

# Globe Real Estate

## ARCHITECTURE

A once-modest, one-storey worker's cottage in Hamilton – now part hippie and part high-modern – shines with an artistic flair that's been busting out all over "the Hammer" in recent years Page 2 ➤

## GRANOLA-MODERNE



The courtyard at the Hamilton home of Bill Curran and Maryanne Scime. An outdoor shower is visible at far left. THIER + CURRAN ARCHITECTS INC.



## ARCHITECTURE



From left, the home at dusk; the poured concrete, two-sided fireplace in the living room, and the outdoor shower and fire pit. THIER + CURRAN ARCHITECTS INC.

## House of contrasts

Architect Bill Curran and his wife, Maryanne Scime, pick up a bargain fixer-upper in Hamilton, gut the one-time rooming house and create a home with a mash-up of styles – one part modern, one part cottage



**DAVE LeBLANC**  
THE ARCHITOURIST  
daveleblanc@globeandmail.com

An outdoor shower beside an indoor shower; a soft headboard of pine boughs in the bedroom; a hard steel beam spanning the living room; a bathtub that's part terrarium, part brutalist concrete sculpture; an exterior as futuristic as *Star Trek* – yet glimpses of the 130-year-old cottage remain; a tiny lot, yet an expansive courtyard plan.

Le Corbusier could live here, Carlo Scarpa or any of the high modernist priests of old. But so, too, could an earthy, 21st-century hippie.

That's because this is a house of juxtapositions, of contrasts. In the once mostly blue-collar city of Hamilton, this once-modest, one-storey worker's cottage on Macauley Street West now shines with the kind of artistic flair that's been busting out all over "the Hammer" in recent years. And it does it all in less than 1,400 square feet.

"In Toronto, I would have had a 600-square-foot condo if I'd have been lucky," says Bill Curran, who designed this home for himself and his wife, Maryanne Scime.

While Mr. Curran is a modernist, he's not the high priest kind, and he's certainly not a hippie. Rather, this partner in Thier + Curran Architects Inc. is a 47-year-old hometown boy who, after working in Toronto and that other great steel town, Pittsburgh, bought a dilapidated "hellhole" in Hamilton's gritty North End for the bargain price of \$120,000 with the idea of building new.

"We figured we bought a lot with a foundation and a sewer pipe and no development charges," he says, "but once we started gutting it, we found that the old cottage had some really nice bones [and] nice proportions from the street."

So, instead, he and his wife went the sow's-ear-to-silk-purse route. After owning the suspected illegal rooming house for a full year, they gutted it in 2006 and removed a small 1950s addition at the rear. By May of that year, a contractor was tackling the



Above, a steel beam spans the living room. Above right, the bathtub with a cactus planter insert.

heavy renovations and, by September, they'd moved in.

For the past two years, they've been working on "finishing touches." Last spring, for instance, the couple transformed the "sea of mud" left by the contractors into some seriously cool landscaping, and, just weeks ago, sliding glass doors from C-living in Don Mills were installed to turn den into guest room.

But about those contrasts: They start at the front door. Sure, it's located where it would have been on the original cottage – smack dab in the middle with a transom over top – but it's a huge pivoting affair punctuated by piercing blue space-age LED lights.

Over the threshold and inside the foyer, what impresses most is how that massive steel beam (which traces a line

where the old, original cottage ended) and the hefty, poured-on-site concrete fireplace in the living room don't choke the space, but rather seem light and airy. The beam is serrated and seems to hover at one point because of a ventilation tower cut around it (more on this in a minute), and the concrete hearth angles back so as to float above the floor.

"Maybe it's because I grew



**I always wanted a steel beam in my house and I always wanted a chunk of concrete.**

Bill Curran

up in Hamilton," Mr. Curran says, "but I have a real affection for exposed steel and the things you can do to sculpt it like they did on bridges and airplanes. I always wanted a steel beam in my house and I always wanted a chunk of concrete – I guess every young modernist architect does."

Young modernists love glass, too, and this house has sunlight-gulping gobs of it. Enormous living room windows add to the home's transparency and the many smaller, corner windows break the box, literally, by dissolving hard interior lines.

Also effective is the long, custom kitchen island that pulls the eye horizontally along the length of the home to the corridor-bathroom (which leads to the master bedroom at the rear) and the vertical ventilation tower that sends light down into the middle of the home via remote-controlled windows. This tower also acts as a "heat chimney" in summer.

The bathroom-as-corridor configuration was chosen to facilitate Mr. Curran's "fixation" on having a courtyard house. By arranging it as a narrow "walk-through" to the much wider master bedroom, the cradling C-shape necessary for a courtyard was achieved.

To solve the privacy problem, Mr. Curran added a small room with a Sloan 4000 waterless urinal and a toilet.

"If you love a woman, get

her a urinal," he jokes, "because the toilet seat is always down."

Born out of feelings of guilt that the hulking concrete tub required too much water to fill, an ingenious glass wall/rock-and-cactus planter was added, which also softens its hard look.

On the other side of the door beside the shower is the home's most interesting feature – the outdoor shower, which drains into the garden rather than the plumbing system.

Always envious of cottager friends, Mr. Curran had to convince his wife such a thing was a good idea in the city. "She thought I was crazy," he says, but not any more. "It's one of my favourite features in the whole house, actually, and I didn't realize I was going to love it so much," Ms. Scime admits.

"You get the odd cold day where you get a gust up through the deck boards," Mr. Curran continues, "but most of the time you're in this cocoon of steam and, at night with the stars, or at mid-afternoon with the sun beating down on you, it is so nice."

And speaking of nature, the bedroom headboard isn't really made of pine boughs. By placing a long window along the top of the bed where, coincidentally, the boughs dangle, the illusion is created. "When you look out you see right into the trees ... and you can see birds," the architect explains.

Embracing nature yet at ease with steel, concrete and glass, this house of contrasts is much like the hardscrabble North End of Hamilton itself, where smokestacks and slag heaps are only half the story. The other half – just minutes away by foot – tells of walking trails, marinas and endless possibilities.