

## East York gets a lesson in modernism

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With the ongoing residential makeover the city has been enjoying for the past two decades, no neighbourhood is immune.

Take, for example, the formerly trapped-in-amber, postwar pocket of East York bounded by Broadview Avenue, O'Connor Drive and Coxwell and Mortimer Avenues. While the late-1940s/early-1950s one-storey, hipped-roof bungalow is still king, a drive up and down any street reveals a considerable number of second-storey “top ups.” In some cases, tear-downs have allowed for stone-and-stucco mini-McMansions to be hastily erected; indeed, enough of these “faux châteaux” can now be catalogued to suggest they are no longer a rarity here.

What is a rarity within these borders, however, are new builds done in a thoroughly modernist style.

“You walk into all of them, they’re all identical designs, same layouts,” says newbie developer Rambod Nasrin, 36, of the new builds. “So we came here and I said, ‘I want to create a new product.’ It was a bit of a risky venture because it hadn’t been experimented with, but we ended up getting great results.”

It’s hard to argue with his cheery boast, since a sold sign was slapped onto 11 Barfield Ave. after just one day on the market. And while it’s not the only two-storey home on the block – there are a few across the street, and Memorial Park Avenue to the south is lined with them – the flat roof, sexy black brick, generous windows and stainless-steel-trimmed cedar make this three-bedroom maverick seem like Arthur C. Clarke’s monolith has come to teach the neighbourhood a lesson.

In a way, it has, says its architect, Andrew Reeves: “It is an up-and-coming neighbourhood,” he offers. “There’s a lot of neat retail [stores] and restaurants going in, frankly, because it’s affordable, so you’re getting restaurateurs who can’t afford to be on Queen coming over and starting their first restaurant.

“So the question for us is: ‘Do you design for the neighbourhood in transition, or do you design for the one-storey house that’s next to you?’”

While Mr. Reeves has clearly gone with the former for Mr. Nasrin’s two-year-old company, Upside Development, that’s not a bad thing – at least as far as the neighbourhood is concerned. Many Barfield

residents walked over during construction to say much they liked the design and, says Mr. Nasrin, during the open house that inevitably followed, “probably a quarter” of the 200 people that visited were local contractors looking for ideas: “I had one guy pull up with a brick; he goes and puts it up against my brick trying to match it,” he says with a chuckle.

So why the love-in? Well, other than looking fresh in a formerly static neighbourhood, Mr. Nasrin, formerly sustainability manager at Tridel Corp., has made it Upside Development’s objective to build a premium product. Past the crisply tailored cedar-and-brick exterior suit, the interior is just as refined: wide-plank flooring in a lovely matte grey, an open staircase with glass walls, skylights to rain light down into all areas of the home (including the fully finished basement), and expert drywalling (with modern, there’s no crown moulding to hide mistakes) that includes a notched detail in places.

Even with items one would be forgiven for not noticing, there is an unexpected level of finish and customization: doors are eight feet tall; the “dead space” over the kitchen cabinets is replaced by a “live picture frame” clerestory window; there is a neat little niche for display-only firewood under the three-sided gas fireplace in the living/dining areas; in bathrooms, floating vanities and handsome tile-work abound; and tiles have even been laid under the stairs in a finished storage area.

“When we do a home, we do it from the front curb all the way to the back, upstairs to downstairs,” says Mr. Nasrin. “My audience is the same as somebody moving into an executive condo: They don’t want to come in here and have to finish their basement.”

It’s a level of detail that makes sense when building for an actual client, but for a speculative home in an untested neighbourhood? And other choices, such as removal of the ubiquitous (for this area) backyard garage for more usable outdoor space, why take the chance? For an architect who prides himself on “character-driven” homes, it can be difficult to design a spec home, since there aren’t instructions like “I like to sit on the floor” or “I like to garden,” says Mr. Reeves. “So you have to make up a fictitious buyer, which is a totally different design experience.” In this case, he and his three staff members sat down and created a narrative of walkability: “It’s not about the car,” he says.

Whether the purchasers of this home prefer feet, bicycles or automobiles is unknown. What is known, however, is that they saw enough of a future in East York to pay \$1.1-million to set up house. And if that seems expensive, look around, says Mr. Reeves: “It’s a premium house, but, at the same time, in its range I think with the assembly of finishes and materials it’d blow the doors off the other guys who are doing a \$1.2-million spec house.”