

IN THE COUNTRY IN THE CITY

BEHOLD THE DREAM HOME OF JUDITH MACKIN AND ROBERT MOORE IN SAINT JOHN, N.B. THE CULMINATION OF TWO YEARS OF WORK AND PLANNING, HEARTACHE AND INSPIRATION, IT SHOWS WARMTH AND WIT IN A SMART MIX OF URBANE DESIGN AND LONG-TERM THINKING.

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK HEMMINGS

[Part 4: THE FINAL CHAPTER]

In the end, it was a saga of more than two years' duration. In the winter 2011 issue of *IA&D*, we introduced you to Robert Moore and Judith Mackin, who had purchased a rugged, steeply sloped lot in downtown Saint John, with a view of the Bay of Fundy. Inspired by this natural green space in the heart of the city, the couple planned to build a new, modern house on it.

Enter Monica Adair and Stephen Kopp, principals of New Brunswick firm Acre Architects. They worked with Judith and Robert to create a design—a multi-layered process that required going back to the drawing board when it was determined that the original design on the intended site would prove too costly and difficult to build. A second site on the property was agreed upon, and a second design was developed. In spring 2011, the building began, and, as we last reported, the house was close to completion in October 2011.

As it turned out, however, some of the biggest challenges were still ahead. Writer Suzanne Robicheau has been tracking Judith and Robert's project since the early design meetings with Kopp and Adair. She has monitored the house's advances and setbacks and witnessed first-hand its materialization. Here, we present the final chapter in our story of the long and sometimes arduous process of bringing this dream home into reality—and the thrilling final result. — *The Editors*



The modern façade of the house is a meeting of solidity and transparency, lightness and weight. Clad in weathered wood siding repurposed from a Wyoming snow fence, and accented with black steel window frames, the exterior has a “toughness” that suits the urban setting, says architect Stephen Kopp. “The site is between two old, very different neighbourhoods,” Kopp explains. “So, the house isn’t sleek or ostentatious. We consciously chose not to build a perfect white box on a hill.” The home is sited to take advantage of the views, including that of the spectacular rock that was part of the property’s initial appeal.

THE BACK STORY

If you missed any of the earlier chapters in our series on the building of this New Brunswick dream house, you can find them on iadmagazine.com.

TIMELINE

Spring 2010

The land is purchased.

June 2010

Judith and Robert have their first design meeting with Acre Architects.

July 2010

The owners are presented with two design concepts; one is chosen.

April 2011

A 100-metre driveway is constructed from the road to the site.

April–June 2011

Excavation for the foundation and basement level; the foundation is poured.

July 2011

Framing for the main level is completed and the main-floor joists are in place. The basement walls are erected. Services are installed, ready for connection.

August 2011

The subfloor on the main level is in place, some pre-assembled walls are erected, and the steel framework is installed.

September 2011

The upper level materializes: flooring joists and subfloor are installed, and the steel framework and the upper walls are now in place.

October 2011

Vandals do minor damage. The roof framing and roof installation are complete.

December 2011

The local supplier of their German-manufactured windows goes out of business—necessitating a search for new windows and a four-month delay.

January 2012

On New Year’s Day, Robert and Judith discover that thieves have broken in during the holidays and removed the home’s copper wiring.

April 2012

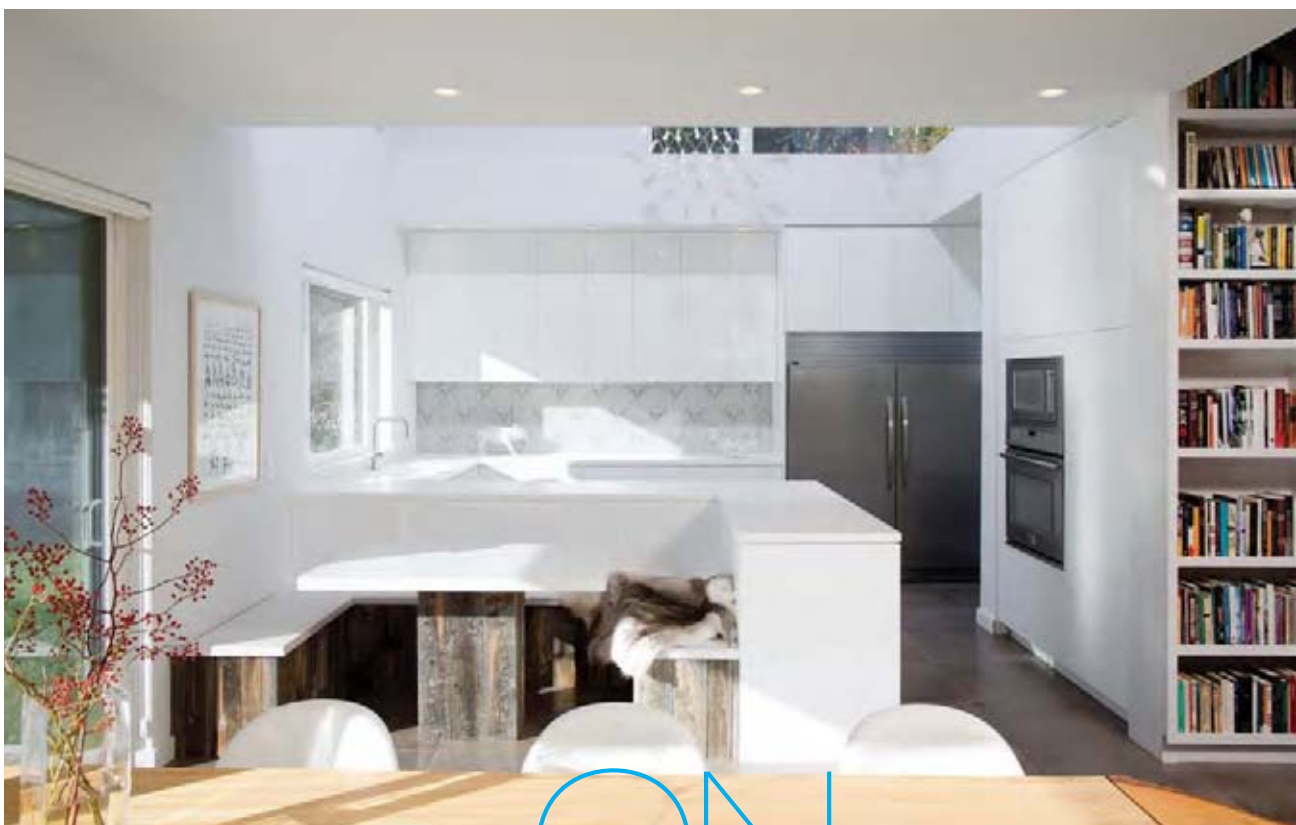
The windows are installed at last. Now the interior finishes—flooring, painting, furnishing—can finally go in.

August 2012

Move-in day!



Right: The kitchen is “the only space that feels all white,” Adair says. “Everywhere else, the books, the wood, the furniture—everything else adds colour.” The light-filled 15-by-17-foot kitchen “borrows” visually from the open living-dining area beyond its framework and from its two-storey height. By leaving it open to the loft level, the architects supplied a multiplicity of views and light sources that contribute to the sense of spaciousness. The bases of the table and banquette in the dining nook get a rustic touch from the same weathered siding as that used outside the home.



ON

a crisp, cool afternoon, Judith Mackin and Robert Moore trudge up the steep path of their property on a hill in downtown Saint John. With the backdrop of dusk, the lit-up windows beckon from their new home, which sits on a plateau about 40 feet from the top—a modern tableau set above the historic port city.

Judith makes this climb to the top of the site on a daily basis, sometimes accompanied by their Boston terriers, Scout and Macie. “We sneak up here and spy on Robert,” she says, laughing.

There have been many times since construction of the house began, in the spring of 2011, when laughter was a lot harder to find. Despite some unfortunate surprises along the way, more extensive site preparations than expected, record-setting rainfall during the months of building, and incidents of petty vandalism, completion of the house was still on track for December 2011. And then things went terribly wrong.

As the couple made plans to spend Christmas in their new home, give up their rental and retrieve their belongings from storage—they sold their previous house in September 2011—news came that the local supplier of their German-manufactured aluminum-clad windows had disappeared. “The windows were sitting in a warehouse about an hour away,” says architect Stephen Kopp, “but there was no one with the specialized knowledge to install



Opposite: In a house with so many windows, it was essential to designate an “art wall” for changing displays from the collection of owners Judith Mackin and Robert Moore (above). The weathered wood siding forms a continual thread from the outside, so “the outdoors doesn’t just stop at the edge of the house,” Adair explains. The wood is “an arrow,” she says, that pulls the gaze from the view of the art to views of the site beyond. Dining table, Bruce Gray. For art credits, see p. 89.



Opposite: The steel staircase with glass railing, fabricated by local steelmakers, is an industrial look with a modern edge. Viewed from any angle, it achieves the architects' goal that it not take up too much real estate. Within the grid of floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, alcoves with views to the outdoors are designated pet-friendly zones. The owners originally considered polished concrete for the main floor but opted instead for the more refined look of this light grey tile. On the wall is *Nazareth* (2003) by Rick Burns. *Floor tile, Ciot.*

Below: Rough Corten steel was fabricated in panels to give it an ordered quality. "It has textures, layers, warmth," Adair says. "It feels contemporary." When the panels arrived, they were a disconcertingly bright yellow; they weathered to this rust hue over two months' time. It was an unexpected development for interested neighbours, many of whom watched the progress of the build with binoculars. During a recent house tour, some expressed concern that the garage was "rusting."

them and, because of that, no warranty once they were installed."

Other, similar window products were more expensive, and available materials, such as residential vinyl, could not meet the requirements of the design's large spans of glazing. So, the search began to find affordable alternatives. The architects finally discovered a line of hurricane-resistant, steel-reinforced vinyl windows that are sold in Florida—and manufactured in New Brunswick.

It took another two months to get the vinyl windows in a black exterior finish that is, in Kopp's words, "badass enough to match the project site and aesthetic." During that period, the house sat empty, exposed and vulnerable to the winds and snow of a Saint John winter, as well as to another assault—thieves broke in over the Christmas holidays and stripped the house of its copper wiring. "That was a very emotional time," recalls Judith, with some restraint.

Meanwhile, the architects had to reduce the size of some of the openings to accommodate the new windows—a design change that's not noticeable now, architect Monica Adair notes, but one that required them to alter some of the plans for the interior, too. It was April when the windows were finally put in place. Only then could the installation of the final finishing details commence—flooring, fixtures, tiling, painting. After months of sitting and waiting, during which tradespeople had scattered to other projects, it was a whirlwind time, with all hands pitching in to bring the project to its close.

On July 1, 2012, Judith and Robert invited friends to celebrate Canada Day on the deck of their still-unfinished house. "Our things were in storage, so all we had was lawn furniture," Judith says of that stressful time. "When it started to rain, we scrambled to move everything inside." But at least she knew then that they were almost out of the woods.

In late August, the couple moved into their new home, a structure that looks remarkably like the architect's model. "They didn't take shortcuts," notes Kopp. "Most people would have settled for something else to get it finished faster."

Gritty and solid, the house fits the location as easily as its nearest neighbour—a polite Victorian mansion constructed in 1904 for the owner of the Red Rose tea company. The north façade of Judith and Robert's home presents a careful balance of solidity and transparency, lightness and weight. The solids, in particular the jutting mass of the upstairs loft, are carefully balanced by the voids created by the glass-walled main floor and the upper-level deck articulated by a stained cedar railing. Instrumental in allowing the structure to blend into its surroundings is the weathered black-and-cinnamon-coloured wood siding, repurposed from a Wyoming snow fence. With the black-framed windows, and industrial-look Corten steel cladding on the garage, the exterior palette has an intentional "toughness," Kopp says. "It contrasts with the inside, which is more white, and refined."

Those fence boards also find new life inside: as flooring on





A large part of the upper floor is an open loft space used as a second sitting area (*see next page also*). A deep built-in window seat that almost disappears into the woodwork remains true to the minimalist aesthetic, as does a wall-mounted gel fireplace. As Kopp says, the idea was to “let the site do the talking, not focus on the interior.” The flooring on this level is a refined version of the home’s exterior siding, sealed for a smoother finish.

Prairie tables and Delano chair, both by Gus Modern; area rug by Chilewich. All through Tuck Studio.*



FROM THE GROUND UP



Left: The windows of the loft are positioned to capture views of the rock that is one of the site's key assets and was part of the inspiration for the project. Judith found the Orbit chandelier by Patrick Townsend; its light clusters—"like fireworks," Adair says—are visible from both levels of the house. The walls of the laundry area, the only room in the house without a window, stop inches short of the ceiling to aid air circulation and allow natural light in. *Flip sofa by Gus* Modern, Tuck Studio. Neon crow sculpture, Ryan Livingstone. Clay vessel, Darren Emenau.*

Opposite, below: Judith's office sits to the left of the entryway, facing the courtyard. *Blue Truss chair by Gus* Modern. Branches chandelier, Brothers Dressler.*



A generous deck, accessible on the loft level, was landscaped with an integrated pattern of plantings and staggered boards. The deck railing was crafted from wooden posts painted to match the Corten steel cladding on the garage and standard plastic panels from The Home Depot.

Opposite, top: Architects Stephen Kopp and Monica Adair

‘There is a dialogue with the city that happens when you are there,’ Adair says of the site. Adds Kopp: ‘In fall and winter you can see the city. In spring and summer, when the leaves come in, there’s an incredibly dense canopy. The house turns inward. It feels like you’ve gone somewhere else.’



the loft level, where they were planed and then sealed, and as finishing material for a storage bench and kitchen banquette. In addition, the architects used them as a wall finish in the main-floor living space. Here, the boards appear to slide in from an exterior wall, blurring the distinction, not only between indoors and outdoors but also—given the similarity to AutoCad software images mounted in the architect’s model—between illusion and reality.

Also faithful to the architect’s drawings—right down to the paintings on the wall—is the open-concept living space. The main floor is a linear plan of kitchen, dining and living areas, all open to each other and rendered in a cool white palette that’s the backdrop to a collection of modern furnishings and art. The showstopper on this level is the steel checker-plate staircase without risers, which leaves the view toward the front of the house unobstructed, and, behind it, a massive installation of floor-to-ceiling bookshelves.

The space reflects Judith and Robert’s passion for all things modern. A linear fireplace and wall insets for log storage set the stage for Robert’s Eames chair, while the black-and-white cowhide doubles as an extra bed for the dogs, whose coats match the rug. Bisecting the room is a 10-foot live-edge elm table designed by New Brunswick craftsman Bruce Gray. In the kitchen, the expanse of white Corian countertop provides a sleek complement to windows that frame the constantly changing view outside. “We knew from the beginning that we wanted high-gloss cabinets and a restrained palette,” says Judith, “but as time went on, we edited the look even more with touch-release cabinets.”

The kitchen wow factor comes from the Orbit chandeliers by industrial designer Patrick Townsend. There’s a wow too, albeit subtler, from the mutable backsplash—removable acrylic panels Judith designed as an alternative to tile. A showcase for everything from menus and maps to magazine covers, the panels currently display a stylized cow-skull image from Robert’s recently published book of poetry, *The Golden Book of Bovinities*.



FROM THE GROUND UP

Below: The architects took maximum advantage of the home's spectacular country-in-the-city setting to provide two opposing views from the master bedroom's large windows—all urban on one side and all nature on the other. A dropped ceiling makes the wall of cabinetry appear built-in, rather than free-standing. An all-white envelope of walls, ceiling, window and door frames and furniture—including the headboard and built-in side tables—allows the focus to remain on the views. *Wassily chair by Marcel Breuer through Knoll, from Design Within Reach. Artemide Tolomeo lamp, Attica.*

Bottom: In the upstairs bathroom, tiny mosaic tiles add delicacy, while an all-glass shower enclosure and floating vanity have little visual weight. The square-edged Wetstyle tub sits in a cosy nook by the window, proffering another view out to the rock on the site.

Opposite: One of the changes to the design plan in the early stages included the addition of a basement to house Tuck Studio, Judith's modern home design shop. Difficulty with excavation led to another alteration: the house was built on a higher grade and a terraced set of entry steps was added.



At the top of the stairs, a glass guardrail in the loft area overlooks the kitchen below. From this vantage point, clerestory windows capture the 100-foot rock face outside. Framing the rock face was key from the beginning of the project, Adair says. "We wanted to capture views of that rock from a few different places in the loft."

On the opposite wall, west-facing windows gather in a broad view of Saint John and the Bay of Fundy. "I never imagined being this high in the trees," says Robert. Aligned with these windows, a glazed door opens to a staggered array of deck boards and one of the region's first residential green roofs, where several species of sedum soldier on as natural air exchangers.

The loft is anchored by a wide window seat with deep cushions for comfortable lounging alongside a gel fireplace. A corridor at the other end of this space leads to the laundry room, guest room, master bedroom and adjoining bath—a sanctuary of round white mosaic tiles and sleek hardware. Despite the artful appointments—a glass-enclosed shower and a square-cornered tub—sometimes the main attraction is simply the option to observe a passing deer outside.

Both the guest room and master bedroom are small by today's standards, but built-in cabinetry contains clutter and eliminates the need for free-standing furniture. In both bedrooms, light floods through floor-to-ceiling windows, creating a sense of spaciousness that belies actual room size.

Difficulty with modern building methods, an abundance of custom features, and necessary changes in plan and materials all sent costs for the project more than 25 per cent above budget. "Building something unconventional is pretty tricky in these parts," says Adair. And so, the reflecting pool is on hold, landscaping will be done in stages and, for now, a planned retreat at the top of the hill will be more belvedere deck than enclosed structure.

"In hindsight, it's interesting," Adair says of the design process. "You start with simple volumes because you're trying to maintain simplicity of construction. But as you start to understand the site, you begin to turn and twist the forms, to hide some views and open up others." By way of example, she recalls that they had originally placed the garage at a 90-degree angle to the house. "Then Stephen rotated it at one meeting," she says, and that seemingly simple change "led to the courtyard off Judith's office, and the roof deck, and the covered entrance."

Mindful of the increase in cost and extensive delays during construction, Kopp and Adair gathered their courage and asked their clients what, if anything, they could have done differently. The answer was quite surprising.

"We didn't like the way water from the scuppers poured down in front of the tub window in the upper bath," says Judith. "Then Stephen explained that scuppers were purposely positioned to create a small waterfall. Now we love it. We love all of it." ●

For floor plans, go to iadmagazine.com.

