Window (un)dressing: Today's stylish windows are anything but covered

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More from Patrick Langston

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“By doing that linear, horizontal window, it’s almost like sitting on a porch, waving at the neighbours going by,” says Simmonds. “You’re engaging the street life, everything that’s happening there.”

That engagement, and the spirit-buoying flood of daylight that generous glazing affords, is more available than ever thanks to today’s seemingly endless variety of windows and the savvy ways they’re being used in everything from custom homes to production builds to renovations.

Technology has played its part in the window’s ascension from the jagged, animal hide-covered hole in the wall that was once all the rage to the stylish and efficient glazing of the 21st century.

“Today we have the technology to build larger panes of glass (with better insulating values); it’s thicker, more structural,” says Jacques Hamel of Hamel Design. By contrast, he says, a century ago a window typically consisted of multiple small, brittle panes. As well, there was no double glazing, let alone the triple glazing that is now increasingly common, nor did energy-efficient technology such as window films, fibreglass frames and insulating, inter-pane gases exist.

Hamel’s Robertson House project showcases modern windows. While the original heritage home had already been lovingly restored, it retained a bleak addition at its rear that had no view of the large backyard. Hamel replaced the addition with over 1,200 square feet of new space featuring large windows, including one corner that is basically glass.

“Almost the entire design intention was to connect with the rear yard,” he says.

Like the Wellington Village Modern home, Hamel’s project was a winner at the 2015 Housing Design Awards.

Whether a home’s design is contemporary or traditional, large windows can provide a revitalizing connection with nature.

“In our custom work, the window is not a piece of technology but an opportunity to connect the owner to the natural world, whether that is a recognition of a significant feature such as water or a special tree as well as connect with where the sun is throughout the day,” says Ottawa architect Barry Hobin in an email. That connection is fundamental to his design of a Brown’s Inlet bungalow that also won at the housing awards.

It is, literally, a window on the world. The spectacular wall-to-wall kitchen window of Wellington Village Modern, a project by Christopher Simmonds Architect and RND Construction, is at the front of the home where it gives an expansive view of life outside.
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It’s not just main living areas that are benefiting from this new attention to glass.

Designers are finding inspired ways to brighten bathrooms, for example, including large corner windows surrounding a soaker tub. Transom windows over a shower or tub can lend an architectural touch to a bathroom, according to designer Nathan Kyle at Astro Design Centre.

When it comes to renos, Kyle’s colleague Dean Large reports that more glazing is de rigueur. “I’m getting more and more clients coming in and saying, ‘This is the home we have but keep in mind this whole wall is becoming windows.’”

Even the humble laundry room can be blessed with a window, a feature in Tartan Homes’ Ashton and Mansfield models, for example. Production builders also love to point out the large windows they’re increasingly installing in basements, making below-grade rooms anything but below the grade.

Floor-to-ceiling and wall-to-wall windows, often with transoms, are also increasingly common not just in condos but in single and other tract homes. Attentive to energy efficiency, Minto has made triple-pane windows standard in some communities.

Not that glazing is unlimited, points out Art House Developments’ Alex Dias, who has made the most of windows everywhere from ensuites to sitting rooms. He explains that because glass is not nearly as energy efficient as a solid wall, the building code puts limits on what percentage of the total exterior surface can be glazed — generally 17 per cent. Anything more than that number requires higher insulation value in the glazing itself or other strategies to increase the home’s energy efficiency.

And while solar gain from extensive glazing can be a plus in the winter, designers have to guard against it in the summer. That’s often done with extended overhangs that allow heat from the sun to enter during the cold months but protect against it in the summer when the sun is higher in the sky.

No matter how you frame it, one thing is clear: the window is now about more than just glass.