

Housing Design Awards: The Simmonds brand



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Architect Chris Simmonds (standing) and his firm won an unprecedented nine trophies at last weekend's Housing Design Awards. The firm includes (from left): Michelle McKenna, intern; J.P. Lafleur, technologist; Simmonds, Gabriel Prost, architect; Rad Canolo, senior designer/architect; Rick Shean, architect; James Hawley, technologist; Samantha Schneider, architect; Kayla Spruit, interior designer; Don Peterman, architect; and Ryan Baker, technologist.

Photograph by: Julie Oliver, Ottawa Citizen



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Christopher Simmonds is going to have to build more shelves in his Eccles Street Annex to accommodate the nine hefty crystal trophies his architectural firm won last weekend at the 30th annual Housing Design Awards.



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The 58-year-old eco-warrior of sustainable design was the superstar of the night, sweeping all but one of the five custom home categories with a portfolio of designs that all share the recognizable Simmonds' genealogical stamp, namely sophisticated, flowing spaces connected to nature and outdoor gardens by large sheets of glass.

A slim two-storey in New Edinburgh was the brightest star of the Simmonds' entries, winning a trio of awards at the glitzy affair, including green and custom honours and the most prestigious award of the night, the Ottawa Citizen Peoples' Choice Award, earned by toting up the most number of votes by the public attending the Home & Design Show late last month.

The Zen Barn on Ivy Street in New Edinburgh shows a maturing of the Simmonds brand and an expansion of talent in the architectural firm, which was established in 1996 and has been dedicated to a contemporary take on designing and building eco-sensible housing. The British-born architect is clearly the soul of the firm, yet there is a talented band of disciples stretching their imagination inside the Eccles Street offices, including Rick Shean, who was the lead architect on the New Edinburgh home.

"Rick is a passionate minimalist and he is passionate about details," says Simmonds. Shean worked closely with Roy Nandram, owner of RND Construction and on the contemporary house which manages to fit neatly into the mature neighbourhood. Covered in reclaimed white oak barn board, the home sports a clean, almost spartan sculptural quality inside and an energy pedigree that slashes consumption.

Shean and Nandram, a longtime collaborator with the Simmonds' firm, also worked on a spectacular stone-and-glass house on the banks of the Ottawa River that also took home double honours, including top marks in the night's biggest category: large custom bathrooms. Fifteen of the city's top designers squared off and the Simmonds team was victorious with a sensuous bathroom featuring a sculptural white tub tucked next to a wall of glass and uninterrupted views of the river and Gatineau Hills.

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The Simmonds team also edged out seven other entries in a funky category celebrating any room in the house. The architect created an outdoor entertaining space in the backyard of a Dunrobin home, linking covered decks and cedar pergolas around a pool, while all the time flirting with a pond and the surrounding forest.

“It’s a bit overwhelming,” an astounded Simmonds said after a continual parade to the gala stage to accept his nine trophies. “We’re happy for our clients; they got great houses. That’s what architecture is all about.”

The usually subdued architect remembers back 11 years, attending his first awards night in a newly purchased wool and silk jacket and man scarf, while savouring the recent birth of his daughter, Eliane.

“I got five awards that night. I have always been focused on the experience of living and homes connected to nature.”

A master of sublime homes that celebrate light and vistas, be it a garden, a pond or the Ottawa River, he notes that “if there is one bush on the property that’s where we will put all of the windows or we will do some planting.”

He considered a master’s degree in landscape architecture and often jokes his perfect job would be a gardener in a Zen monastery.

He tells of walking the Ottawa River property where that spectacular stone-and-glass home now sits. The dentist owner wanted Simmonds to renovate an existing house, but instead the architect brought along a ladder, put it on the northwest corner near the river and said, “Look at the view.”

The master bedroom and award-winning bathroom now sit high above that very spot in a home visualized by Simmonds and brought to reality by his team.

The thoughtful architect of nature starts each day by finding a quiet corner in his Riverdale Avenue home in Old Ottawa South and meditating. He teaches meditation classes at night and he will push away from his cluttered office if a design is blocked.

“I will sleep on a design or meditate and see myself walking through a house,” says the self-confessed doodler, who prefers a thin felt pen over computer strokes when laying out a home, condo or office building. “Then the design comes easily because it is the left side of the brain working, the intuition, not the right side of the brain. You can’t force it.”

Simmonds hands over his doodles to longtime colleague and “design psychic” Rad Canolo, who turns the ideas into exquisite hand-drawn elevations and interior plans. The two have worked together for more than a dozen years, earning local and provincial design honours along the way, including the iconic Mountain Equipment Co-op on Richmond Road, which slashed energy consumption by 50 per cent, and Eastern Ontario’s first LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Gold certified building: the Rideau Valley Conservation Centre outside of Manotick.

The Simmonds team is growing, taking up all of the corners in the Eccles office. Two years ago, Simmonds had to expand the conference room because there wasn’t enough room for everyone to sit around the table at Monday brain-storming sessions.

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Always the financial conservative, Simmonds pushed the wall of frosted plastic panels and a frame made of wood chips two feet into the main office. “Wood chips are cheaper and stronger than using wood frames,” he explains.

The larger team means Simmonds can pull back and be an adviser, launching the design of a custom home, the six-storey Eddy (an ultra-green condo in Hintonburg by Windmill Development Group that’s now under construction) or a series of green homes for a new builder coming to Ottawa.

The decision now, says Simmonds, is what jobs to take on and what jobs to decline.

He was approached by a major retailer to redesign their stores, but said no because they weren’t interested in the priorities of sustainable architecture. “I don’t want to just do things to keep busy. I now have the freedom to do what I preach and I believe in.

“I want to stay true to my priorities and that is to be able to differentiate a house or business through design, sustainable design.”

With files from Patrick Langston