



Built by RND

A COURTYARD HOUSE

By Rhys Phillips

Photography by Ewald Richter



At first glance, a recent multiple award-winning house designed by architect Chris Simmonds presents a conventional albeit elegantly proportioned and finely detailed profile to the street. Nestled along the Rideau River behind a carefully preserved mature maple in a finely landscaped garden, its pedigree is clearly rooted in the Arts and Craft tradition.

The street facade is broken into animated forms composed of solid, cast-stone walls juxtaposed by wood framed windows. All this is topped by a powerful series of shingled roofs broken by a variety of gables. From the lower river bank side, a massive stone foundation supports a two storey, cottage-like pavilion, its gabled roof seeming to float above a continuous band of windows.

Simmonds makes no apology for the house's recognizable form. The pitched roof, he explains, is a traditional sheltering image that represents the strength, form and integrity of the

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house. At the same time, he believes that to respect materials, "the weight and texture of a piece of stone, the grain and colour of a piece of wood or the brightness and strength of shiny steel," means that through craftsmanship each material must be allowed to express its beauty in a truthful, and even playful manner. As a result, he has employed the structurally expressive and earthy forms of the Japanese influenced-California craftsman movement of the early 20th century. In other words, he states, "I look for classic and enduring archetypal forms - but not clones of historic styles. The forms are then detailed and spatially arranged in a modern way."

Courtyard House Yields an Unusual Plan

From the street, Courtyard House is deceptive. Once through the front entrance, it is immediately clear the house is no typical two storey box. Instead, its plan (minus the garage) is revealed as a squared "C", wrapped around an ample center courtyard.



The open south side of this terrace is defined by a dense screen of newly planted spruce, oak, and cedar.

From the entrance vestibule, this sheltered garden is immediately revealed straight ahead while a flight of stairs on the left leads up to a generous artist's studio. A turn to the right starts a journey along a black slate path around the inner courtyard - garden to one side and, a guest bedroom, library, and ascending stairs on the outer side.

Each of these interior spaces has its own unique character. Both the guest room and the library have direct access to their own private "pocket" garden. The latter is separated from the corridor by an exquisitely crafted, free standing fiddlehead or birds-eye maple cabinet set into a glass wall. An equally fine crafted fireplace and bookcase on the Library's west side is expressed into the stairwell as a curved wall which works with the floating, open risers of the stairs and glass balustrades to create a sense of upward, spiraling space.

At this point, the house opens out into a cluster arrangement of primary living spaces that completes the interior pathway. First, on the left, a breakfast nook looks out both onto the courtyard and into the lower living room. To the right is a kitchen designed for two cooks to work at once.

Fanning out two steps below these spaces are the living room and dining area, separated by a sculpted fireplace and with generous views of both the courtyard and the river.

The clients, one of whom is an artist, are both avid cooks prone to holding informal family gatherings in all seasons. They wanted guests to remain interconnected even as they broke into the inevitable conversation clusters. At the same time the dual chefs wanted to be able to partake in the conversations happening around them.

Thus the custom kitchen, richly designed with cherry cupboards, granite counters, tumbled marble mosaic back splashes, and eucalyptus veneer, is the central organizing space in this vital section of the house. "It is a couple of steps up from the dining and living room," Simmonds explains, "so that the chefs can see into those spaces, as well as beyond to the outside landscape. However, guests can seldom see into the messy cooking surfaces."

The success of Courtyard house, however, goes beyond deft functional arrangements and attractive detailing. There emerges



an intuitive relationship between building and environment that involves a felt sense of movement and energy, resolved into a lively balance. And, this is exactly what Simmonds seeks in his residential work.

Landscape and the Garden

Simmonds (47), is best known for his work with Linda Chapman on the much admired Mountain Equipment Co-op store in Westboro. He was born in Chester, England just south of Manchester. As a child he often visited stately homes and gardens, very pastoral landscapes stripped of the ruggedness of the original landscape. "This," he relates, "was my first impression of landscape as well as townscapes and buildings."

Suburban Toronto was a shock. "I felt like I was in a stretched out and sterile desert because of the scale. I found it overpowering." But northern camping trips had a more profound and positive impact. "Being on the Canadian Shield, hiking and canoeing on the rivers and lakes, I picked up this very deep connection with the Canadian wilderness and I have maintained that sense."

The experience of humanely scaled English landscape

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followed by the power of the Canadian wilderness intensified an early fascination for gardens. "I remember as a five years old," Simmonds says with a laugh, "announcing to my parents that we should build a rock garden to replace a dead tree in our yard."

While attending Waterloo University he did a stint in a landscape architect's office alongside Juergen Partridge, now an accomplished landscape architect. The two have maintained a close friendship and a strong working relationship. This included an influential year's sabbatical from architecture school to work for Partridge's landscaping company.

Initially a strong proponent of organic design along the lines of Douglas Cardinal's work (Museum of Civilization), Simmonds discovered how to arrange rectilinear shapes together and create the feeling of flowing energy. "Even if you were not building curved shapes, you could imply movement and the sense of flow and energy." This important breakthrough is clearly present in the Courtyard House.

Spirituality of Form

Simmonds' work is also influenced by a conscious spirituality. He relates, "while in India, stumbling out of a particularly intense "darshan," or learning session with a teaching master and into a garden. "I experienced everything around me in the garden as just energy. I now like to think of space as energy rather than geometry; I like the space to flow, to move with gentle harmony rather than to rush helter-skelter or become stagnant and dull. I like to dissolve boundaries, to play with division between inside and outside."

This desire to communicate an essential unity of things has led to a tendency to combine house and landscape into a single whole that expresses a presence of subtle energy. "The building helps shape the garden and it also defines the exterior space. The garden spaces and the rooms of the house are part of a larger continuum which expands, contracts, and changes with the seasons."

The Gentle Art of Feng Shui

Soon after starting his practice seven years ago, Simmonds spent some time at the Omega Center in New York studying Feng Shui. "Feng Shui," writes Nancy Hansen, "embodies a belief that there are subtle forces in our surroundings that can impact upon our lives. It provides a framework for understanding the secrets of how energy moves in our surroundings and how the landscape, the style of our buildings and their interiors affect us at a subtle level."

For Simmonds, this means a house is supported by the natural form of the land and must make clear gestures "to enhance and enjoy its relationship with the nurturing and sustaining energies that nature provides." He goes on to describe a visit to the Chinese garden in Montreal's Botanical Gardens. There, you walk through a portal but there is no clear path ahead. Instead, you must turn around; you are forced to make a circular observation of the space you are in. Then, you move through the space, but not in a linear way, to the next portal. "This movement of both the body and the eyes is the energy that is so important to Feng Shui theory," he outlines. "So your participation in the environment is through this circular and spiral like movement."

Simmonds has taken this same concept of the Feng Shui guided movement and has applied it in his design. In the Courtyard House, arrival is through a garden along a non-linear path that creates a separation between the public street and the private residential realm. There is first a pergola with a slotted pyramid roof. This strong focal point or "portal" turns you along a path



and across a bridge over a dry stream bed that constitutes a boundary. Again, at the front entrance porch you are invited to pause and look back into the garden towards rocks and plants, which are directed at the front door as if feeding the energy of the landscape back into the entranceway.

Having proceeded into the entrance, you are immediately presented with the courtyard garden. "You must first pause at this unexpected view," he continues, "then turn right proceeding around the courtyard, then left, rotating around the guest room and the library and past the vertical spiraling stairs to arrive at the main living space."

Here one pauses again at the raised kitchen that looks out across the open living room and dining room through the abundant glazing to the garden and river side. "This movement is almost as if one is doing Tai Chi, a martial art that focuses on the gentle exercising of the body through choreographed, slow rotations of the body to re-balance its vital energy flows.

As you pass outside the house, there is again a series of movement and pauses as you descend, either through the different levels of decks from the dining room exit or from the courtyard itself which curves down to the lower garden and swimming pool level.

Function plus Intuition

Simmonds approaches a house project in two ways. First is the programming side starting with a written functional program. Even this is a creative process because he uses this exercise to challenge the client's creative notions about what sort of spaces they want.

The second approach relies on an intuitive experience of the site. "First, I load up all the practical data and information because the moment I step on the site and start rooting around

I begin to sense its energy, then images and feelings start to flow. I work from an intuitive design process and I usually perceive quickly the arrangement of the rooms in terms of their relationship to the site."

A piece of land, he continues, "talks to me at a subtle level. I sense feelings of joy, repose, or expansion at different places so that I know instinctively how to respond to the context." Thus a house is never an independent object but a set of relationships. It is a container of subtle movements or experiences of energy. "When I am designing a house for people, I am thinking very much about the connection, not just to the objects in the house or its functions, but how you move through the structure."

For Courtyard House, he walked across the gently sloping property with its huge mature maple tree and the plan came rapidly into his mind. "I immediately sketched a plan and the clients responded, "We like it."

With a little Help

Simmonds received assistance from 2H Designs, the well-known Ottawa partnership of Danielle Hannah and Ernst Huppel. In addition to advising on colours, materials, and lighting, 2H contributed the contemporary furniture that works well with the house's combination of intimate rooms and open, interconnected spaces.

Courtyard House, whether or not one accepts its spiritual intent, is well-appreciated beyond its owners. Simmonds not only picked up three 1st place awards (2002) from the Ottawa Home Builders Association, his house also snared the Most Outstanding House over 2,200 sq. ft. Award (2002) from the Ontario Home Builders Association. Now that is good Feng Shui. ♦

