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SPECIALIST: COURTYARD

DESIGN QUEST: SONGS OF SUMMER

HOME REVIEW

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Designed as a weekend home for a family of six, Compass House takes its name from the clients' desire to chart a new course as they transition from United Kingdom to Canada.



LEADING THE WAY

A compass is a device that helps you find your direction. Compass House, designed by the Toronto based architectural firm Superkül, was probably named so, to reflect two paths or directions; one the clients' transition from the UK to Canada, and secondly the architects' passionate commitment to sustainability principles in residential design.

Text By Ramya Srinivasan
Photographs Ben Rahn/A-Frame Studio
Courtesy V2com Newswire



A thicket of mesmerising apple trees provides windbreak and a sense of enclosure to this retreat.



The choice of low-maintenance construction materials such as cement-board siding, aluminium windows and a steel roof on the exterior minimises future repair and ensures that the building would age gracefully.

Just like its name, the Compass House, is unconventional. It is one of those rare residential projects that is LEED Gold-certified, a mark of its pledge to building a sustainable house for generations to come. **Designed as a weekend home for a family of six, a couple and four children, this sprawling house amalgamates the spirituality of nature with the domesticity of ordinary life.**



The Compass House won the 2017 Architizer A+ Award (Jury Winner) in the Residential Private House (L 3,000-5,000 sq ft) category.

In a larger context, the sustainability comes through in the way the Compass House leaves behind a legacy or a family heirloom. Meg Graham and her husband Andre D’Elia, co-principals of Superkül, said, “The project demonstrates a historic and geographic contextual relevance and exemplifies the harmonious integration of architecture and landscape.” In addition to the big picture, the house is conspicuous for the numerous technical aspects that have resulted in its exceptional energy performance.

Passive ventilation is one of the key sustainable techniques employed in the project.

“Passive ventilation was achieved through strategically placed operable windows and skylights, which encourage the flow of air throughout the house. Cross-breezes keep the house cool without air-conditioning, and the skylights, when open, enable the stack effect to occur, releasing rising hot air through the roof to the outdoors. These glazed openings also serve to maximise daylight, which reduces reliance on artificial lighting, while providing framed views to the stunning landscape,” explained Graham and D’Elia.

There is also an in-ground geothermal system (usage of earth as a heat source in the winter and heat sink in the summer), premised upon a standard in-ground horizontal geothermal loop.

Other strategies such as efficient surface water management, high-efficiency plumbing fixtures and high insulation values demonstrate the architects’ consistent approach to sustainability. Even the waste from the construction has been sorted with 88% of it diverted for recycling.

The materials have been carefully picked and locally sourced, too. On the exterior, the choice of low-maintenance construction materials such as cement-board siding, aluminium windows and a steel roof to minimise future repair enables it to be a building that would age gracefully.



The judiciously placed skylights in the soaring pitched roof planes of the house allow soft washes of light to illuminate the interior.



Materials are mostly locally sourced; walls and floors of knotty white cedar and white oak render texture, warmth and contrast, while expansive white ceilings float above.

“In the interior, the materials reinforce the role of nature: texture, warmth and contrast are introduced through walls and floors of knotty white cedar and white oak, while expansive white ceilings float above. The distinct difference in materiality echoes the meeting of land and sky outside,” commented the architects.

The siting, tectonics and landscape design of the Compass House is attributed to the circumambient nature. **With its location on the Niagara Escarpment, forests to the west, a hill to the south and 100 acres of fields to the north and east, nature serves as an inspiration to the house.** Low retaining walls, constructed from fieldstone found directly on the property, not only create a foundational plinth for the house but also accord an unobstructed connection between the house and its environs.

To add to this, the longhouse form of the main residence is setup to allow the house to register various seasons.

“During the winter months, the view is directed east and west, towards the forest and harvested farmland. Then, as summer approaches, the view is refocused north and south as the glazed bi-fold doors on either side of the open-concept kitchen/living/dining area slide away to let nature in, merging interior spaces with the generous courtyard, hills and new crops beyond,” explained the architects.

The longhouse with an elongated narrow footprint is an inherently efficient typology found throughout Europe and parts of North America.



The building's low-lying horizontality finds its contrasting force in the totemic form of the outdoor fireplace that adds a critical vertical counterpoint.

"The length also allows for a balanced and effective distribution of programming, with a generously scaled yet intimate family space at the centre of the plan, and bedrooms comfortably separated on either end," said Graham and D'Elia.

The Compass House has a yin-yang type of juxtaposition with its balance of intimacy and expansiveness, light and dark, land and sky. For example, the restrained colour palette changes its visual effects between winter and summer. The white exterior is distinct amidst the green fields of summer, but, during winter, comfortably merges with the landscape of waning light and snow.

This project, an inspiration for other sustainable residences, won the 2017 Architizer A+ Award (Jury Winner) in the Residential Private House (L 3,000-5,000 sq ft) category. Graham and D'Elia shared, "The clients' self-appointed role as environmental stewards of the property is ideologically consistent with our prioritisation of sustainability."

The Compass House is an example of how a shared ethos of sustainability between architects and clients can result in something that is not only respectful of the planet but also be a nice cost effective, energy efficient home that can be cherished for years to come.

✉ press@superkul.ca