

# Rustic with an Edge

Contemporary meets country in this home designed for its environment

by JUDY ROSS • photography by DEREK TRASK

From the street the house looks bold and mysterious; different from its neighbours in Nipissing Ridge, where more traditional country homes line the winding streets. With a shocking red tin roof, hefty cladding of dark wood and stone, and a mere slit of windows, the street

façade is intentionally guarded. But inside is a different story. The lofty light-filled space is immersed in the natural surroundings. Walls of glass open to the private backyard with trees rimming a ravine and views of the snow-covered slopes at Craigeleith and Alpine ski clubs.

ABOVE: This house built by Simon and Shirlee Williams in Nipissing Ridge turns its back to the street and focuses toward the backyard where a leafy ravine garden is integrated into the contemporary design.



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ABOVE: Shirlee chose the opulent chandelier to contrast with the sparseness of the great room. The fireplace design allows for neat wood storage beneath the hearth.

LEFT: Buddha, a white boxer puppy, lounges in the afternoon sun. He was named in honour of Buddha Rider, Shirlee's fitness studio in Collingwood.

Owners Simon and Shirlee Williams bought the empty lot in August 2007 and just over a year later, in October 2008, they moved into this newly built home with their nine-year-old twins Ethan and Oliver. "It was an intense experience – a lot of work, a lot of decisions," recalls Shirlee, "but Simon had a vision and I pretty much went along with it. I don't pay that much attention to details. I just trusted him to make the right choices and decided there was no point in two of us getting stressed out."

Simon's business background includes design, building and renovation, but he had never built a home for himself from scratch. Before moving here the couple had restored a large Victorian house in Toronto's Annex district, but their heart was in Collingwood. They spent eight years commuting on weekends to their condo at Lighthouse Point. All week long they discussed the best time to leave the city on Fridays; then on weekends they fretted about whether to go back on Sunday night or make the early Monday morning trek to get the boys to school on time. Finally, they decided to make life easier by moving here full-time.





ABOVE: Stark white marble counters and espresso-stained cherry cabinets (built by Clearview Woodworking in Stayner) give a bistro vibe to the open kitchen where Simon does most of the cooking. RIGHT: This trio of butternut wooden sculptures brightens a corner of the great room. Purchased at Level Gallery in Collingwood, they are the work of sculptor Fran Bouwman.

The most dramatic part of the house is the great room, designed for year-round entertaining. Simon and Shirlee love having the house filled with people – 80, including adults, children and dogs, on New Year’s Eve. As well, they frequently host more intimate dinner parties.







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ABOVE: Keeping the dining room separate from the kitchen and living area adds ambiance to the couple’s dinner parties and provides an extra wall for their extensive art collection. The painting is by Chinese artist Xiao Guo Hui. On the sideboard is a sculpture by Salvador Dali.

They sold their city house and when they couldn’t find the ideal home for sale in this area they opted to build. That way they could customize an environment that precisely suited their family needs. Coming from a vintage house in downtown Toronto they wanted a complete change to reflect their new, more relaxed lifestyle. So they built a rustic yet contemporary home that takes advantage of its environment and embraces the outdoors in every season.

The interplay of landscape and architecture is evocative of West Coast style, suggests Brad Abbott, a Toronto-based architect who helped to site the building on the lot and worked with Simon on the design. “We wanted to maximize the private views at the back of the property,” he explains, “so we basically turned our back to the street and positioned the house as close to the road as zoning allowed.” A local builder, Dave Harrington (who happened to live conveniently across the road) worked on the project using local trades. Simon chose nature-based materials and his primary goal was to get away from the clichéd look of post-and-beam and gables, but still maintain the mountain/country flavour with cleaner lines and a contemporary edge.

With 5,500 square feet spread over three levels (including a basement), the design had to function as a full-time residence with separate quarters for the two boys. Ethan and Oliver have their own area on the second floor, which includes a lounge, two bedrooms adjoined by a bathroom, and a guest room. The master suite on the main floor can be closed off by a pocket door from the foyer. But the most dramatic part of the house is the great room, designed for year-round entertaining. Simon and Shirlee love having the

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In the great room high clerestory windows let in natural light and floor-to-ceiling doors open to the garden. The angle of the shed roof allows for a ceiling that starts at 10 feet and rises to 20 feet. At one end of the room a tall stone fireplace provides an anchor; at the other, there’s an open bistro-styled kitchen. Unlike most great rooms which include a dining area, Simon chose to put a wall up to create a separate space for more formal dining. Shirlee maintains that after their first dinner party she was sold on the separate room idea because “you don’t see the mess in the kitchen.”

The seamless blend of indoor and outdoor elements is evident when you first enter the house. The front walkway stone continues onto the foyer floor and the cedar planking on the porch roof also carries inside. Espresso-stained wood siding is used on both interior and exterior walls. And the living room beams appear to extend to the rafters of the outdoor trellis. Windows and doors meet the floor, giving the sensation of being able to step outside from anywhere in the house. Come summer, four oversized glass doors will be opened up to a complete outdoor living room and a rock-edged swimming pool.

Important also in the house design was wall space for the couple’s considerable collection of contemporary, modern and surreal art. Given the amount of glass, it was a challenge to incorporate art walls. In the foyer, for instance, a tall wall provides an ideal showcase for a large Charles Pachter and a long light-filled passageway to the master bedroom is lined with smaller framed pieces.





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ABOVE: At the foot of the stairs a pocket door on the right opens to the self-contained master suite. The staircase leads to the second level where nine-year-old twins Ethan and Oliver enjoy their own space.

LEFT: Glamour meets nature in this master bathroom where a combination of light and dark slate envelops the space. The wall-less shower has heated floors sloped for drainage and beneath the garden-view window is a large soaker tub.

## Getting It Right

Simon Williams offers these tips for prospective home builders:

1. Work with a team you completely trust. Make sure that the lines of communication are open at all times.
2. The more soul searching you do in the beginning about what you really want, the better. Focus on exactly how you'll use the house. Start making decisions early in the process and do as much research as possible.
3. Create a design and live with it. There are so many choices. Think about what you like and then don't overthink it. Better to not make changes once you get started.
4. Have a realistic budget and then add 10 per cent. Then add another 10 per cent and you should be close.
5. Stay connected to the project. Be there for as much of the build as possible.





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ABOVE: The same organic materials (granite, cedar, river rock, slate) – all reflective of the Georgian Bay landscape – were used on both the interior and exterior of the house.

LEFT: A trellis over the outdoor living area adds linear interest in winter and shade in the summer. In the distance are the ski hills of Alpine and Craigeleith.

Charlene Stewart of Town & Country Design helped the Williamses from the early building stages and says the whole project involved a group of gifted people. “I’ve never had more fun,” she enthuses. She loves the home’s sense of serenity, a feature that comes from the consistency of lines and materials. In too many houses, she contends, this important design factor is overlooked. “There should be a flow throughout the house, not big changes from room to room. You should always know you’re in the same house.”

For the Williams family the house functions just the way they hoped it would. There is still work to be done, details to be finished, furniture to be purchased. In winter it’s warm and welcoming with heated floors throughout and sunlight streaming through glass walls. But they look forward to their first summer when they can open the doors to the garden and truly experience the indoor/outdoor ambiance that is the hallmark of the home’s design. 🌲