

Living on the Edge

Marian and David Aylward build a combination city-style house and cottage within easy commuting distance of the capital

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PHOTOGRAPHY MARC FOWLER/METROPOLIS

IT'S A FAMILIAR REFRAIN: so many of us want it all—the calm of a country home combined with a manageable commute to the city. That dream usually proves impossible, and those who can afford it end up giving in and shelling out for both a cottage retreat and a house closer to work. Unless, that is, they're among the few blessed with the foresight and talent to score that coveted cottage vibe within the city limits. And that's what brings us to Marian and David Aylward's home in Sprucewoods, a development located just off March Road in the city's far west end.

Full of personal touches, natural light, and lofty open spaces, this is a house that fits its country setting both inside and out. Here, the city is largely left behind. The road meanders, and nature presents itself at every turn. Birds play chicken with passing cars, chipmunks chatter and jibe,



the tree line on the cedars hints at a healthy deer population, and local lore includes the story of a bear that snaffled a garbage can and then sat on it, folding it in half.

When Marian and David purchased a parcel of land here in 1996, they already had a strong sense of what they hoped to accomplish. Both in their 30s, they had rented for years in Kanata and had scouted out dozens of houses for sale without ever finding the perfect fit. The solution, they decided, would be to build from scratch. The new community of Sprucewoods was ideal for a couple who wanted to be part of a neighbourhood but didn't want to worry about whether the television was turned up too loud or wake up to the revving of a neighbour's lawnmower in the morning. Sprucewoods, a 200-acre development that boasts properties averaging two acres each, held the promise of peace and tranquility. It has kept that promise. There are now 44 houses in the development, many of them built among mature evergreens: a truly restful setting for eyes accustomed to cookie-cutter houses on tiny suburban lots.

Then came the hard part—designing, building, and decorating from the ground up. Armed with a hefty file filled with

There are plenty of wonderful things about Marian and David Aylward's home. It's full of light, open spaces, and unexpected surprises. But one of the best things about it is how it blends perfectly into the surroundings. This also extends to the garage (left), a 100-year-old barn that was bought, disassembled, transported, and reassembled on the site. Today it shelters the car and provides work space and generous amounts of storage





In order to get that “cottage feel,” the Aylwards created a 1,500-square-foot room by installing a giant awning over the cedar deck on the back of the house

pages torn from magazines, the couple set to work. It wasn't long before similarities began to surface, ideas jelled, and Marian and David found their direction. With a few suggestions from their builder thrown into the mix, construction of what would become a stunning house began less than a year after they bought the land. Not bad for a couple with no background that would suggest an aptitude for building or design.

Marian, who works in marketing, hails from Stoney Creek near Hamilton, while David, who is in sales, grew up in a rural community in Nova Scotia. Marian has always had an interest in design and decor, having taken interior-design courses at Algonquin College. But David says it wasn't until they decided to build their own house that he discovered a surprise interest in, and aptitude for, design and construction. Today he considers himself “the structure guy,” and with the help of friends and family, he ended up tackling much of the labour himself.

Despite all those pages torn from all those magazines, this is not the kind of home that is so often portrayed in them. The opposite of sterile, every aspect of the house reflects its owners' personalities—an impression they don't feel could have been

replicated if they had hired someone else to do the design work. Here, comfortable is married with thoughtful. The Aylwards' collection of art, furnishings, and lighting can't be bought in one fell swoop from Leon's or Ikea. This is the kind of design that evolves with love and patience over time. In fact, the two purchased many of their favourite pieces before they even had a house to put them in. “It's all gut feeling,” says Marian, “buying things before there's a place for them.”

MARIAN SAYS SHE AND DAVID WERE CLEAR FROM THE START that their house would also be their cottage, and that duality is embodied in many ways, both inside and out. Inside, this is a house that is not fussy, pretentious, or overly colour-matched in trendy hues. The idea, says David, was to create a home that was comfortable and laid-back, one that would give the sense of having been lived in even when it was new. It had to be kid-friendly too. Although the Aylwards do not have children, their extended family includes 10 nieces and nephews who often come to visit. And Marian and David have always made it clear that they aren't afraid of scratches. In some cases, they even encourage them. David laughs

as he recalls the expression of cabinetmaker Darryl Villeneuve (of Villeneuve Fine Woodworks in Almonte) when he said that he'd be putting a few dents and knocks in the newly made kitchen cabinets. You know, to age them a little.

Outside, the Aylwards designed an incredible 1,500-square-foot “cottage room” by installing a giant awning over the cedar deck on the back of the house. “The awning offered us the opportunity to expand the house without having to actually build onto it,” says Marian, explaining that each spring it only takes them about a day to set up the awning itself, along with screened walls and doors. The result? A multi-purpose outdoor room that's as perfect for entertaining as it is for peaceful meditation. The cottage room is also home to a decadent 10-person hot tub and a permanent barbecue and has enough floor space to hold a great party.

The room allows the Aylwards to enjoy the beauty of the Ottawa Valley summer: its views include a lush and expansive lawn and a saltwater swimming pool, which offers much-needed relief from the summer's heat. In the background, a mature coniferous forest offers total privacy.

Above, left: Every aspect of the house reflects the owners' personalities. They chose many of their favourite pieces before they even had a house to put them in

Above, right: Even though her mornings tend to be rushed, in summer Marian likes to read the paper while she eats breakfast in their “cottage room”

Left: Brimming with natural light and views of greenery, the living room is the ultimate place to read, meditate, or socialize. Warm tones, comfortable seating, and unique pieces of art combine to make this space truly comfortable



Designed both to hide and to showcase, the kitchen is a foodie's dream come true



Back inside, the true centre of the home is the kitchen. Marian estimates that it took a year's worth of research to plan their ideal space. As self-professed foodies, the Aylwards needed their kitchen to be highly functional but wanted it to be comfortable, since they knew they'd spend so many hours there.

All that planning paid off. The finished kitchen is striking—designed both to hide and to showcase. For instance, while glass cabinet doors show off a collection of three sets of china, cabinetmaker Darryl Villeneuve also installed an appliance garage whose roll-down door adeptly conceals the toaster and other pedestrian kitchen clutter. And a walk-in pantry could probably double as a panic room, completely camouflaged as it is behind cabinet doors. Unsuspecting visitors anticipating regular shelves behind the door are instead surprised to discover steps leading down to a spacious storage



room. There, meticulously labelled open shelving holds rows of wicker baskets filled with all manner of spices, cookbooks, and less-used appliances and pots.

The focus in the kitchen proper is a long island topped with versatile stainless steel. "You can take something out of the oven and put it straight down, prep food on it, serve food on it, and eat at it," explains Marian. And while its tendency to scratch might turn some people off, she likes the idea of a counter whose surface reflects a busy, well-loved space. On the practical side, stainless steel is waterproof, heat resistant, and easy to clean.

The Aylwards' choice of stove cements the kitchen's gourmand appeal. The kitchen was Marian's turf, but the process of researching and buying the stove was something David definitely wanted to be a part of. It was he who discovered the Wolf, a range that comes

with a grill between the burners. And though it was more expensive than a conventional range, the capacity to charbroil indoors was a must on David's wish list. Unfortunately, the Wolf wasn't available in Ottawa. So the two bought a beef tenderloin (David swears by The Butchery in Bells Corners), then drove, meat and all, straight to a showroom in Montreal for a test grilling. The Wolf passed muster, and David insists it can grill anything better than their Vermont Castings barbeque.

EVERY PART OF THIS HOUSE reflects a couple who know what they want and have used their imaginations to achieve it. And, like all great projects, theirs is a work-in-progress. As she concludes the tour, Marian shows me the space reserved for a wine cellar that has yet to be finished. David, meanwhile, is now turning his attention to the outside, building stone walls that he hopes will replicate the look and feel of the Tuscan countryside they love visiting.

Asked what she likes best about the house, Marian has an immediate answer. Beyond all else, it's the sense of tranquility they feel when they get home after a busy day. Amen to that. ■

Top, left and right: Once part of the old garage, this space made perfect use of what could have been an awkward corner. "It's like having all of your cabinets open at once," says Marian. "You can immediately find what you're looking for."

Bottom, left and right: The ever-so-organized Marian built compartments within the kitchen drawers for easier access to tea and cereal

Opposite, bottom: Short of teaching your cat to eat off a plate and put it in a dishwasher, this is the ultimate solution for where to put the kibble. A drawer has a hole cut in the bottom, supporting the food dish. The drawer can be pulled out at dinnertime and pushed back when not in use. Little did they know that Ernie, their super-sized cat, would actually learn how to open it. ("I heard the drawer opening and then munching," recalls David.) Perhaps it's because of his anatomical advantage over the two other housecats – he does, after all, have an extra toe.