

DECEMBER 2010 - No. 215

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# Our House Is a Very Very Very Fine House





It's no accident that the front door is such a dominant component in the design of Peter and Jessica Bootsma's new house near Grafton, Ontario. Composed of recycled barn beams, the portico is intended to be an inviting feature. "When we drive up the driveway, the entrance welcomes us home," says Peter.



## When they built their dream home, a couple borrowed style from the past and matched it with a futuristic approach to energy efficiency and technology.

STORY BY TOM CRUICKSHANK

INTERIOR PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL WALLACE

WINTER PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDREA HUNNIFORD

Jessica and Peter Bootsma met on an airplane en route to Chicago in 2002. She was on her way home; he was flying from Toronto on business. From that initial conversation high above the clouds, a romance blossomed. They were married in 2004 and by 2005, Peter and Jessica were making plans to build a house together.

It was a logical step for the couple. "The house was our way of establishing our lives together," recalls Peter. For Jessica, the relationship meant pulling up stakes and re-establishing her career on this side of the border. "It was a new life for both of us, and we wanted to start fresh." A new house—tailor-made to the two of us—would be very symbolic.

At the start, the idea was to build a home reflective of their interests and personalities. It would be a hideaway in the country built specially for the two of them, with extra room for family when they visit. Likewise, Jessica was keen to indulge her penchant for Arts and Crafts style, whose simplicity and clean lines struck a chord in her creative mind long ago. Moreover, the house was to be a model of energy efficiency, using passive solar and other green technology. "It was a great creative exercise," Jessica says. She couldn't wait to put some ideas on paper.

Integrating the ideas of two individuals is daunting. Trouble was, there were perhaps too many good ideas. Jessica says, "I sketched a lot of concepts and knew the feasibility of construction was the challenge. Even so, we needed someone to co-ordinate our ideas on paper and develop a design we could construct." So the couple turned to Toronto-based Christine Lolley and Tom Knezic,

newly partnered in an architectural practice and in personal life. "We liked Christine and Tom's ideas," Jessica recalls. "They were really keen on green concepts and I especially liked that they actually listened to our ideas so our house would truly be our own."

Things finally started to come together when Christine and Tom presented the concept of an Arts and Crafts house, namely the Pratt House in Ventura County, California, the 1909 masterpiece by the architect brothers Charles and Henry Greene. "It provided lots of inspiration—details such as the beauty of wooden beams, the design of the front entry and details for the fireplace—and we especially liked the long, linear floor plan."

The idea to adapt the Greene and Greene design proved to be pivotal, for not only was it a faithful expression of Arts and Crafts sensibilities, it also made great use of daylight. "We like that the house is only one-room deep, so you get lots of light at any time of day." And the benefits didn't end there. "Think of the passive solar possibilities," Jessica says. "With a southern exposure, the linear layout of rooms can bring lots of sunshine through the windows, selected for the high solar heat gain factor, during the winter months. Yet the extended roof overhangs keeps the heat from the summer at bay."

Before any lines were drawn on paper, Christine gave Peter and Jessica a homework assignment, suggesting each write a diary-style essay describing an ideal day in their new house. "I wanted to know how they would use the house, who would share it with them, how they see





The house is divided into two obvious sections: the lower wing for the kitchen, dining and living areas and a private two-storey wing that contains bedrooms, guest rooms and home offices. The house is only one room deep, which makes good use of available light and provides opportunities for passive solar.

their lives in, say, five years," Christine says, adding that this is the best way to insure that the architecture says as much about the client as it does about the architect.

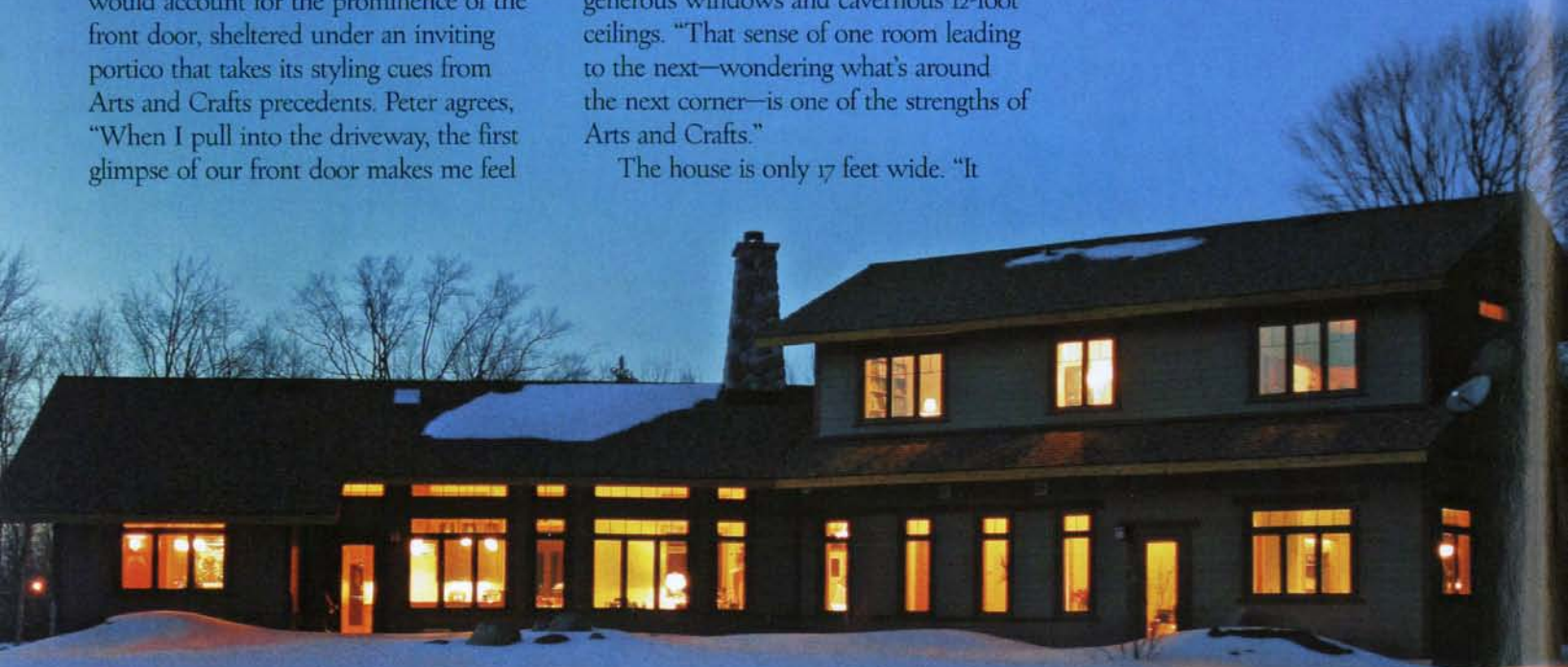
For Peter, it was important that the house be blessed with a sense of "sanctuary." "He faces a long commute," Christine explains, "and wanted the house to welcome him home each day." This would account for the prominence of the front door, sheltered under an inviting portico that takes its styling cues from Arts and Crafts precedents. Peter agrees, "When I pull into the driveway, the first glimpse of our front door makes me feel

like I can put my daily cares away for another day."

Likewise, Jessica borrowed another concept from the Arts and Crafts book: "I liked the idea of going through a 'sequence' before arriving in the living area," she says. To that end, the entry hall has a low ceiling and offers few clues that beyond is a real architectural treat, that is the open-concept living area, with its generous windows and cavernous 12-foot ceilings. "That sense of one room leading to the next—wondering what's around the next corner—is one of the strengths of Arts and Crafts."

The house is only 17 feet wide. "It

looks bigger than it actually is," says Jessica, noting that the plan is divided into two obvious wings—the open-concept living area and the bedrooms—joined by the front entry hall. (This is yet another idea borrowed from the Greene Brothers.) Throughout the design and construction, Jessica was meticulous about keeping records. "I tore articles out







of home magazines and kept binders on everything from paint colours to bath fixtures to roofing materials," she says. She even acted as her own general contractor, something that she is hesitant to recommend to anyone else. "Construction took a lot out of me," she admits, recalling how difficult it was to juggle it with her day job. Moreover, it wasn't easy to find contractors familiar with the state-of-the-art materials she was keen on using. Nevertheless, she doesn't regret a thing. "This is our home, the place we want to be ours," she says. "We had to get it right."

## THINKING GREEN

- House employs structural insulated panels (SIPs) in lieu of a conventional frame. The panels are prefabricated, and incorporate an insulating layer of rigid foam sandwiched between two layers of structural board. SIPs get the environmental nod not only for superior insulation value but also because the panels are made largely from wood byproducts that might otherwise go to waste.
- Likewise, there was an effort to limit the call for new wood. Some components, notably the barn beams that frame the entrance portico, are recycled. Fibre-cement siding is considered quite green as are bamboo floors, in light of how quickly bamboo stands can regenerate themselves.
- Hydronic radiant in-floor heating system is divided into four zones, so that certain rooms can be turned down or shut off when not in use.
- The house is aligned along an east-west axis so that there are lots of south-facing windows, perfect for passive solar capabilities.
- Linear arrangement also allows windows on opposite walls, thus encouraging cross ventilation. Ceiling fans in all the rooms alleviate the need for air conditioning.
- An idea borrowed from Arts and Crafts style, windows and doorways have overhead transoms, which are an important ventilation consideration.
- House plants—lots of them—do more than add greenery to the interior. They also play a role in maintainin indoor air quality.







## The Down-Home Appeal of Arts and Crafts

Like clothing, furniture and everything else related to taste and design, residential architecture goes through phases. And chances are today's fashion is a reaction against yesterday's. That's certainly the case with Arts and Crafts, an aesthetic movement that looked back in horror at the excesses of the Victorian era. Lighting the way for the new 20th century, it turned its back on ostentation and ornament in favour of something more humble, home grown and tuned to nature. "Its whole purpose is to minimize the distinction which exists between inside and outside of four walls," explained a 1906 edition *Architectural Record*, describing the work of architects Charles and Henry Greene, two of the movement's biggest champions. "The exterior should... sink its architectural individuality and tend to disappear in its natural background." And most telling of all, "Its most prominent architectural member will inevitably be its roof."

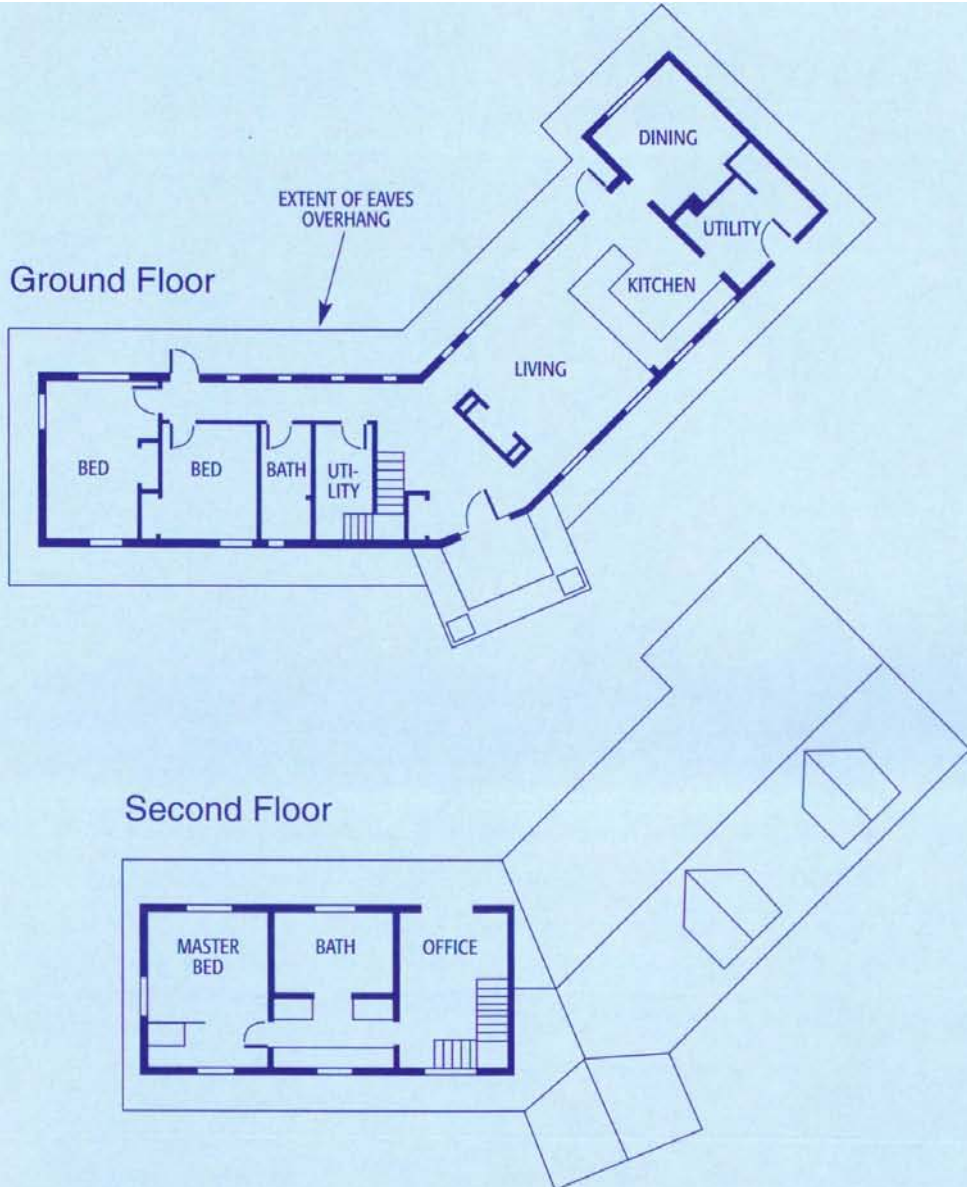


Open-concept living area and kitchen stand in marked contrast to the more private appeal of the upstairs bedrooms, but the common thread is a certain architectural presence borrowed from the Arts and Crafts tradition. It shows in the choice of colours, window stylings, the lack of ostentation and the pervasive hue of oak.





Inside, Arts and Crafts houses were the antithesis of their Victorian cousins. Gone were the conspicuous architectural gew-gaws in favour of simple lines and minimal trim. Where Victorian houses were glamorous and pretentious, Arts and Crafts style was more modest, understated and homespun. "I've never seen an Arts and Crafts house I didn't like," says Jessica, and she's seen a few, having grown up in the American Midwest where the style had enormous appeal. And she isn't alone in her enthusiasm: In recent years, the style has been revived, serving as a model for contemporary interpretation. ☻



## Specs

**Concept** Contemporary home modelled after the principles of Arts and Crafts style, designed with energy efficiency in mind.

**Architect:** Christine Lolley and Tom Knezic, Solares Design, Toronto. Owner acted as general contractor.

**Location** On two acres in an estate subdivision near Grafton, Ontario, east of Toronto

**Genesis** Sod turned spring 2007; habitable by autumn 2007

**Bedrooms** 3

**Bathrooms** 2

**Total usable floor area** About 2,200 square feet

**Construction** Structural Insulated Panels (SIPs)—see text

**Foundation** Slab on grade; no conventional basement (in light of local high water table)

**Roof** 50-year asphalt shingles with fiberglass coating

**Cladding** 25-year fibre-cement siding

**Insulation** Walls: Rigid foam, as part of SIPs panels (R40). Ceilings: Blown-in cellulose (R60).

**Heat** Primary source: in-floor, propane-fired radiant heat; with wood-burning fireplace insert. Winter comfort greatly assisted by passive solar.

**Windows** Double-paned windows with fiberglass frames

**Electrical service** 200-amp service

**Water and Waste Management** Conventional well and septic system

**Selected trades** Siding and custom millwork: Rob Thompson, Newcastle; Tile: Artisan Tile, Grafton; Front entry: Dave Vanderschaff, Cobourg; Building materials: Cole's TimbrMart, Brighton