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SYLVAN LIVING:

HOW A SUSTAINABLE HOME TAKES ADVANTAGE OF ITS EXCEPTIONAL RAVINE SITE, EXEMPLIFYING A LIGHT-TOUCH APPROACH, DUBBED "VIALE SUSTAINABILITY" TO GIVING THIS HOME ANOTHER 100-YEARS LEASE ON LIFE.

R E V E L A T E U R S T U D I O

Building anything in a city like Toronto is well-known to be a challenge. The cost of land, regulatory environment and inflated construction budgets as well as timelines, makes delivering a quality product on time and on budget a tall order.

Throw into the mix a whole list of additional regulatory requirements, the desire on the client's part to build a home that is both gentle on the environment and reflective of their taste and personality, all of that on a very unique site abutting protected parkland and you have the recipe for a complex, challenging project that would make lesser architects run for the ravines.

Not Dewson Architects, a firm very much used to complex, challenging projects with numerous stakeholders and equally numerous regulatory requirements. After renovating multiple centenarian, heritage-protected homes in Rosedale and building a new house on a 100-year floodplain in Etobicoke, the latter designed to be both viably sustainable and last for generations, they were up to the challenge of renovating this mid-century, homely split-level in North York, near Bathurst and Sheppard.



“A truly sustainable project takes into account the environment, the stakeholders needs and wants and the financial constraints. We get things built by finding the sweet spot in all three aspects”.

- Bill Dewson



The architects' focus on this project was fourfold:

1. Renovate a pedestrian, nondescript home that blatantly failed to capitalize on its exceptional site bordering a ravine, into a comfortable and luxurious home connected to nature.
2. Fulfill all regulatory requirements, including satisfying the TRCA (Toronto Regional Conservation Authority) which has jurisdiction over the site.
3. Make the renovated home as sustainable as possible while staying within the budget constraints.
4. Give the house another 100-year lease on life by designing a home that is meant to last.

Design-wise, the architects functionally flipped the program to de-emphasize the original design's orientation and connection to the street, and instead open the living spaces to the side yard, giving the interiors an unparalleled view and functional connection to the ravine landscape beyond the property lines.

All the principal living spaces were relocated on the main floor to take advantage of this connection to nature, while the master suite was designed as a small second-floor addition, giving the impression of living in a luxurious tree house, thanks to large floor-to-ceiling sliding

doors blurring the indoor-outdoor boundary. Lastly, the architects fought for the permission to add a rooftop terrace that expands the house's space outside in the summer, while taking in breathtaking views onto the surrounding landscape.

From a regulatory standpoint, the design was constrained by the requirement to build within the existing home's footprint and reuse the pre-existing foundation. This required extensive underpinning, shoring and slope stability work in order to ensure that the renovated home would last for another 100 years while keeping up with the code and zoning requirements, at the same time maximizing the healthy, yet limited budget.



The design team managed to fit a number of sustainable features, such as:

- Passive ventilation that allows for air-conditioning-less cooling on all but the hottest days.
- Building an airtight envelope to minimize cooling and heating loads. The home ended up having an ACH (air changes per hour) of less than 1, vs. the code-minimum of 2.5.
- Reusing as much of the foundation as possible to minimize cost and reduce the embodied energy of the project.
- Designing a high-performance envelope, with little to no thermal bridging, high insulation ratings and triple glazed windows that allow breathtaking views into the ravine while greatly reducing heating and cooling losses. These windows are covered with heavy roll-down blinds at night that further reduce losses.
- Turning the main orientation of the house from the street to the shaded side yard, increasing the connection to the outdoors and limiting solar gain on the southwest-facing facade.
- Using materials, such as the durable cement cladding that will require little maintenance and last for decades.

Dewson's approach to architecture is what they've dubbed "*viable sustainability*": looking beyond the strictly environmental performance of a building to consider all aspects of its impact, such as cultural (in the case of rejuvenating centenarian homes), financial (building

within the client's budget constraints), as stated by Bill Dewson:

"A truly sustainable project takes into account the environment, the stakeholders needs and wants and the financial constraints. We get things built by finding the sweet spot in all three aspects".

Their approach is akin to that of a chef: carefully measuring every input to make sure that the output is optimal and corresponds to their client's specifications, while adding the "je-ne-sais-quoi" that makes each project special.

This approach has yielded incredible results for Dewson and their numerous satisfied clients, for whom many of their buildings will last another 100 years, until such time that they are refurbished yet again by future generations, secure in the knowledge that it will happen owing to the quality of the architecture. ■



Dewson Architects are available for interviews, along with the other stakeholders upon request (builder and clients). All press inquiries to be directed to press@rvltr.studio.

Project specs:

- Year: 2021
- Location, Address: 49 Don River Blvd, Toronto, ON, Canada
- Size: 3,850 SF (357 SM)

Team info:

- Designer: [Dewson Architects](#)
- Structural Engineer: [Revive Structural Engineering](#)
- Contractor: [Fairside Homes](#)
- Photographer: ©2021 [RVLTR / A. Marthouret](#)

Add'l assets:

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About Dewson Architects:

Dewson Architects is a Toronto-based boutique firm dedicated to designing sustainable legacies: buildings that serve their clients for a longtime while minimizing their impact on the environment and maximizing their client's investment with creative solutions to complex specifications and requirements.