



BY PAUL GESSELL
PHOTOGRAPHY BY PHOTOLUXSTUDIO.COM -
CHRISTIAN LALONDE

W e're only 45 minutes from Ottawa. Or so claim the owners of this Zen-like country retreat in the Gatineau Hills. Actually, this contemporary hideaway seems a million miles from the city – and not just because of the tricky, up-and-down, Snakes-and-Ladders route necessary to get there. Art professionals Anne Maheux and Greg Hill have obviously done this drive hundreds of times. They, unlike a first-time visitor, do not have to slow down every few kilometres to check road signs obscured by faded paint and untamed vegetation. They know exactly how to negotiate this maze of hilly, potholed roads leading to a small, tranquil lake encircled by pines and maples. They know they will inevitably reach serenity on what is surely a faraway planet.

THE EXTERIOR

The terracotta-coloured Hardie panels on the outside of the house have slightly curved, reed-like shapes cut into them by a water saw. The panels are one of a number of well-thought-out touches that reveal to visitors that the owners have a definite artistic bent



TWO ART CONSERVATORS AND
THEIR DAUGHTER FIND TRUE PEACE
IN A COTTAGE-COUNTRY HIDEAWAY

HEAD FOR
THE HILLS



THE ENTRANCE

Walk through the door into a glass-walled foyer (above). From here, turn left to enter the public wing (top), right for the private wing, or go straight up the stairs to the loft

Upon arrival, expect to be puzzled. The driveway ends at the narrowest, seemingly windowless end of the house. It looks as if you're driving up to a wall — is this the house, you ask yourself — a wall in a shade somewhere between red and terracotta. On closer inspection, you notice that the “wall” is accentuated with dark brown trim and covered with Hardie panels boasting reed-like cut-outs that seem almost to sway in the breeze. Now step right up. There it is. The odd-angled wall has a door. It's not just a wall, after all, but one view of a cottage that, despite its starkness and bright colour, surely belongs in this forest the same way an exotic animal looks perfectly at home dozing in its natural habitat.

The interior of this country retreat is intentionally spartan and as quiet as outer space. The floors are smoothed cement topped with a few area rugs; radiant heat comes from below. The walls in every room but one are off-white. The sole splash of

colour is discovered in the powder room, which is painted a shocking orange-red, a wanton Jezebel among the other chaste rooms. The owners figured that since all the other rooms have large windows, coloured walls would detract from the real show — the spectacular views. In fact, the windows so dominate this retreat that the indoor and outdoor spaces blur. From a seat by the living room fireplace, the vistas are such that you almost expect a butterfly to alight on the couch or raindrops to splatter the nearby kitchen counter.

But though the aesthetic is thoroughly modern, the couple has banned most electronic gadgets. The Internet has not yet been summoned to this address from across the hills and jagged outcrops. No BlackBerry vibrates on the side table. Cell phones are useless. Fretting is forbidden. “No work allowed,” says Anne.

Instead, time is spent reading, sleeping, taking long walks through the forest, canoeing in summer, and snowshoeing in



THE LIVING ROOM

In winter, sit by the fire and feel cozy, but in summer, open the glass doors (not shown) onto the expansive outdoor living room, find a spot on the couch — inside or out — and you have a ringside seat to birdsong, rustling leaves, and cooling breezes off the lake

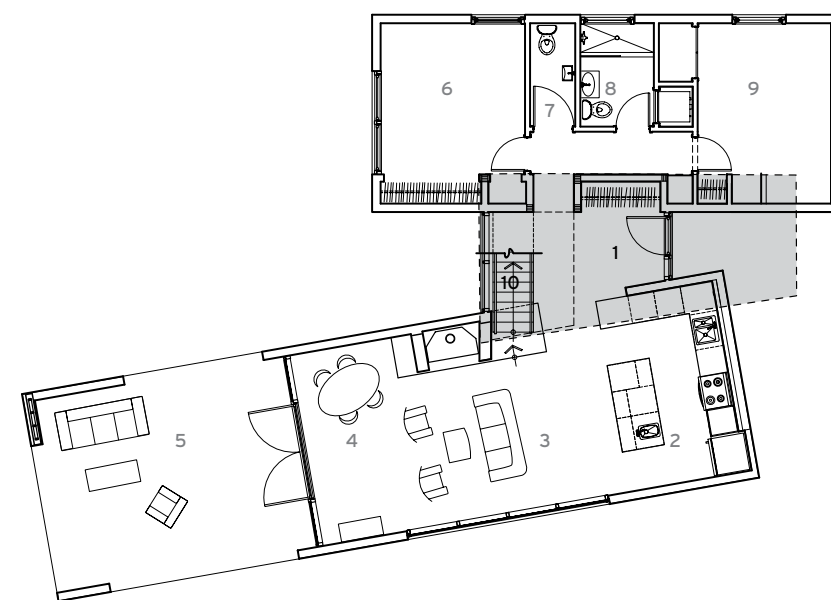


FAVOURITE THINGS

THE ZINC AND STEEL PLATES

A patchwork of zinc and steel plates composes the ceiling of the entranceway and the front of the living room fireplace. Some of the zinc plates are etched, having been used by all three members of the family to make prints. These zinc plates ensure that each person has placed his or her personal stamp on the cottage. The steel plates have been treated with muriatic acid to give them an antique look.

MORE FAVOURITE THINGS
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MAIN FLOOR

1. entrance foyer below loft
2. kitchen
3. living room
4. dining room
5. outdoor room
6. master bedroom
7. powder room
8. ensuite bath
9. guest bedroom
10. stairs to loft bedroom (shaded)



THE KITCHEN

From this vantage point, the Ikea do-it-yourself kitchen can seem small and apartment-like, but not when you stand at the island counter facing the open-concept living room and gaze beyond to the outdoor living room, through the forest, and right up to the lake – a view designed to inspire the most blasé cook to whip up hearty, woodsy dishes. The stairs head up to the elliptical loft bedroom

“THERE IS A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HAVING ACTUAL SPACE AND HAVING A SENSE OF SPACIOUSNESS”

winter. Greg loves to cook, and while peeling and chopping in the Ikea kitchen he and a friend installed, he can look dreamily across the lengths of the indoor and outdoor living rooms and down the tree-covered slope to the lake. He says he can forget he has ever encountered honking horns and traffic jams. And he can revel in the knowledge that he will never have to buy a lawn mower for these six acres. The vegetation cleared almost two years ago for construction is being left to creep back toward the 1,200-square-foot house, to grow and to multiply as nature intended.

It turns out that there is — horror of horrors — a television hidden somewhere in the cottage. “But it’s only for movies,” Anne insists, embarrassed, as if she had just confessed to smoking opium. The existence of the television certainly shocked Anne and Greg’s daughter Madeleine, a fine arts student at Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick. All three members of the family have an artistic bent. All were intimately involved in planning this house, and all were united in the goal of creating a temple

of peace. Turning on an American sitcom in this environment would be akin to cranking up some heavy-metal music in a vow-of-silence convent.

To the Canada geese flying overhead on this particular autumn day, the Maheux-Hill home looks like two rectangular boxes of unequal size. The larger is 15 by 52 feet, including a 20-foot-long outdoor living room, while the smaller is 15 by 34 feet. These two boxes are placed, like the overhead geese, in a V shape with the wider, open ends of the V pointed south toward the water. The other ends of the two “bars” or “volumes,” as architecture professor Paul Kariouk calls his creations, do not quite meet. Instead, they are joined by a third element — an airy entranceway to the house that rises a half-storey above the two legs of the V to form an elliptical loft.

The loft has a curved floor that slowly rises to meet the downward curve of the ceiling. It is best not to drink too much wine at dinner if you plan to mount the industrial-looking custom-made metal

stairway leading to the loft and then attempt to negotiate the curves. Anyway, the loft is Madeleine’s private territory. She plans to paint a mural on the east wall, although it will be a challenge to create anything that can compete with the view of the lake and forest seen through the loft window from the sparsely furnished room. (A customized bed, to accommodate the curves, is planned.)

The larger east bar is deemed public space. This is essentially one open-concept room containing the kitchen, living room, and dining area. The south wall of the zone opens up to an outdoor living room. This outside room is covered by a roof, floored with cement, and enclosed on three sides by ceiling-to-floor screen sheets — nearly invisible curtains that frustrate the mosquitoes. “That’s where I spend my time,” says Anne, pointing to a chaise lounge that, like all the furniture in the outdoor room, faces the water. And if the weather gets chilly, Anne simply snuggles under a blanket. Every moment in this outdoor room is precious.

That second bar — let’s call it the west wing — contains a master bedroom, a guest bedroom, a powder room, and a full bath. The separation from the public space means that anyone who seeks quiet and solitude can slip off to this wing to meditate or read in peace.

THE DINING AREA

The elliptical customized dining room table comfortably seats four and is situated at the far end of the indoor living room, right beside the glass doors that open onto the outdoor living room, offering the illusion of year-round al fresco dining, with the fireplace, handily nearby, to add some coziness





THE LOFT BEDROOM

This womb-like room over the retreat's entranceway – think of it as a giant seed pod or space capsule ready for blast-off – belongs to the couple's daughter Madeleine. It offers spectacular views of the forest and lake; privacy from Mom and Dad; and a unique, comfy environment for a creative mind to ponder all the mysteries of the universe

The master bedroom contains a bed and little else. Even a cloistered monk would find the room plain. “We hate clutter,” Anne declares. That's why the art collection largely remains at home in Ottawa, while the country retreat gets only a few framed photographs, quiet prints, and Inuit textiles for decoration. The bed faces a large window overlooking the lake. There is no need for curtains or blinds, there being no close neighbours to snoop.

The guest bedroom contains two single beds pushed together in an L shape. Actually, the base of each bed is an ordinary solid door with four small metal legs attached and a mattress on top. “It was Paul's idea,” says Anne. Paul Kariouk has apparently built beds like this for his own home. It is an ingenious — and inexpensive — arrangement. The two beds can be aligned to become a double bed, two twin beds, or remain in the L shape to create a comfy day bed. And, Greg notes, the L-shaped arrangement ensures there is enough open floor space to practise yoga.

The design of the cottage was a collaborative effort between the owners and Kariouk, the chief architect. The most difficult part, says Kariouk, was finding a way to join the public and private zones but to keep them as two distinct parts. “We must have made more than a dozen model iterations of just that middle section,” he says. Finally, he and the staff at his design practice settled on the airy entranceway with the elliptical loft on high.

Although relatively small, the house seems spacious. This is because of the 10-foot-high ceilings in the public zone and because the indoor living room extends seamlessly to the outdoor room. “There is a world of difference between having actual space and having a sense of spaciousness,” Kariouk explains. “Extra space costs money. A sense of spaciousness is not about cost, per se, but about a careful choreography of very efficient parts.”

In the fall of 2010, when Kariouk's own home was under construction, Anne and Greg offered him their cottage for two months. “It was such a magical time to be able to be in a place that I designed and tailored for others and yet feel so comfortable there myself,” he says. “It was also, of course, a beautiful ending to our professional relationship. Construction is a very taxing endeavour, with all sorts of heartache along the way, and to have concluded the project with Anne and Greg, and to have become friends close enough to have them lend me their place for all that time was a wonderful feeling.”

The construction of the cottage was, indeed, a complicated story that took more than four years to complete. It involved a change of contractors, redesigns, financial issues, and even a robbery. But the family persevered. They knew that serenity eventually awaited them just 45 minutes, but a million miles, from Ottawa. **END**

OUR FAVOURITE THINGS

ANNE MAHEUX AND GREG HILL



HARDIE PANELS

The terracotta-coloured Hardie panels on the outside of the house have slightly curved, reed-like shapes cut into them with a water saw. The cut-outs give the panels an organic sensibility that references the plants in the forest surrounding the house. The panels also reveal instantly that the inhabitants of the cottage have a definite artistic bent.



THE DINING ROOM TABLE

Paul Kariouk designed an elliptical-shaped wooden dining table that can seat up to six and that references the elliptical shape of the roof over the entranceway of the house. He also designed two elongated metal sconces in the entranceway that, like the metal base of the dining room table, are a rust colour that harmonizes with the steel plates on the ceiling and fireplace. These touches reflect the close personal relationship that developed between the designer and the homeowners.

THE LOFT
The elliptical loft above the entranceway is the private domain of the owners' daughter. The curved floor rises to meet the curved ceiling. It's a bit like being in a space capsule with a spectacular view of the lake below. An overhead fan and opened windows ensure that cooling breezes from the lake flow through the small space.



THE OUTDOOR ROOM

The outdoor living room, which extends beyond the indoor living room, is the family's most treasured space. The room has a roof and a cement floor with hanging screens to serve as walls and to keep out bugs. The view of the lake and forest from this room is sheer heaven. The owners use this as a sleeping porch in the summer.