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Rethink, Redraw, Resolve

A New Brunswick couple and their architects face the realities of building on a rugged property and alter their home's design to suit the setting.
By Suzanne Robicheau



Part 2: THE DESIGN

In the winter 2011 issue of *IA&D*, we introduced you to Robert Moore and Judith Mackin, who had just purchased a steeply pitched lot with a view of the Bay of Fundy in downtown Saint John. Inspired by this green space in the heart of the city, the couple quickly formed a mental image of the new, modern house they would build on its peak.

They began working with Acre Architects (formerly The Acre Collective) to create a design. Acre principals Monica Adair and Stephen Kopp developed conceptual drawings for the house, a two-level structure they dubbed The Belvedere for its intended command of the setting and the view. But the architects were also compelled to point out the obstacles to building on a site with such radical topography—rocky terrain, a 100-foot rise and two separate levels of ground—particularly the high costs associated with creating access and supplying services to the site.

The firm encouraged Robert and Judith to take a hard, practical look at their plans and reconsider the siting of the house. In fact, this is an essential and ongoing part of any home design or renovation: adapting the plans to suit the realities of site, budget and other constraints. Then, the architects went back to the drawing board and devised a new concept: Into the Wild. The house would be built on the broader middle level of the property and complemented by a small secondary structure at the peak, reached by way of a two-minute stroll over a zigzagged path. Here's how Judith and Robert altered their plans without letting go of their dream. —*The Editors*



▲ Design 1: The Belvedere



▼ Design 2: Into the Wild

STEP BY STEP

Rethinking, redesigning and refining the concept

1 Simply put, a house at the top of the hill would be more expensive to build, especially if preparing the foundation requires the use of dynamite. The architects also estimated an additional \$250 per linear metre to take services up the hill.

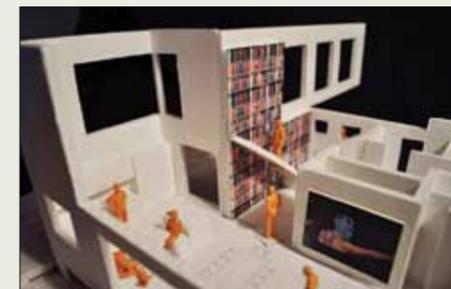
2 Building at the peak, which offers a smaller area of flat land, would mean essentially creating a house of stairs—that is, with several levels. The staggered elevation could become a limiting factor in Judith and Robert's plan to grow old in this house. Building on the broader middle ground creates the opportunity for decks, terraces and walkways that flow seamlessly on one level from the principal rooms, and the outdoors can be an integral part of the home.

3 Judith and Robert discovered a precedent for building on middle ground when they learned that the site's original 19th-century house once stood there. And then they happened to watch a documentary about Frank Lloyd Wright. "Wright says that you should never build on a hill," says Robert. "If you build on a hill, you lose the hill."

4 The rock face of the hill, with its various formations, creates a natural amphitheatre and is arguably the most dramatic physical feature on the property. The Belvedere plan, which opted for the higher building site, would have relegated the rock face to a view enjoyed only in passing on the way up the driveway. Building on the new site positions it front and centre.

5 The lot is large and has many points of access, and because it has been vacant for several decades it has generally been regarded as public property. Part of the appeal of building on higher ground was that it would make the house more secure and private. Adair and Kopp demonstrated that it was possible to arrange walls, fences and sightlines in a way to afford an equal sense of security on the middle ground, where there is actually more protection and privacy.

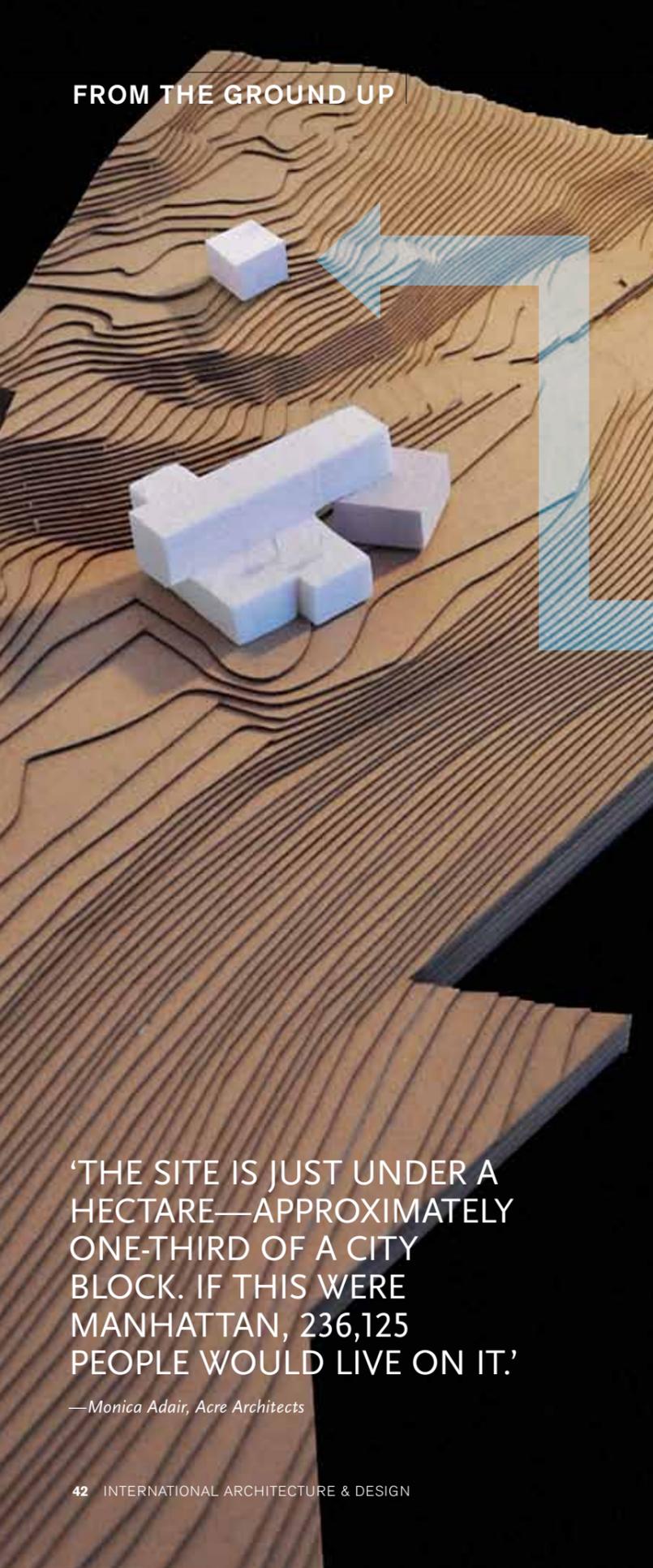
6 Building at the top of the property would have meant landscaping all of the land below; building in the middle and leaving the top wild preserves natural habitat, while reducing costs.



Above: The architects created a three-dimensional model—even photographing Judith and Robert's paintings and sculptures and displaying them in miniature—that allowed the couple (*opposite*) to envision the spaces and plot the placement of furniture and art in their future home.

Top: A drawing of the house is superimposed on a photograph of the setting to foster an understanding of the house's exterior.

Opposite, bottom: Early drawings of two concepts of the home: the initial plan, known as The Belvedere, and the revised version, called Into the Wild.



‘THE SITE IS JUST UNDER A HECTARE—APPROXIMATELY ONE-THIRD OF A CITY BLOCK. IF THIS WERE MANHATTAN, 236,125 PEOPLE WOULD LIVE ON IT.’

—Monica Adair, Acre Architects

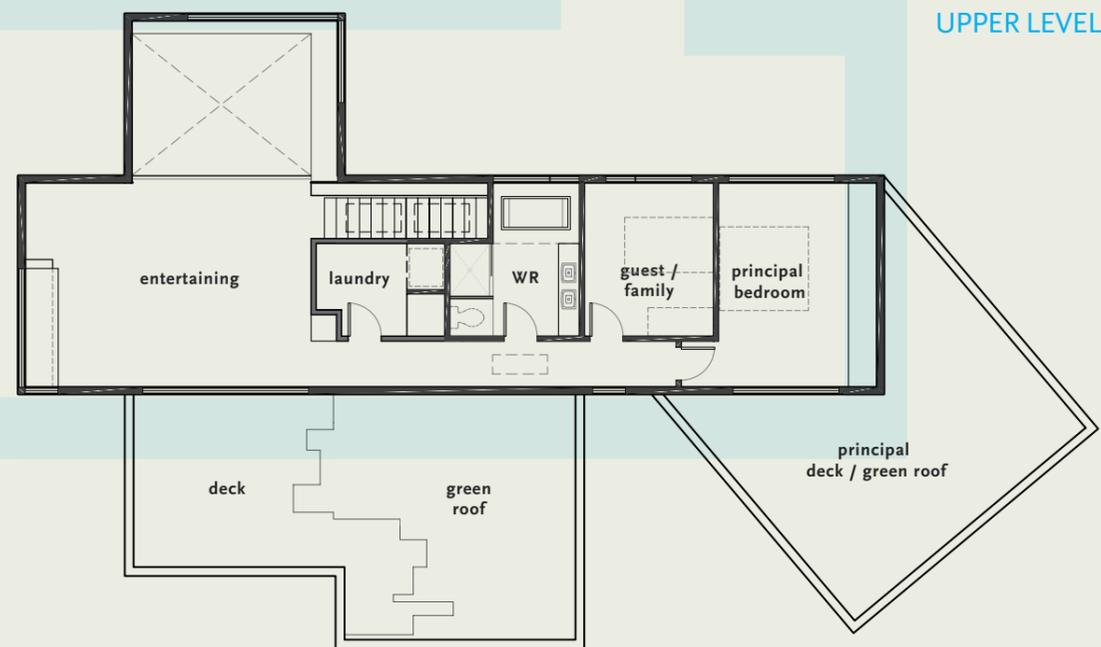
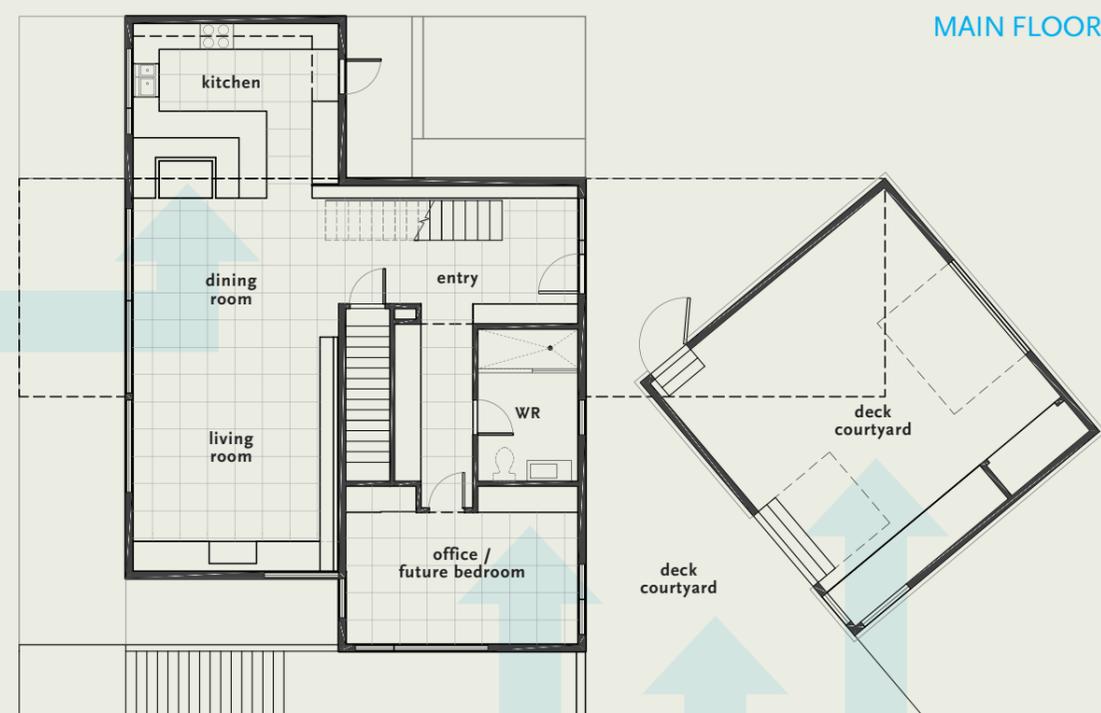
PLANNING THE SPACE

As part of the planning process, Acre Architects worked with Judith and Robert to design a space suited to their current needs and lifestyle. They also considered adaptations for future or occasional use.

- Initial drawings included a central kitchen island with stools. In a bid to save space, the architects replaced the island with a sit-down eating nook, large enough to seat four. It is one of Judith’s favourite aspects of the design. “We are MacBook people,” she says. “We’re rarely at our desks and we like to work together in the same room.”
- The couple like the idea of a completely separate cabin, essentially a “getaway” incorporated into their home’s design. “We had an actual cabin once,” Judith says. “We had it just long enough to know that we are not cabin people.”
- Judith—an entrepreneur who runs a marketing company from her home—needed enough space to accommodate an art and design studio. She and Robert also wanted a spare room for their occasional overnight guests. Rather than designate 125 square feet for a separate guest room, the architects suggested incorporating a hidden wall bed in an office space for Judith. An added bonus: Should stairs ever become difficult for either Judith or Robert, the office can be easily converted to a spacious main-floor bedroom.
- Robert initially wanted to have two separate workspaces—a sculpture studio that includes storage space for his tools and a home office for his work as a professor and poet. The cabin will indeed provide his studio space, but he reconsidered dedicating a room to his office, deciding, “All I really need is a good light, a good chair, and a laptop.”

• Judith and Robert had envisioned a courtyard, but the architects pointed out that this would turn the focus inward and would ignore the impressive site. Instead, they pulled the garage away from the house and rotated it 90 degrees, creating two important areas: a private deck off Judith’s office and a covered entryway. The garage will offer a privacy barrier against the neighbouring properties. And because Judith and Robert are party people, the architects introduced the idea of the garage as a flexible additional space for entertaining. A polished concrete floor will make it welcoming, and a second large door at one end will open onto a private deck and encourage circulation. —S.R.

DIAGRAMS AND FLOOR PLANS COURTESY OF ACRE ARCHITECTS
PHOTOS P. 40 AND P. 43: BRUCE MACNEIL



VITAL STATS

Property

2½ acres

Location

An infill lot in downtown Saint John, N.B.

Occupants

Owners Judith Mackin and Robert Moore. Their home will accommodate a family that includes Robert’s 14-year-old daughter, Alexandra, who lives with them most weekends; Judith’s 20-year-old son, Robyn, who visits often; Robert’s oldest daughter, Jessica, and her fiancé, who are regular visitors. —S.R.

IA&D is following Judith Mackin and Robert Moore as they design and build their dream home. In future issues, we’ll visit the building site and report on their progress.