

Starting fresh

Buying a house with 'little worth saving' created opportunity to build a new home in Guelph, focused on energy efficiency and local craftsmanship

BY ANDREW VOWLES
PHOTOGRAPHY • ALISHA TOWNSEND

When George Ivanoff and Eve Schmitz-Hertzberg bought their retirement house in Guelph's leafy Eramosa Hill neighbourhood in 2015, they knew the post-war dwelling needed work. They just hadn't realized how much work.

Renovation plans for their 1,500-square-foot house on King Street soon ran up against complications, not least of which were lead pipes and asbestos.

"The architect and builder said there was little worth saving," says George. So, in 2016, the couple demolished the existing house and started over.

This past June, they moved into a new custom-designed dwelling that better meets their needs – today and for tomorrow – while reflecting their values and taking better advantage of the property's attributes.

Their renovation-turned-construction-project has given them a 2,500-square-foot house built largely with local materials and with energy efficiency in mind – including relying partly on an age-old heating system you won't find in too many homes in North America, let alone Guelph.

For Eve, designing her dream home was also a chance to follow a maxim of her father's: "He said, 'You've got to build a house in your lifetime.'"



A red kachelöfen, or masonry heater, in the living room is intended for heating the home. Standing well over head height and finished in red tiling, the Jessica Steinhauser creation is also a statement piece.



George Ivanoff and Eve Schmitz-Hertzberg relax at the dining table as sunlight pours in. 'We've got amazing light in the house,' Eve says.

“The house opens up but not in one piece. It’s open concept, but it has nooks and crannies.”

DAVID MCAULEY, ARCHITECT

Relocating to Guelph was a homecoming of sorts. George and Eve met in 1976 as University of Guelph students. She was in veterinary studies; he studied agriculture and then did graduate work in landscape architecture. One year, he rented a room just a block away from their new King Street address.

After marrying in 1981, they moved to Richmond Hill, where Eve ran a small-animal clinic. Now 66, she sold her business in 2010. George, 63, worked in

environmental planning with the provincial government in Toronto; he retired three years ago.

After nearly 35 years spent in a 1960s-era subdivision, they wanted a more walkable community and a more eco-friendly house for their retirement years.

They trolled through various locations including Niagara, Peterborough and Collingwood, but, says George, “We always kept coming back to Guelph.”

Being near downtown was a draw and two

of their three children – all of whom also attended U of G – live in the city.

“The community has a lot of positive energy,” George says. “It’s a progressive town.” He points to the farmers market and their favoured restaurants – including Artisanale and With the Grain – as well as the Bookshelf, Planet Bean and a community-shared agriculture program through the Stone Store they have signed up for.

“We’re looking to be part of the community,” Eve says.

Like its neighbours, the house a few doors down from Derry Street perches well above street level, accessible from the sidewalk by a flight of concrete stairs. Its slate-blue metal roof contrasts with the exterior walls of bronze-coloured Maibec wood siding arrayed in mixed vertical and horizontal bands. Numerous windows wrap around the front and side of the house.

Unlike its predecessor, the new house sits further back from the slope, tucked into the northeast corner of the 80- by 100-foot lot. Referring to the resultant southern exposure, Eve says, “We’ve got amazing light in the house. It’s so good for your mental sanity to have light.”

From inside, those windows offer a view of downtown, including the spire of St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church on Norfolk Street poking above the foliage.

That view vies with what is perhaps the most arresting visual feature in the open-concept house: a pair of kachelöfens, or masonry heaters, installed back to back against the wall separating the kitchen from the living room. The kitchen unit, finished in turquoise-coloured tiles, is about the size of a large kitchen range and will be used for cooking. Its living room counterpart – standing well over head height and finished in red tiling – is intended for heating the home.

From previous visits to Guelph, George and Eve knew the work of Jessica Steinhauser, a local ceramic artist and owner of Stonehouse Pottery. A kachelöfen contains a wood-burning fireplace and a thermal mass that traps heat and radiates it to the house over eight to 12 hours. Among two dozen units designed and installed by Steinhauser in Canada, the United States and Europe over the past 10 years, four are in Guelph, including the pair in the new house on King Street.

“Guelph might have the highest density of kachelöfens in Canada,” says Steinhauser, who grew up in Germany and learned her trade in Europe before moving here.



Floors, stairs, railings and other exposed interior woods are mostly locally milled red oak. The ceilings in the living room and the master bedroom are finished with cedar. Natural oil finishes allow the woods to breathe, says Ben Polley, owner of Evolve Builders Group.



TOP: Natural light flows into the kitchen, which was designed by Uli Walle of Old World Woodworking in Guelph.

RIGHT: The living room offers a bright space to curl up with a good book.



It took a week for Steinhäuser and her Austrian protégé to install the units. Weighing roughly 500 and 1,800 kilograms, respectively, both kachelöfens had to be supported by vertical concrete uprights installed in the basement. Before that, it took two months to design and build the oven components, including decorative elements suggested by the homeowners.

Tiles forming a frieze around the top of the living room unit bear a circular floral motif that the homeowners had spotted stamped into the door handles of St. Andrew's church across the river. Although neither George nor Eve is Presbyterian, they liked the idea of connecting their new home with that nearby architectural icon.

Their own Quaker roots are reflected in several lines chiselled in cursive script into

one side of the living room kachelöfen. Written by Quaker Society founder George Fox in the 17th century, the inscription reads in part: "Be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, wherever you come, that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people and to them."

Referring to the kachelöfens, George says, "They're artistic and functional. They're warming even without being on. They're heartwarming."

And housewarming: Although the couple has yet to try out the ovens, they expect the units will provide much of their home heating. Heat from the taller kachelöfen will circulate throughout the living room, helped by a fan suspended from the 18-foot-high cathedral ceiling. That great room is open to the second-floor hallway, allowing heat to travel into the upper-floor rooms.

The kachelöfens are not the sole heating source. In another anomaly for most

Canadians accustomed to a system of forced-air ducts, the house is heated with hot water, drawn from a gas-fired boiler in the basement and dispensed through compact radiators. The couple wished to avoid ductwork heating, with blowing air and attendant dust and mould concerns. "I don't like having hot air blowing around," Eve says.

The only ducts in the house are for a heat-recovery ventilator system that sucks air from the kitchen and bathrooms on the ground floor and second level, and replenishes those rooms with fresh air. The concrete basement floor, overlaid with linoleum, contains radiant heating.

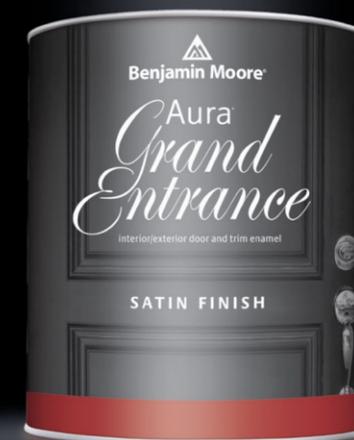
Builder Ben Polley, owner of Evolve Builders Group, points to other heating and cooling features, including a number chosen for their environmental and health attributes. (Evolve is also the parent company of Harvest Homes, which builds "straw bale" houses.)

The metal roof of the King Street house is coated with inert, ceramic-based paint instead of polyvinyl chloride. That wood siding on the exterior walls is certified as sustainably harvested by the Forest Stewardship Council. A double-wall system for the exterior walls contains mineral wool insulation, and the triple-glazed windows are seated inside durable fiberglass frames. More windows face south than north, and three-foot-wide cedar soffits will shade part of the windows in summer.

Indoor air-conditioning units are mounted in the master bedroom and at the top of the stairs. That ceiling fan in the living room pulls up hot air in summer to cool the downstairs, and reverses to push down warm air in winter.

Referring to the energy-efficiency features, Polley says the house has a tight envelope that relies on the materials in walls, doors and windows to conserve energy and reduce heating and ventilation costs. "You

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A second kachelöfen, finished in turquoise-coloured tiles, is about the size of a large kitchen range and will be used for cooking.



can dispense with complex mechanical equipment and fancy controls.”

Inside, builders applied mineral silicate paint – basically highly pulverized silicon – to the plaster walls. “It penetrates the largest plaster pores to keep out water,” says Polley. “It’s breathable yet water-resistant – like Goretex.” Paints contain few or no volatile organic compounds for less off-gassing. Throughout the house, the floors, stairs, railings and other exposed interior woods are mostly locally milled red oak. The ceilings in the living room and the master bedroom are finished with cedar. Natural oil finishes allow the woods to breathe, Polley says.

The couple connected with Polley through their Guelph architect, David McAuley, principal with J. David McAuley Architect Inc.

Besides considering energy efficiency and environmental and health issues, McAuley says the firm paid attention to the couple’s lifestyle.

“They wanted a mix of public and private zones,” he says. “The house opens up but not in one piece. It’s open concept, but it has nooks and crannies.”

They also built with both today and tomorrow in mind. For now, the master bedroom is located upstairs, along with a walk-in closet with uber-organizer shelving and an adjoining bathroom. Another bedroom on the second floor leads to a pocket room that serves as George’s meditation space.

At the beginning of August, landscaping and other finishing touches to the exterior were a work in progress. Left, the view from King Street. Right, the view from the laneway that leads to Queen Street.

Downstairs is a TV room – along with an adjoining, fully accessible bathroom – that the couple figures will serve as their main-floor bedroom when they’re no longer able to manage the stairs.

Outside, Guelph’s Escape Designs was retained to finish the property, including building a cedar deck accessible through double sliding doors from the front rooms and landscaping the garden sloping down to King Street. That frontage will allow them to carry the house’s open concept outdoors while still retaining a measure of privacy above and back from the street.

Tucked back into the lot, much of the dwelling is hidden from below, including the garage; a communal laneway running behind the house and its neighbours connects onto Queen Street a block up.

“It’s a unique house that reflects us as individuals, hopefully, without being ostentatious,” George says.

Maybe one of their two daughters summed it up best in a thank-you card left after she stayed over one night. Referring to her parents’ new house of a lifetime, she wrote, “It is at its essence so very you that it felt familiar.”

Says Eve, “She felt at home right away.”

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