

A better bungalow

A radical redesign brings a new fluidity and floor-plan clarity to a low-slung Peterborough home



DAVE LEBLANC
THE ARCHITOURIST
daveleblanc@globeandmail.com

While architects generally live by the “don’t repeat yourself” rule – Mies van der Rohe notwithstanding – one can, occasionally, persuade them to pay tribute to a design.

In early 2009, Molly’s Cabin, the sublime, Pointe-au-Baril area, rock-hugging, 1,000-square-foot cottage by Agathom Co. was making the media rounds. A Modernist stunner by the husband-and-wife team of Adam Thom and Katja Aga Sachse Thom, the dipping-roof and timber-clad interior graced these very pages, and those of international magazines.

And that’s when the Brown family of Peterborough – Kathryn Moore the dentist, Siemens senior manager Robert Brown and college-ready Alex and Ian – were introduced to the Thom family. In time, the Browns would allow the Thoms to pull a Fred Astaire and dip their roof, too, along with a whole lot of other smooth architectural moves.

But that’s getting ahead of our story.

First, Agathom had to assess the big, beefy 1954 bungalow the family had purchased in 1992. Almost immediately after the Brown’s purchase of the west-end Peterborough home, they had a few walls removed to open up the space (as modern families are wont to do); this was followed by a big master bedroom addition and the enclosure of the carport by the late-1990s. They’d also added a projecting, gabled vestibule into the front yard, and a lovely, frog-and-algae-filled pond (built by Mr. Brown) into the backyard. Despite all of this, something still didn’t seem right.

“There were so many hallways throughout the plan,” Mrs. Thom says of her first visit.

The task, then, was to introduce some logic to the floor plan and, more importantly, develop a much stronger bond to that lovely pond (like most non-California 1950s homes, the big windows face the public street, not the private back). But Agathom, being an objective outsider, began to speak a radical architectural language, suggesting removal of that vestibule, a big fireplace under a popped-up, dramatically sloping roof, and a window-wall to welcome in the delights of the backyard.

Thankfully, Ms. Moore says, she understood intuition at work: “Some other [architects] we talked to [before Agathom] wanted a lot more of what we wanted and where we wanted it, all that kind of thing.” Agathom, she continues, “just seemed to know” what was needed to clarify and connect.

Today, the trimmer entryway is a thing of beauty. Still plenty big enough, a visitor enters at the side (rather than the front) and spies a wall of shimmering Anigre cabinets by the master cabinetmakers at Toronto’s Gibson Greenwood. Next, the eye is directed to the new, Spanish cedar-trimmed wall of windows. But this window-wall defies the original line of the house just a little, as it pushes into the yard a few feet at the far end: “We feel that this angle helps pull you in,” explains Mrs. Thom, her Danish accent still noticeable.

Oh, it pulls ... like a magnet. So much so that visitors quicken their pace past the lovely, yet low-ceilinged living room to get under the soaring, sloping post-and-beam ceiling of the new dining room. Twenty-two feet at its highest point, the roof then dancier-dips, Molly’s Cabin-style, to just five feet at the far corner of the room. And, no matter where one stands, the views are of the backyard’s wild-yet-curved greenery and that brooding, burbling pond. Surely the massive new double-sided Rumford fireplace – which “creates the anchor and makes the otherwise open plan into defined spaces,” says Mrs. Thom – was enrobed in sparkling Venetian plaster just so it wouldn’t go unnoticed.

Creation of the window-wall overlooking the pond necessitated a swap with the kitchen, which took some convincing, since even though it had but one pokey window, family chef Robert had grown accustomed to the close-up view. The new kitchen, Mr. Brown says, “works surprisingly well ... and the cabinet work is unbelievable.”



“There’s more than one way to move through the house now.”

Katja Aga Sachse Thom



What’s also unbelievable is what happened to the home’s old fireplace. Now located in the new kitchen area, all agreed it was time Mr. Brown had a wood-burning pizza oven to extend his culinary skills even further. Indeed, his pizzas are so delicious, it’s likely new Peterborough pizzerias will keep a distance of several kilometres.

Of course, Agathom’s architectural influence went beyond the vestibule, kitchen and dining room. A staircase to the basement was relocated and crowned with a lovely wall complete with

arrowslits to allow light to penetrate deeply. “We enjoy circulation, and trying to celebrate it without making hallways,” Mrs. Thom says.

In the master bedroom, the architects enlarged the walk-in closet, had Gibson Greenwood create a stunning headboard, and gave the master bath a makeover, too. A sliding door takes the Browns out to the pond from here: “There’s more than one way to move through the house now,” Mrs. Thom says.

Yes, there is fluidity, floor-plan clarity, and, well, a lot more dra-

The husband-and-wife team of Adam Thom and Katja Aga Sachse Thom behind Agathom Co. introduced logic to the floor plan of the Peterborough home of Kathryn Moore and Robert Brown.

ma and interest. But just as the non-showy Browns requested, 99 per cent of the architectural interventions are hidden from street view (conveniently helped by the wide 1950s chimney). Visual lightness has been achieved via gobs of natural light and the natural materials palette, and also by new furniture selected by Mrs. Thom from Mjölck. There is so much cottage-like cross-ventilation now, the Browns decided against installing air conditioning.

It’s kind of like a little piece of Pointe-au-Baril in Peterborough.