult triangular shape that had been occupied by a Mediacom billboard. Eventually, after sitting on the market for years, the property was purchased by Walters for \$17,000. Behind a sliding wall, he built a house on stilts, this time raised above a parking pad and interior garden.

What interests Walters is how the individual designer can go about reinventing derelict sites in the city. At \$95 per square foot, the Coxwell house also demonstrates that it doesn't have to cost a lot to build something that's unique, solid and safe. The ceilings are all exposed timbers and the wooden baseboards are grooved to hold electrical wiring. The windows are pine tongue and groove and not custom designed. Upgrades can happen over time as the owners can afford it, says Walters. "I noticed in Italy," he says, referring to Waterloo's study-abroad program in Rome, "that houses are finished by degrees as the families can afford it. People here don't do that -- they finish the house and end up house poor."

Even at this domestic scale, the Walters house injects a sorry urban stretch with something that is startling and dramatic. It makes public art out of a private home. That's one important step toward lessening the plodding, trudging way in which we experience much of the city these days.

A public open house of 157 Coxwell Ave. will be held on Jan. 18 and 19 from 2 to 7 p.m.

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