

The dining area, which is just inside the front door and off the kitchen, features a table that Mickleberry built himself of reclaimed fir, etched out with worm holes.



JOHN McRAY/VICTORIA TIMES COLONIST

The outside of Rod Mickleberry's hip new Victoria home, which caused neighbours to comment on its ugliness.



The living room, which is at the back of the multi-sectioned house.



A raised floor of black-stained ash elevates the cook to centre stage in the open kitchen.

'Ugly' house is a livable one for maverick developer

Victoria builder, who's tired of 'faux heritage' styles, added flying buttress

By SUSAN DOWN

VICTORIA - It takes guts to build the new house on the block, using a hip design that's sure to have the neighbourhood talking. During the five months it took to build their new home this year, Janice and Rob Mickleberry heard plenty of dissenting opinions from community critics, some not covert at all. "I had people stopping to tell me — this was before we were finished — that this was the ugliest house they had ever seen," said Rob, adding that since they've painted the house, most of the negative comments have stopped. A house design should

reflect current design philosophies, says Mickleberry, a maverick developer whose company, Prodigy Development Services, has created some innovative small lot subdivisions in the Victoria area.

"I'm getting a little tired of the faux heritage," he said. "I used to believe that the best way to go into a neighbourhood was to build something that actually suited the neighbourhood."

Ironically, he also built one of the oldest-looking homes in the vicinity right next door, a gabled, heritage-style house that he sold in 1997. That was before he started really examining the local residential

architecture and saw everything from turn-of-the-20th-century homes to bungalows from the 1960s and 1970s. "In every one of those periods, they built in the style of the period." Since then he has built a collection of modern homes throughout the city that aren't neo-anything.

Mickleberry's new house is the result of that builder's epiphany. The design, by Zebra/Channel 5, was partly dictated by the location on a wide but shallow lot. Located on a busy street in Fairfield, the lot was formerly his neighbour's front yard, which had been subdivided. "This is a normal city lot turned sideways," he said.

He had to take the project to Victoria's board of variance for approval to reduce the standard 25-foot rear setback by five feet to give the house a livable dimension. At 20 feet deep, the interior is actually four feet wider than Mickleberry's last home, another contemporary landmark.

Sitting atop a rocky rise, the house may look imposing from the street but it is well within the permissible height. A covenant has protected the arbutus trees in the front yard.

To offset the long and skinny house he had to build to match the lot, he chose an exterior that is full of texture with a three-colour palette. The front face of the house also has a nose, a cantilevered mid section — like a flying buttress — that gives it a unique profile.

In a new take on board and batten finishing, he opted for Hardipanel siding shaped into squares by spruce trim. For contrasting texture, he used stucco on upper sections.

Inside, the look is contemporary without sacrificing warmth and comfort. Although Mickleberry has plenty of experience choosing layouts and finishes, when it came to his own family home, the decisions had to be shared. "My wife is my toughest client by far," he said, adding they had help from interior designer Sandy Nygaard.

The walls throughout are shades of warm grey. The pony wall separating the kitchen from the entry is a deep plum, and doors and trim are a darker shade of grey.

A floor-to-ceiling window overlooking the back yard is oversized industrial aluminum. The concrete floors (the house has in-floor radi-

ant heat) are scored to resemble tile, and the concrete is also slightly textured to look like slate.

The two-storey home has a sectioned rather than completely open layout on the ground floor. At one end, just inside the front door, is the dining room. The kitchen is in the middle followed by the living room on the other side.

A raised kitchen floor of black-stained ash elevates the cook to centre stage. "I wanted to define the room while still making it an open plan," he said. "Nobody's being left out of the loop because they have to go to the kitchen to get something." Appliances are stainless steel including a Frigidaire fridge, KitchenAid gas convection range and Maytag dishwasher. A pantry wall replaces the need for hanging cupboards. Maple cabinets (by Successful Visions) feature chunky brushed aluminum handles from Ikea, topped by simple black laminate counters.

On the other side of the gas fireplace wall is the family room with french doors leading out to the level back yard — a must for the couple's two young children. This room is more relaxed with a pine armoire and textured slipcovers on an oversized armchair and couch.

Furnishings range from handcrafted to designer. For example, Mickleberry made the dining table of reclaimed fir from a heritage building, using planks with worm-hole filigree. The couple picked up a couple of black leather tub chairs at Ikea, pairing them with a pedigreed gold couch from DesignHouse and a rainbow-striped area rug.

Upstairs the house has the same colours, with the addition of a soft beige carpet patchworked with a squared-off sisal and loop design. As well as an upstairs laundry room and four bedrooms — the master has a generous ensuite — Rob also has room for a huge home office. He has resolved the private-professional space dilemma by building an outside staircase and separate entry so he can see clients without ushering them through his family's life.

Most successful homes are designed from the inside out, says Mickleberry. Despite what the neighbourhood thinks of the exterior, the contemporary layout has passed the livability test for his family. "We were really striving for originality," he said. "I'm really happy with it."

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