A house designed with the future in mind

Vancouver homeowners commission forward-looking build to accommodate them in their retirement years

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The staircase wraps around the glass-encased elevator and offers access to all three floors of the home. Its transparent quality integrates rather than dominates in the space. PHOTO BY ANDREW LATREILLE

A three-storey house perched on a steep incline doesn't bring to mind a residence suitable for life well beyond one's retirement years. Yet that's exactly the brief architect John Henshaw and his team received from the homeowners: design an accessible, low maintenance, energy-efficient home for their lofty Vancouver city-view property. Oh, and make it look esthetically pleasing.

The key to achieving this wish list was the melding of clever engineering and creative vision, resulting in a functional open-plan layout that reflects a timeless yet contemporary esthetic. It also involved installing two elevators.

"The garage is at the back property; we had to come down 24 steps ... down to the backyard level," explains John Henshaw, principal architect at John Henshaw Architect Inc (JHA). "We incorporated an elevator into the garage to come down from the garage onto the rear yard, which is then at the same level as the main floor. So, if you had a wheelchair, you could wheel yourself into the elevator down to the ground level and into the back door of the house.

"Inside the house, we developed a staircase that kind of wrapped around an internal elevator that connects all the floors together."

Both the staircase and the elevator are encased in glass, making them a striking design feature while eliminating any monolithic quality in the centre of the house.

Though building an accessible home on a steep lot offered design challenges, it also afforded the homeowners spectacular city views. PHOTO BY ANDREW LATREILLE

The staircase wraps around the glass-encased elevator. PHOTO BY ANDREW LATREILLE

“The elevator is transparent,” says Joy Chao, lead interior designer at JHA. “So it doesn’t look like a block.” Because the stairs wrap around it, it’s the most efficient use of space, she adds.

The 4,500-square-foot house features three bedrooms with ensuite bathrooms and a laundry on the top floor; the living room, kitchen, a separate prep kitchen and designated dining area are on the ground level with a den/workspace tucked around a corner on one side of the staircase to offer some privacy in the open floorplan.

The basement has a media room, gym, family room and guest bedroom and bathroom. A rooftop deck is the proverbial cherry on the house.

“The front wall of the house is basically floor-to-ceiling glass. It’s a window wall facing the view out towards the city,” Henshaw says. “So, it gets plenty and plenty of light. All the windows are kind of geared toward bringing light into every nook and cranny of the main floor.”

The natural light that infuses the living space is complemented by the light, neutral colour palette, which is warmed with strategic positioning of wood detailing, like the striking wood ceiling feature above the dining table, which visually unifies the front and back of the living space.

A slab of dramatic porcelain is a striking juxtaposition to the quiet luxury of the minimalist-style kitchen. PHOTO BY ANDREW LATREILLE

“That goes back to how we just don’t want to give them a white box,” Chao says. “The main floor is quite open. We felt like we needed a visual wow factor. Also, it was to hide a bit of a drop ceiling out of necessity to run the HVAC ductwork. We thought it would look almost too open without a visual centre.”

The wood ceiling installation was designed to create visual interest, add warmth and unify the open plan while concealing a drop ceiling that houses ducting for the HVAC system. PHOTO BY ANDREW LATREILLE

The flooring is engineered white oak throughout except the bathrooms floor tiles that mimic wood planks and are in the same white oak tone. The homeowners opted for laminate on the European-crafted kitchen cabinetry, which also mimics white oak, because of its low maintenance — easy to clean and it's antimicrobial. The countertop material is a resilient acrylic, which can be repolished if ever scratched, says Chao.

The dramatic focal point in the living room is a floor-to-ceiling creamy slab of white porcelain accented with earthy-hued veining. Chao kept to the neutral colour palette throughout the home by using texture to create visual interest, like the kitchen backsplash, which is a glass chevron pattern, and on the bathroom walls, the 3D swirly brush-stoke-like tiles create an arresting effect.

The colour palette of the home is a mix of creamy whites and light wood tones complemented with the intentional use of texture such as the bathroom wall tile or the chevron glass backsplash in the kitchen. PHOTO BY ANDREW LATREILLE

The rooftop deck's expansive city views are thanks to the steep incline on which the house is built. PHOTO BY ANDREW LATREILLE

Given that expansive windows were central to the home's design, it was also one of the areas where Henshaw boosted energy efficiency by installing triple-glazed windows with low-E coating. The exterior walls have three inches of insulation — double what standard homes usually have, says Henshaw. All the interior lights, including the decorative ceiling fixtures in the dining room and kitchen, are integrated LED.

“The exterior is all low maintenance materials — metal panels,” says Henshaw. “We had a special siding material … which is kind of like a heavy duty plastic laminate material. So there’s no painting … And any wood incorporated on the exterior was in locations where it wouldn’t take any weather.”

The front of the house is a wall of mostly floor-to-ceiling windows. PHOTO BY ANDREW LATREILLE

The homeowners, one of whom is now retired, were involved in the process to achieve their wish list of accessibility, low maintenance and energy efficiency incorporated in a stylish design, Chao says. Client collaboration is integral to JHA practice and the success of their projects.

“We work very closely with the client,’ she says. “We look at what they want, what they’re hoping to achieve, and then the whole process. We’re very involved through the entire design, even the construction process.”

The house was built by Niebuhr Construction over a 20-month period, which finished in the summer of 2019. It was one of the final projects for the builder, who is now retired.