

Unique bungalow achieves the wow-factor

Eclectic design for empty-nester home inspired by *Life* magazine

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Calgary Herald

It has what they call a “Starbucks” ceiling downstairs. Huge aluminum I-beams hold up the top of the peaked, 18-foot ceilings over the kitchen. A mesh wire railing leads to the stairs to the lower level.

Brick is on an inside wall. Barn-style doors lead to the cosy TV room. Furniture is from numerous retailers, including Liquidation World. The striking entry feature is a giant concrete face meant for an outside garden.

“The great thing about this house is that the owner (55-year-old Johanna Thompson, along with her husband Dave, 57) did what she wanted,” says Kelvin Choy, president of Matisse Homes, who built the home on an acreage northwest of Calgary. “She didn’t care what others thought.”

Indeed, says Johanna, “everyone thought I was crazy when I told them what would be in the home.” But it works — and works grandly.

The 2,280-square-foot bungalow (with the lower level also developed) is a warm, contemporary home filled with interest, drama and cosy intimacy. It definitely has the wow factor.

Not that it is exactly what was planned. The enthusiastic homeowner has been carrying around a well-thumbed copy of a June 1994 *Life* magazine for more than a dozen years, honing her dream.

In it, renowned architect Robert Stern designed a “dream” house — one that was “classic on the outside and remarkable on the inside — and affordable.” The home, the magazine claimed, “can be adapted to suit your family and can be built anywhere you want.” Little did the writer know that, indeed, it could be — 14 years later on an acreage in Bears paw, 25 kilometres outside Calgary.

“I like the floor plan,” says Johanna about the magazine’s dream home. “It’s pretty practical and it’s a house that works for us.”

The original certainly wasn’t this modern, says Dave. “But the structure of the home is pretty similar, other than some additions.” The floor plan of the *Life* magazine model was about 1,400 square feet, and it was a two-storey house.

“I wanted a bungalow,” says Johanna. “This home is one we can live in in our old age, when we are not able to go up



Kelvin Choy of Matisse Homes says he loves creating something out of the ordinary.

PHOTOS: CALGARY HERALD, CANWEST NEWS SERVICE



The front of Dave and Johanna Thompson’s dream home overlooks a forest in the community of Bears paw.

and down stairs.” Just one bedroom is on the main floor, but it’s a good-sized master suite with a roomy walk-in closet and full ensuite.

Johanna says it was important to have three large bedrooms downstairs “so the kids can come home.” The empty-nester couple has three children, two living in other cities. The third has just moved back from living in Vancouver and will soon be moving to his own condo.



The dining nook off the kitchen gives a cosy feel to the home.

While the bones of the home design came from the *Life* magazine, “there were 15 other references that were handed to the designer and he was told to ‘work this in,’” says Dave with a laugh.

Johanna certainly did her homework and knew what she wanted.

Once the imagination played out, then it was up to the designer to make the plan work and the builder to figure out how to build it.

Not an easy task, but a delightful one, says Choy, who has been building custom homes on acreages and infill lots in the inner city since 2004.

“I love doing anything out of the ordinary,” he says. “It’s great to be able to do something out of the box.”

“This is one of my favourite homes I’ve ever done.” Not without challenges, though.

The I-beams soaring to the top of the peaked ceiling in the kitchen are one example. Truly the focal point of the whole house, they’re dramatic and eye-catching, packing a punch no matter which direction you look. But they weren’t easy to put in.

The original beams the couple saw in a magazine were made of steel, but the weight of so many steel beams was a factor, so we sourced other materials before deciding on aluminum, which cut the weight by one-third, he says.

“Then, my granite installer actually notched the granite to fit the beams through so there wouldn’t be extra weight sitting on the granite and the danger of cracking the countertop.” The aluminum was then stained a dark charcoal colour — another complicated process that took three different steps.

The same stained aluminum beams are used to frame the floor-to-ceiling fireplace surround in the great room.

The “barn” doors are 114 kilograms so they needed special metal tracks to allow them to slide and hold the weight.

The metal mesh used in place of spindles on the staircase railing are one-inch square, and matched on the outside deck.

As for the “Starbucks” ceiling, it’s downstairs — a dropped ceiling made of plywood and filled with potlights and exposed bolts.

It was built to hide the heating ducts, rather than a traditional drywall treatment with stippling on the ceiling.

“It adds a unique flair to the space,” says Choy.

The exterior of the house is quite European in style, hearkening back to Johanna’s Dutch roots, he says.

“The front of the home is like the house where I was born in Holland,” says Johanna.

“It had French caps on top, and we adapted it from there. One of our daughters lives in Mississippi and the facades there have a French influence — that’s here as well.”

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