

At home with Detective Murdoch

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It's been said that marriage is about compromise. In *The Wedding*, Nicholas Sparks suggests it's about "doing something for the other person, even when you don't want to." While it is not the "spice of life," writes poet Phyllis McGinley, "it is solidity."

In other words, the resulting blandness is necessary for success. In architecture, however, compromise can produce a very spicy dish indeed.

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Yannick Bisson, known for his role as popular turn-of-the-twentieth-century detective William Murdoch on the CBC's *Murdoch Mysteries*, and his wife, Shantelle, have whipped up a two-and-a-half level home on a Toronto ravine cul-de-sac that manages to satisfy both partners despite "a lot of wrestling matches."

"Literally every piece of this house we had to compromise on," says Mrs. Bisson, explaining that while she prefers wood, texture and warmth, her husband could live quite happily in a place that's "very monochromatic and very cool." As a result, last February the couple and their three daughters moved into a home that's a study in contrasts – cool and warm, cozy and spacious, and tailored yet casual – yet nowhere do things look as if they are settled-on second choices.

"I think it turned out," she agrees. "We're both very, very comfortable and happy in the house, and the kids love it – they think they've won the lottery."

It wasn't so much luck as assembly of the right team. Gordon Ridgely Architects and Associates, builder Rambod Nasrin of Upside Development, Eric McClelland of Fleur-des-lis Interior Design and Mr. Bisson himself, who occasionally rolled up his sleeves to pitch in, combined to create a modernist home that transcends the typical brick-and-glass box.

While a casual glance might dismiss the Bisson residence as a seen-it-all-before kind of place, the educated eye (like the fictional Mr. Murdoch's) spots much more. For instance, where other builders might slap

stucco on the sides and rear of the home to save money, here the sexy black brick and cedar wrap all sides: “There’s no front or back here, the whole house is one,” says Mr. Nasrin, the builder. The thick roof-line is trimmed in crisp, commercial-grade metal. Also, welded metal stairs showcase the same high quality workmanship – punctuated by shiny raw bolts – on both the exterior and interior; Mr. Nasrin says he and his “metal guy” worked on these for more than five months.

If the home does look familiar, perhaps it’s because you, too, drove down East York’s Barfield Avenue and spotted No. 11 (featured here in July, 2012) at some point during the past few years. That’s how Mr. Bisson, who was already working with Gordon Ridgely, discovered Upside Development: he saw the strikingly modern home under construction and walked inside. “I almost kicked him out,” laughs Mr. Nasrin. “I didn’t recognize him.”

Joining the team after the ball was rolling was daunting, says Mr. Nasrin, but his suggestions for revisions were soon part of the plan, such as moving the master bedroom from the rear of the main floor to a brand new, self-contained floor above, which allowed for a larger kitchen. Also, admits the builder, “a lot of the ideas came from Yannick himself – coming from the film industry he’s quite a perfectionist and a visionary.”

And although Mr. Bisson admits to flipping through the odd architecture magazine and admiring the work of his uncle, Quebec-based architect Claude Bisson, he draws from a much deeper well: “There’ve been many dry spells as an actor,” he says with a chuckle, “and I had to put food on the table, because we had kids young, and I learned to build houses ... I got trained by a very experienced custom home-framer and he taught me a lot.”

“This is the Yannick signature,” says Mr. Nasrin, pointing to the raised hearth wrapping the home’s three-sided fireplace. Proof of Mr. Bisson’s abilities, the sculptural, hand-hewn beams were salvaged during a Murdoch shoot at a barn in Cambridge, then cut and fit into place by the actor.

“He was here seven days... I don’t think you’d get anyone else to do this good a job – it’s not easy to build with these old logs,” says Mr. Nasrin.

And speaking of old things, the placement of stairs, doors and windows all align with the principles of feng shui to continue the “good luck” the couple has enjoyed since moving into the original 1950s bungalow in March 2007; while they were renovating that house, says Mrs. Bisson, her husband successfully auditioned for the part of Detective Murdoch.

“So that was a big reason why we didn’t want to move,” she continues, “because all our friends are over in Rosedale and Forest Hill and they’re, like, ‘Why are you still over there?’”

The view of lush ravine while perched at the kitchen’s Scavolini waterfall counter (chosen for the company’s commitment to sustainability) may have something to do with it, too. Or the feeling of tranquility one experiences in the 800 sq. ft. master bedroom, complete with its own balcony (and while the untrained eye may not notice, that Mr. Nasrin has completely hidden all bulkheads contributes to this feeling). Maybe it’s the cozy family room in the walkout basement, or simply how the solid walnut baseboards live in harmony with the concrete floor, which came out much “warmer” than the couple could

have ever imagined.

Second choices? Hardly. “A marriage, in every aspect, is a compromise in the best sense of the word,” says Mr. Bisson, “and when it came to designing the house, it wasn’t Shantelle’s choice to do this style.

“There were a few times where she looked at me and said ‘Oh my Lord, Yan, this place is just absolutely beautiful, I love it.’”

Fans of Murdoch Mysteries take note: the new season begins Sept. 30 on CBC.