

Natural advantage

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 Byline: Kathryn Young
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Designers and builders will be sipping chilled champagne tonight as Ottawa's housing industry celebrates its best. It's very likely winning homes, scrumptious kitchens and soothing ensuites will feature generous helpings of slate, stone and fine woods

Wenge wood and bamboo, stone columns inside and out, cherry cabinetry, glass tiles and leaded copper, slate and limestone -- natural materials create warmth and earthiness in this year's contenders for the design awards to be handed out tonight by the

Ottawa-Carleton Home Builders' Association.

At a glitzy gala at the National Gallery, builders, designers and renovators of the most outstanding projects will be honoured with marble-and-glass trophies. Judges won't give away secrets, but they found the overall quality of the 100 finalists to be solid.

"There's no reason that we in Ottawa -- designers and builders -- need to take a second seat to any other major centre in Canada," says designer Gerhard Linse, one of the five judges. "The big national design magazines should take note and pay attention to what's being done here. There's been some exceptional things in the last three or four years."

"I was very impressed with the submissions," agrees judge and architect Linda Chapman. "The winning ones had mixtures of materials which was interesting."

The new mixed palettes of natural materials included exotic woods such as wenge and anigre from Africa or Brazilian cherry, slate and limestone tiles, soapstone counters, raised glass eating bars with ragged-look edges, glass tiles and mosaics -- nary a view of vinyl flooring or broadloom, although vinyl siding still appears on the backs of tract houses.

"Esthetically, it came together nicely," says fellow judge Katy Sinha, vice-president of sales and marketing at Dharma Developments. "It helps a home blend into its environment better when those natural materials are used, even as a facade."

Other design elements that kept cropping up were spare fireplaces, many with a simple shelf-style hearth, the increased use of leaded copper and other metals on exteriors, and the emphasis on horizontal lines in windows, wall tiles, utensil racks and cabinetry that spread wide rather than reaching tall.

But though the general quality was high, judges weren't hit with the "Wow" factor often enough for their liking.

"There wasn't too much that was really innovative," says Sinha.

And Rick Hughes, a project manager at Canada Lands Co., found the bathrooms in particular were a tad too tame.

"There's a lot of beige ceramic -- it was blah," he says. What really impressed him was the high quality of infill projects, both small and large, that provided decent architecture and clean lines while remembering the affordability issue.

Each judge had his or her particular bugbears they looked for when choosing the winners in 29 categories. Linse kept his eye on front entries and mudrooms to see whether they could accommodate up to a half dozen visitors at a time without being crammed into a postage-stamp-sized space.

"I think it's just horrible when that happens," says Linse. "There's no need for design like that."

He noted that open-concept designs continue to be popular because they suit today's more casual family lifestyle. But in open-plan kitchens, he watched for an effort to hide dirty dishes from the eating area -- say, with a raised eating bar -- and examined the wide industrial stoves for built-in shelves behind them that would encourage people to reach over while cooking and set their sleeves on fire.

Sinha eyed the plans for good lighting, efficient use of space, wine racks and bar fridges in kitchens (rather than stuck in basements), and kitchens and bathrooms that featured high-tech elements, such TVs in niches, music speakers wired into the ceiling or a built-in cappuccino maker -- and she happily found good examples.

"I appreciate little details like that," she says. "It saves on space."

Meanwhile, Chapman, who is also chair of the association's green building committee, checked the entrants for energy-efficient, green and sustainable features. This year's awards introduced a new green/sustainable category that attracted three submissions -- from Kitchen Craft and Linda Nolan Interiors, Lagois Drafting and Construction, and Christopher Simmonds Architect.

Chapman noticed more green features creeping into the regular categories as well -- exactly the direction that she hopes home building will take. But for now, the category has great education value for the public, as well as builders to showcase what's possible.

"I'm pleased there were enough submissions to justify having our own category," she says.

Architect David Egan judged the designs on their details, looking for symmetry, for dormers that might be overpowering, for windows too small or too big, or any elements that look good but create maintenance nightmares. He also noted a lot of vibrant colours used effectively in interiors.

"I'm a detail person," says Egan. "That comes through from my background in the technical side."

He was pleased that natural materials have moved into tract homes.

"We're getting more and more materials that were very custom materials introduced into average homes," says Egan, lauding suppliers for making a range of materials available. "Designers use what's available. They're getting some beautiful materials that are very affordable and very real -- they look natural."

People who are concerned about the source of exotic woods -- whether from rainforests or plantations -- should be sure to ask, cautions Linse. And although bamboo has been around for a number of years, it's easier to get it in larger, wider pieces.

On exteriors, wood needs a lot of maintenance, but there are more and more natural-looking wood replacements, such as synthetic decking, fibre cement boards such as Hardiboard, and OSB (oriented strand board) with a coating that lasts for 25 years.

"All these things have a price point," says Linse, but when you don't have to replace them or spend a lot on maintenance, they can be well worthwhile.

Last year, there were so many condominiums entered into the contest that the association created a new condo category. But surprisingly, there weren't enough entries to make it a go this year.

IMAGES



Uncredited image
 Judges sifted through more than 100 entries in the 2006 Design Awards, finding bold colouring and healthy helpings of natural finishes. The winners will be announced at a gala tonight. **(FPinfomart: Restricted, Canada.com: Restricted)**



Uncredited image
 Urban Keios maintained its reputation for edgy designs, combining personalized tiles created by members of the Glebe family, then inseting them into the ceramic backsplash. Amsted built the curvy, customized kitchen. Note the funky stool that looks like a giant, overturned cooking pot. **(FPinfomart: Restricted, Canada.com: Restricted)**



Uncredited image
 Princiotta Custom Built Homes, the folks who designed and built the Ottawa Hospital lottery home outside Manotick, is a contender for honours tonight in the custom category for designs between 4,000 and 5,999 square feet with this two-storey stone address on Deer Meadow Drive. **(FPinfomart: Restricted, Canada.com: Restricted)**



Uncredited image
 Amsted Construction and Ottawa architect Richard Limmert pooled their talents to renovate this McKellar Park two-storey home, adding a modern edge in an established neighbourhood. **(FPinfomart: Restricted, Canada.com: Restricted)**



Uncredited image
 Herb Lagois combined granite and heavy, rough-cut glass to add eye appeal to this customized kitchen in a North Gower home. **(FPinfomart: Restricted, Canada.com: Restricted)**



Uncredited image
 Uniform Urban Developments teamed up with Ottawa architect Barry Hobin to design and build a community of distinctive townhomes in Alta Vista. **(FPinfomart: Restricted, Canada.com: Restricted)**

Other changes to the awards included a limit of two years for judges, and a maximum of five and a minimum of two finalists per category.

Kathryn Young is an Ottawa writer.

Next Saturday: Winning designs in 2006

Illustration:

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