

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

See Brenda and James create their dream eco-home

By and large, modern architecture in Canada has viewed nature as an adversary. Buildings are hermetically sealed and interiors are “climate controlled.” Nature is something to be seen through a “picture window,” putting it in the same category as a Group of Seven painting. The vagaries of the outside are banished, so it’s possible to wear a T-shirt indoors at any time of the year.

This is not what Brenda and James Lolley wanted for their retirement home. As much as possible they wanted nature inside. It didn’t mean they wanted to eat breakfast in the midst of a swirling blizzard; it did mean they’d like to feel part of one, but not have to put on a parka when they got out of bed.

James is a retired engineer; Brenda, a medical doctor, is approaching retirement. “All day at work I deal with people’s problems,” she says, “with their bodies, with their lives.” What she wanted was a home that would be “restorative.”

In their new house north of Ganoque, she feels they’ve got it. “I



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sometimes forget if I’m inside or outside,” she says. “I tell people we are camping on a beautiful property with a really nice tent.”

The “tent” has 2,670 square feet of living space, plus an additional 1,100 square feet for a garage and workshop.

It climbs a rocky outcrop, so that the living space on the second floor nestles on top of the rock overlooking a large wetland.

It took James and Brenda three years to find the property. They didn’t want to be on a lake. Too much money and too many motorboats. Finally they happened upon 50 hectares surrounding a wetland.

“We saw the property,” says James. “We camped on it; we saw it change every day — the smells, the

sounds, the life, the feeling. It was very exciting. Then we bought it.”

They asked their daughter Christine and her partner Tom Knezic to design the house. Christine was finishing her master’s degree in architecture; Tom already had his master’s, and was working for an architectural firm in Toronto. They not only designed the house, they, along with James and Brenda, built it. And now, under the firm name of Solares Design Build Inc., Christine and Tom specialize in designing environmentally integrated homes.

Their first step was to ask James and Brenda to envisage in detail how they saw themselves spending a full day of their lives in the house five years down the road.

“I really needed to get to know (my parents),” says Christine. It was a comment that surprised me, until I realized that understanding parents as a daughter is different from understanding them as an architect. Then she and Tom spent time getting to know the land, hiking, tenting, discovering what the sun was like in the morning. The sounds. The smells.

“It was daunting,” says Christine. “It’s a big piece of land.”

Once it was decided where to build, the house was designed, says Christine, so that “the way it functions has everything to do with what’s outside” — and they succeeded. No matter where I was in the living space, the outside felt as if it were inside.

Their primary focus for energy efficiency was the building envelope. The walls are concrete with insulation on the outside, so the inside acts as a thermal mass, storing heat in winter and coolness in summer. Then there are what they call the bells and whistles: geothermal, in-floor heating; solar hot water heating; facing the building southward to allow passive solar gain.

What I didn’t expect was the great care taken to understand the psychological needs of Christine’s parents, and to understand the land. It was a very detailed process. But then, sustainability is all about process. In this case, it proved its worth.

View Cameron Smith’s columns at www.cameronsmith.ca