

Past meets present at Woo family's West Wellington home



SHEILA BRADY

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Suzanne and Michael Woo in their kitchen. Photo by Jean Levac *JEAN LEVAC*

Five years ago, breast cancer rattled Suzanne Woo's life, prompting the mother of two to take a new look at time and her dreams.

"I always wanted to be an architect," says the City of Ottawa traffic engineer. "I was diagnosed with breast cancer at 39 and a week after I turned 40, I had a mastectomy. It was my birthday present.

"I always wanted to build our dream home and realized it might not be a good idea to wait," says Woo in a quiet, certain voice.

Her husband, Michael Woo, an emergency room doctor at The Ottawa Hospital, gives his wife a huge, supportive smile. "I love what she loves."

The couple, both 44, are sitting at a round wooden table on the edge of a chic, white kitchen that is the epicentre of their 2,700-square-foot dream of glass and light perched on top of a wide lot in the heart of Wellington West.

Four years ago, the Woos and their children, Hana, then 7, and Toshio, then 5, were living four blocks to the east in a big brick house from the '20s. "It was dark and we didn't use the living room or dining room very much," says Dr. Woo, who readily confesses he is a big fan of light, especially when Ottawa winters are long and dark.

"There is light here all the time," he says. "You could feel the darkness in the other house. Windows would fog up in winter."

There hasn't been a single drop of winter condensation on the triple-glazed windows since the Woo family arrived with their piano, violins and cello in August 2014.

Planning started more than two years earlier when Suzanne grabbed on to her dream and started looking for the right location in a neighbourhood where they liked to shop for spices or head out for dinner. They found a wide lot in Wellington West and a good omen appeared when the sellers wanted to rent back their modest home for a year, while making plans to retire in the United States.

The Woos focused on saving money and searching for the ideal architect, a talent search helped by two other modern souls and friends, Alteriors owners Jacob Visutskie and Monika Durczak. They urged Suzanne to check out Christopher Simmonds' architectural firm and its thick portfolio of modern designs that maximize glass, merging indoor and outdoor living.

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Suzanne Woo's mother, Judy Blackman, an artist in Vancouver, made the ethereal sculpture suspended by the floating staircase. It is paper and wire made from pages of a dictionary compiled by Blackman's father, when he arrived in Canada from Japan. The Woo's son, Toshio, is named after his beloved Japanese-born grandfather, Toshio Nakagawa. (credit doublespace photography) *AMANDA LARGE + YOUNES BOUNHAR 201*

Suzanne went on a home tour with Simmonds' long-time colleague, RND Construction President Roy Nandram and her eyes lit up seeing a glass and wood clad home in New Edinburgh built by Nandram and designed by dedicated modernist, Rick Shean, a senior architect in Simmonds' firm.

The dream-driven engineer met the very modern architect and a partnership was forged.

Woo quickly discovered she was very good with numbers, knew what she wanted, but stopped short of turning it all into a living design.

Rick Shean had the vision for a glass house that glows from the inside when the sun sets.

"I remember sitting on our couch that first night, my head down. I never envisioned how beautiful the house would be," says Woo, adding she's forever grateful she listened to her mother's advice.

"My mom is an artist and she spent time with Rick. She told me Rick has a vision and not to mess with it."

"A modern infill home is already a contrasting style in an older neighbourhood. So you want to keep it a bit more subtle and not emphasize the contrast," says Shean, who relied on a muted palette of colours and materials inside and out.

The house, designed on the letter H, is more than 30 per cent glass, testing the architect and Nandram's building skills to turn out an R-2000 demo house that was a teaching model for building students at Algonquin College and an award-winner at last fall's design gala hosted by the Greater Ottawa Home Builders' Association.

The massive kitchen, eating area and family room sits on one side of the house, while a guest suite for family and friends sits on the other side. An open staircase leads to three bedrooms and home office on the second level.

There are few walls and wide open views to the back garden and to the front street.

The Nandram-Shean-Simmonds team have scooped up a host of awards for design and green smarts through the years. On this project, Nandram developed a hoist system to lift oversized heavy windows up the steep lot.

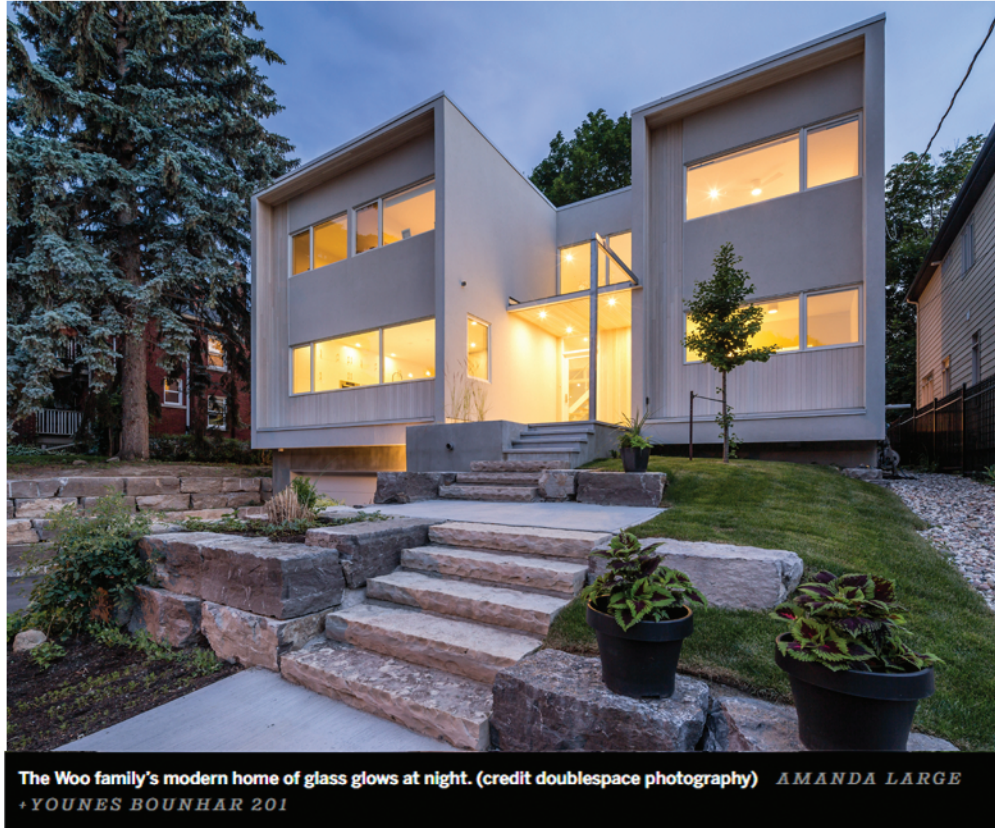
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The Woo family's modern home of glass glows at night. (credit doublespace photography) *AMANDA LARGE*
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"There is a lot of glass in this home and glass has an R factor of 5, meaning you have to up the R-factor in the walls to bringing it all up to R-2000 standards," says the respected green builder.

The technology translates into a warm, comfortable living space for the Woo family, who handed Shean a priority list, starting with laundry facilities off their second floor master bedroom and the provision for an elevator to whisk aging parents or themselves up from the street level garage to the main level.

The Woos plan to age well in this house.

"We use every single room," says Michael Woo, who often works in a second floor office and retreats to his man cave in the basement or the music room, where he practises his cello. "Some of my best memories were playing cello in the orchestra at Queen's University when I was in medicine."

Hana and Toshio practise the piano, violins and guitar in the music room, which is separate, yet feels part of this very open house thanks to interior glass walls.

It took Suzanne Woo a few weeks to be comfortable in her public house, preferring to clean up dishes at a smaller sink, turned away from the large windows facing the street below.

"It is good to watch the street wake up. We wave at people. Some we don't even know," says Suzanne, who loves to cook fragrant stir fry's. "The kitchen is my favourite space."

There is family history in this modern home, an ethereal paper and wire sculpture suspended beside the stairs and made by Woo's artist mother, Judy Blackman, from pages of a dictionary kept by the engineer's beloved Japanese grandfather, and namesake for her son, Toshio Nakagawa, when he arrived in Canada.

The past and present have come together for a woman looking to the future in the home of her dreams.

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The pristine white kitchen is the centre of Michael and Suzanne Woo's Wellington West home. Suzanne often waves to neighbours while cleaning up after a meal. (credit doublespace photography)



Woo house for homes story by Sheila Brady credit doublespace photography



Woo house for homes story by Sheila Brady credit doublespace photography A stone sculpture sits in a small backyard courtyard.



Woo house for homes story by Sheila Brady credit doublespace photography The chic white kitchen is Suzanne Woo's favourite room. "When friends come over, they always end up in the kitchen," says Michael Woo, a doctor in the emergency room at The Ottawa Hospital.