

AWARD-WINNING

RETREAT IN CLEARVIEW

BY DAN O'REILLY ■ PHOTOS BY MIKE DAVIS





For Toronto residents Derek and Diana Ham, finding a photo on the Internet was the first step in the design and construction of their country getaway house which ultimately received a Niagara Escarpment Commission's Niagara Escarpment Achievement Award.

The Hams' summer retreat in the depth of winter. Hidden from the road, the house is sited to take full advantage of the view of Niagara Escarpment lands.



The open-concept kitchen at the centre of the house is glamorous and tidy with marble countertops, large copper and silver bowls, and the cabinetry-enclosed refrigerator. Wooden barn beams crown the ceiling of the whole gathering room.

“On the first day I walked the property for several hours until I found what I believed was the right location, part way down a hill.”

“**W**E WANTED a summer and weekend retreat, but didn't want to make the three- to-four hour drive to the Muskokas,” says Derek of their 2008 purchase of a Creemore-area farm property and the adjacent farmhouse lot which originally had been part of the farm until it was severed off by a previous owner.

For design ideas Derek conducted Google searches and found a photo of a Texas house. “It had won an award,”

he says. “But I couldn't find out much about it. When I saw it I knew that's what I wanted and showed my wife and we went with it.” They printed the image and consulted with Jamie Douglas, an associate with Young + Wright, now part of IBI Group Architects. This specialty practice within the global firm specializes in designing houses on the Niagara Escarpment.

Transforming the Ham's dreams into reality required designing, situating and building a house which could capitalize on the setting while

having a minimal impact on the Escarpment and therefore obtain all the Niagara Escarpment Commission and municipal approvals, says Douglas. As the former farm is bisected by a series of hills and valleys, finding the right site location was not easy.

“If we put the house too high on a hill, it would have had an impact [on the Escarpment] and if placed too low in the valleys, the views would be lost,” says Douglas, who visited the property three times before commencing

detailed design. “On the first day I walked the property for several hours until I found what I believed was the right location, part way down a hill. On the second visit I erected stakes on the site and marked the location on the survey.”

On the third visit he was accompanied by the Hams and their builder John Gordon of J.W. Gordon Construction. Douglas credits the Collingwood-based contractor with providing valuable advice on how storm water could be redirected away from the house.



▲ The view from the kitchen to the dining table, living area with fireplace, and beyond to the separate sunroom/family room.



◀ (Top Left) Owner Derek Ham at the gas fireplace which marks the end of the formal entrance to the house, and welcomes guests to the gathering room beyond.

◀ (Top Right) A glamorous side cart on wheels, displaying beautiful silver items, brings urban sophistication to the spacious gathering room.

As the Hams knew exactly what type of house they wanted, the design only took six months. Site plan approval from the NEC only took two months after a building application had been submitted.

Several factors contributed to the short approval process, says Douglas, including the location: setback from a north-south road, the east-facing house cannot be seen by passing motorists and it was designed and constructed so it would blend in with the surrounding landscape.

Harmony with the Environment

A key component in the objective to harmonize the house with the environment was the careful selection of building materials, most of which came from the Niagara Escarpment. Quarried Owen Sound stone was used for the exterior walls and a coach house/garage which is attached to the house via a glass corridor. Two porches, one facing east and the second on the west elevation, are supported with Douglas Fir columns, and in the main floor open-concept entertainment room, reclaimed barn beams decorate the ceiling.

Also “evoking the palette of the Escarpment” is the charcoal-tone seam metal roof which the architect suggests is reminiscent of the outcropping farm dwellings which once dotted the area.

Although there are two floors, the house is technically a one-and-half storey house because the second level was pushed into the roof space, lowering the height and minimizing its visual

impact. Another benefit was that all four bedrooms have cathedral ceilings.

Construction started in November 2009 and was completed a year later. But midway during construction a hurdle arose, although it had nothing to do with the house and one which was eventually turned into an opportunity.

Soil testing uncovered an extremely wet section along the route of the new driveway. One idea was to extend the original farm driveway on the severed lot to the new house. As the couple had planned to eventually sell the lot, this would have led to complications including negotiating a right-of-way from prospective purchasers. Ultimately, it was decided the severed lot should be legally conveyed back to the larger property, returning it to its original 100-acre lot size, says Douglas.

“This (proposal) was endorsed by the NEC because it reduced the amount of driveways and less traffic coming out on to the road and less overall development in the area,” he adds. Although the legal conveyance took about six months to complete, it did not impact the construction schedule, he says.

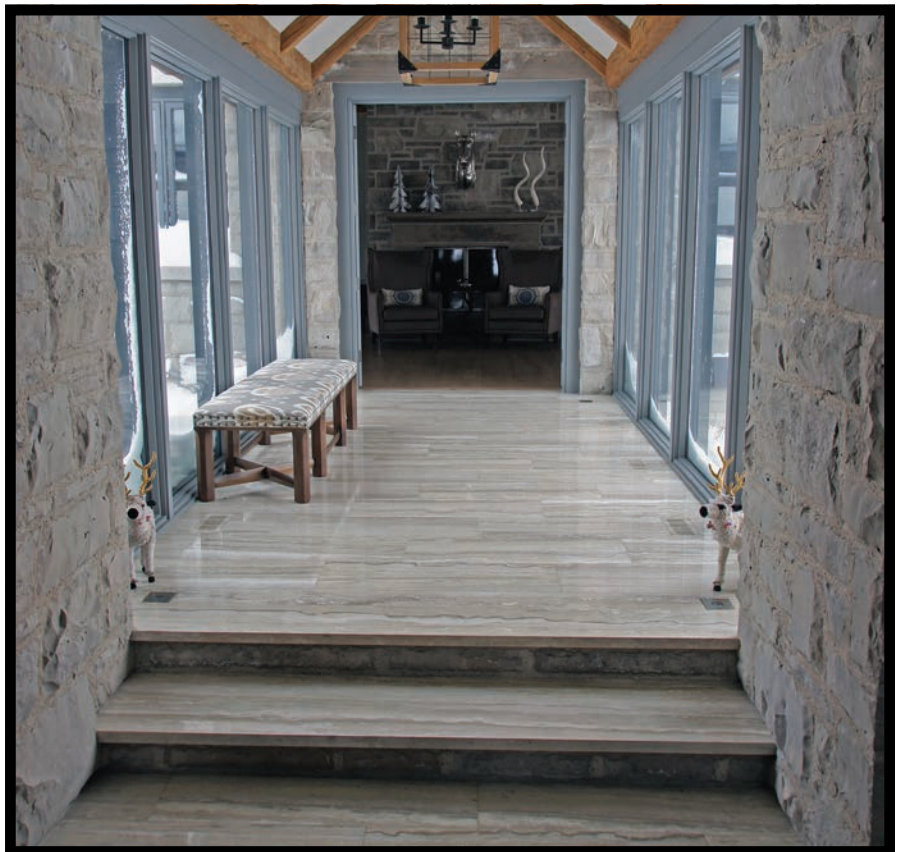
Niagara Escarpment Achievement Award

Factors such as the site development, the restoration of an existing barn, and the merging of the two separate parcels back to the original 100-acre lot size were the reasons the NEC awarded its 2012 Achievement Award to Douglas and the Hams, says NEC landscape architect Linda LaFlamme.

◀ The sunroom/family room has three walls of windows, giving views all around the house at the far end, including the poolhouse with bar and change rooms.



▲ The minimalist yet luxurious master bath is ensuite to the master bedroom.



▲ A discrete outside entrance to the house opens up to this glass-enclosed breezeway leading to the main living areas.



▲ The high-ceilinged, spacious master bedroom has a subdued colour palette.

Established in 1987, the award program recognizes individuals and groups for outstanding initiatives undertaken in the Niagara Escarpment Plan Area.

“We believe the Niagara Escarpment Achievement Award program has helped to increase awareness of the need to protect the Niagara Escarpment’s natural environment,” she says. Nominations can be made by the public, NEC commissioners or by NEC staff, which was the case with the Ham development, she adds.

There have been a total of 115 award winners since the program’s inception in 1987. Recipients have included architects, homeowners, community associations, schools, and volunteer organizations. In 2012, for example, Owen Sound’s West Hill Secondary School won an award for its multi-year student-driven cleanup of the West

Rocks Conservation Area, says LaFlamme. The awards have typically been presented every two years, but there were no winners in 2014 as the NEC is reviewing the program to make it more broad-based, she says.

“Winning the award was nice, but I think it meant more to the architect and the builder. I’m just the guy who picked the photo,” says Derek Ham. While declining to provide construction costs, he advises people who would like to live on the Escarpment “to buy rather than build because costs can escalate.” Derek is a stockbroker currently on sabbatical and Diana is a stay-at-home mother. The couple and their two sons spend many of their weekends and most of their summers at the house. **NEV**

Dan O’Reilly’s last feature for Niagara Escarpment Views was “Restoring the Old Caledon Ski Club Cabin,” Winter 2014–15.