

FLOWING

By Will Jones

The River House AgaThom Co

Photography by Michael Awad



Located where suburban sprawl melts into the Credit River Valley and rural tranquillity, this startlingly Modern house is a radical yet logical addition to the very traditional neighbourhood of Brampton, in Ontario, Canada.

Designed by architect AgaThom Co, the two-bedroom, 2,500sq ft home is triangular in plan – a shape developed in response to zoning restrictions presented by various boundary lines and strict conservation limits to the buildable area of the house, given that a small creek cuts through the site.

“The creek’s high-water setback and the other boundary line setbacks offered us only a small triangular building footprint pushed to an extreme corner of the otherwise large lot,” explains partner Katja Aga Sachse Thom. “But these very constraints helped form the layout of the house.”

While the home’s location is dictated by its immediate environment, its Modernist aesthetic is a triumph of historical research over planning dogma. Regulations stipulated a ‘historic design requirement to fit within the existing village context’. The architect addressed this by taking cues from a derelict 19th-century wool mill, around

which the original village had grown. The mill’s stone-and-board-formed cast concrete walls, flat roof, simple blocky volumes and tall chimney stacks were the perfect inspiration for AgaThom.

“By drawing on the material richness as well as the massing quality of the mill, we were able to generate a design that both answered the client’s request for a modern home as well as satisfied the local building officials,” says the architect.

Cast in-situ concrete walls and towers constitute the structural heart of the house. From the road, the building appears dense, almost fortress-like. Its bare concrete and stucco walls form a barrier against suburbia. However, the facade that looks out onto the valley is treated in a much lighter manner. Walls of timber frame, clad in local cedar boards of the same width as those used for the concrete formwork, are punctuated by large glazed elements, providing views out ‘into nature’.

These views play a large part in the layout of the internal spaces. “We want visitors to be pulled into the house by the landscape,” enthuses Thom. “The double-height windows can be glimpsed almost as soon as you step through the front door.”



The design of the main living spaces located on the ground floor is remarkably intricate, courtesy of both the triangular plan and the sloping site, which the architect has used to his advantage. No less than four levels are traversed as occupants move between the front entrance, reception, study area and open-concept kitchen/living room. There is a processional quality that leads to the lowest space – the living room – and the largest views of the valley.

Aga Sachse Thom expounds: "Great care has been taken to eliminate the presence of neighbours by framing views to the natural surroundings only. From inside, the client will feel that he is alone in the woods and not on the edge of a sprawling suburbia."

The textural qualities of the interior concrete walls could be viewed as harsh. However, they are counterbalanced by the warmth of the polished wood surfaces; both floors and cabinetry. In the kitchen, a dark slate floor and CaesarStone countertop pick up the shades of the concrete. And, due to the stepped nature of the interior, the countertop is actually on the same level as the threshold of the concrete front door: the two are aligned, separated by only a glass panel.

While the concrete aesthetic was something requested by the client, it also offers environmental benefits: its inherent thermal stability reduces the heating and cooling requirements, and, because three sides of the building are clad in a cedar board rain screen, the space between concrete and boards provides ventilation to lessen heat absorbed by the concrete in the summer. The cedar boards will weather to a silver/grey naturally, without the need for any preservative or stain.

Additionally, from an environmental perspective, a green roof covers much of the single-storey building element; underfloor heating has been installed; and, due to the high water table, the foundations are lined with double drains to gather in-ground water and discharge it into the creek using gravity alone, eliminating the need for continuous mechanical pumping, as the neighbours employ.

The resulting house is an environment-conscious Modernist's joy that revels in its materiality, both to conform to tradition and to break free from suburban standards. If the thought and ingenuity put into this design were lavished on every provincial home, many more design-savvy urbanites would be seduced by the suburban dream.

