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OTTAWA CITIZEN

Dazzling Details: From concrete counters to copper accents, Ottawa's top designers pull out all the stops

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Design smarts still count, but it's the small details -- the stained-glass transoms, the 18-karat-gold flecks on a wall, the multi-coffered ceilings -- that make finalists stand out in this year's Housing Design Awards.

A row of leaded-glass windows rivets the eye. Waterfalls cascade down walls. A reclaimed elm timber serves as a raised eating bar. Inlaid tile floors look like carpet. These outstanding details are among the 112 finalists in this year's awards staged by the Ottawa-Carleton Home Builders' Association and sponsored by the Citizen.

The awards -- to be given out tonight at a gala ceremony at the National Gallery -- traditionally feature a Housing Details category. But this year, imaginative details have spilled over into other categories.

"I think we're seeing a lot more attention to detail, and that's what's going to make the difference between good and great design," says judge SJ Normand, a senior designer for Jean Vincent Parr Design Studio. Normand, who also teaches at Algonquin College's School of Design, says contenders combined excellent craftsmanship in kitchens and bathrooms, offering up stunning staircases, interesting windows and, above all, flexibility and exploration of new materials.

"They're not staying with the tried and true," she says, offering a pat on the back to those who stretched the boundaries of materials and design.

The building industry is getting more and more access to unique materials to use in homes, from limestone flooring tiles to new shapes in windows, says fellow judge David Egan.

"We depend on these pre-manufactured materials to enlighten our imaginations," says Egan, president of the design firm David Egan Associates and a new judge this year, along with Rick Hughes of the Canada Lands Company. "We saw a good example of that in these submissions this year. We are incorporating them in our designs."

Materials traditionally used in industrial or commercial settings are now making regular appearances in the home.

Urban Keios Design, for example, used green corrugated metal sheathing on the exterior walls of a home. John Donkin Architect combined wood with corrugated galvanized metal and another buffed metal in a home that looks like two boxes stuck together, with one cantilevered out from the other.

Egan and judge Shawn Lawrence of S.J. Lawrence Architect were impressed, but spent time puzzling over how Donkin had accomplished the cantilever.

IMAGES



Metropolis Studio

It's the details that personalize this 6,000- square-foot home by architect David Mailing. **(FPinfomart: Restricted, Canada.com: Restricted)**



Uncredited image

A suspended room doubles as a car port in this modern home by architect John Donkin. **(FPinfomart: Restricted, Canada.com: Restricted)**



Uncredited image

Kitchen designer Friedemann Weinhardt married sleek finishes, a grid-patterned ceiling and rich, warm textures in this sizzling condo. **(FPinfomart: Restricted, Canada.com: Restricted)**



Uncredited image

This country home, by Amsted Construction, combines stone detailing and complex rooflines. **(FPinfomart: Restricted, Canada.com: Restricted)**

Chuck Mills Residential Design and Deslaurier Custom Cabinets entered a kitchen with soapstone counters and an apron-front sink.

Design First Interiors used olive green-tinted concrete for the steps and tub support in a long, narrow bathroom. All the concrete was enhanced to look like hardened adobe mud, highlighted by 18-karat-gold flakes coated with clear epoxy.

"I did find the usage and combination of materials to create detail was good, exciting," says judge Linda Nolan of Linda Nolan Interiors.

In her third year as a judge, Nolan has seen a move to less-traditional designs.

"We're getting more clean, contemporary entries. This certainly seems to be the way everyone's headed -- not as much clutter and stuff. It says just enough, not too much. Nothing is overdone. Nobody went over the top."

Creative windows stood out among the entries: interior and exterior stained-glass windows and transoms; wagon-wheel, porthole and quarter-round windows; glass block framing the entry to a dining room; leaded glass doors in kitchen cabinets lit from within.

In a Chuck Mills/Amsted Construction submission, a 100-year-old stained-glass window of flowers and entwined lines was relocated from the vestibule to the master ensuite above the tub.

Interior water features showed up in several dining rooms, and ceilings showed considerable attention to detail -- wavy and kidney-shaped dropped bulkheads over islands and multi-coffered ceilings that drew the eye upward.

Renovations continued to be a booming business for area builders. Several entries were tiny post-Second World War bungalows that had had additions to the top or back to enlarge them for today's family living. Another renovation trend was to add a second or even third storey to existing homes, again to make them more suitable for growing families -- for teenagers, families enlarged by adoption or the arrival of aging parents into nanny suites. Renovator of the Year contestants were Michael Martin of Michael Martin Luxury Renovations, Guy Moffitt of GSM Construction, and Steve Barkhouse of Amsted Construction.

Serious competition marked the Details category, which honours interesting, unique and well-designed components of a finished house.

Christopher Simmonds submitted a funky basement bar with a floating bulkhead incorporating hidden lighting and four patterns of marmoleum flooring in playful, curving, curlicue lines. Design First displayed shoji doors made for clients who love to travel to Japan, plus a penthouse kitchen island with a granite top made to look 17 centimetres thick.

Amsted also offered two entries: a glass floor in an upstairs sitting area that allows natural light into the entryway below, and a railing with metal balusters that look like they contain random knots.

Moneca Kaiser added curving cabinets on each side of a family room fireplace with matching bulkheads above, while Paul Denys submitted a rebuilt Victorian porch with hand-cut pregnant-lady balusters.

Finally, Phoenix Homes entered the effective lighting details in a model home that included potlights in bulkheads over a fireplace and low lights just above the steps in a curving staircase.

But sensational details also appeared in dozens of other entries. An aquarium was built into curly sycamore kitchen cabinets by Design First. Bryden Martel Architects added whimsical design elements to a modest Rockcliffe home, including an intricate stair railing with interwoven steel rods that suggest the tree branches that surround the home, round and quarter-round windows and a third-floor balcony that feels like a treehouse overlooking the secluded garden.

Urban Keios was back with its funky curves, playful designs in rooflines and a built-in wavy maple bench attached to an angled maple cabinet, while Moneca Kaiser built a round doorway in an Asian-inspired home.

Alti Design showcased a kitchen as a piece of art, with five-cm thick plantation teak as a countertop as well as macassar ebony crowns and inlays and arbutus burl veneer doors. Carleton Kitchens had a custom glass countertop on a raised bar and half-wall that lights up from underneath with a soft green glow. Copper and slate were materials of choice, while stone fireplaces appeared in several kitchens.

Egan found it unfortunate that, while tract builders have attractive designs, they're overshadowed by custom homes.



Uncredited image
Design First Interiors blended different tones of grey in this sleek custom kitchen. (FPinfomart: Restricted, Restricted) Canada.com:

But, overall, judges found the entries illustrate the leading edge of things to come. Although Ottawa is considered conservative, we still see innovation in housing here, says Normand.

"I feel that we're getting there. They certainly are trying to be more eye-catching. It's nice to acknowledge those who take a leap of faith."

Kathryn Young is a frequent contributor to Style Weekly Homes.

Illustration:

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- Colour Photo: A suspended room doubles as a car port in this modern home by architect John Donkin.
- Colour Photo: Kitchen designer Friedemann Weinhardt married sleek finishes, a grid-patterned ceiling and rich, warm textures in this sizzling condo.
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