The View From the Top

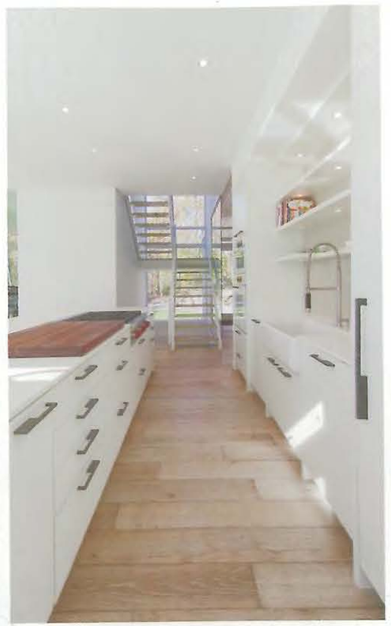
This is a family story that has played out over more than two decades, with an astute real estate decision in 1991 eventually leading, in 2013, to this Cantley retreat with glorious views down the Gatineau River

By Sarah Brown
Photography by Peter Fritz

Marc Gingras grew up just 10 minutes away from this Cantley-area viewpoint high above the Gatineau River, but he has his parents to thank for discovering the lofty site of his family's rustic modern retreat in the hills. In 1991, when Marc was just a teenager, this 1.7-acre plot, and a number of others nearby, came up for sale. His parents quickly snapped up one hilltop piece, as well as a second chunk of land down by the river. "They were obviously thinking way, way ahead — they wanted to keep their kids close by," says Marc with a laugh. "I always knew in the back in my mind that I would one day buy this land from them for my own house. It was earmarked for me."

During his 20s, Marc would go on to study in Ottawa, Waterloo, France, and Singapore. His parents would periodically receive offers on the lots. Each time they would give their son a quick call to ask whether he wanted them to sell. The answer was always no. "I'd say, 'Keep it, keep it. Eventually I'll want to build. One day.' " That day finally came in 2011. Marc and his wife, Natalie Sawaya, were living in a Montreal condo with their new baby — it was time to move closer to family (Natalie grew up in Ottawa, and her parents now live in Gatineau). Marc's brother and his family had already built their dream house on the plot by the river; now it was Marc and Natalie's turn to work with the land. While still living in Montreal, they contacted Christopher Simmonds Architect after seeing his website. "We were impressed immediately with the firm's style and their attention to how houses were placed in their environment," explains Natalie.

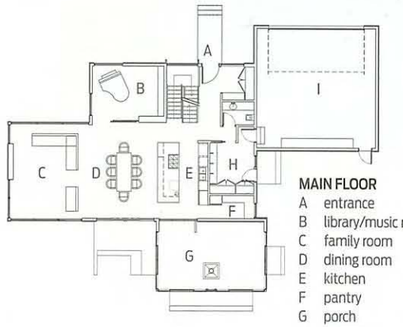
Top The open ground floor allows sunlight to flow through uninterrupted, showcasing the beauty of the natural light. **Facing page** The reclaimed wood on the second level provides a textured balance to the white cement board and glass of the ground floor. **Inset** The family enjoys spending time in the expansive porch



When construction began in the spring of 2012, Natalie and Marc moved to Ottawa to be close by, renting a house for the duration of the 15-month build, a process they describe as "excruciating but worth it in the end." To take advantage of the views he had discovered on that cold winter's day a few months earlier, Shean had to even out the steep incline of the property so that the house could sit up high. He would end up using the giant slabs of rock — dug up to create the space for the basement level — to construct a natural-looking retaining wall. The land behind it was then filled in to create a level spot on which the house would sit. The concrete pool, located at the height of the original slope, was set into the landscape. "It was designed to be minimalist," explains Shean. "The concrete and clear fencing mean it doesn't stand out."

The exterior was also designed with the surrounding environment in mind. While glass and cement board on the lower levels honour modernity, the upper level, clad in reclaimed barnboard sourced from farms in Pennsylvania, references the landscape. That same red and white oak reappears on the face of the kitchen island, tying the exterior to the interior. Although modern in tone, the house incorporates a number of rustic elements, which are seamlessly integrated into the design. Of particular note is the wide-plank white oak flooring, sourced in Amsterdam. As well, a close look at the hardware throughout the kitchen reveals a craftsman's skill, each handle made by blacksmith Michael Kinghorn. For Natalie and Marc, the project expanded the boundaries of all they had envisioned. "The beautiful thing about this custom home was that Rick understood our tastes and then made them even better," Natalie says. "The project was always way beyond anything I could find in my stacks of house magazines — he took every idea we had and made it even better."

Above Two views of the sleek open kitchen. **Above left** Although modern in tone, the kitchen, in keeping with the rest of the house, incorporates a number of rustic elements, including the wide-plank white oak flooring, the butcher block, and the handcrafted hardware on all of the cabinets. **Above right** The rustic barnboard that clads the exterior of the house reappears on the island, hiding a series of soft-touch cabinets that open to reveal storage shelves

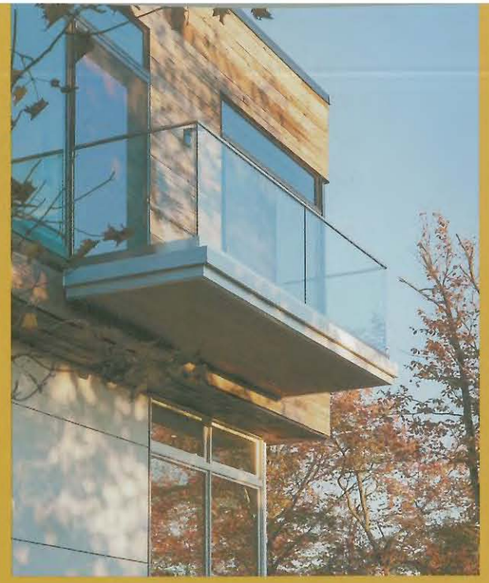


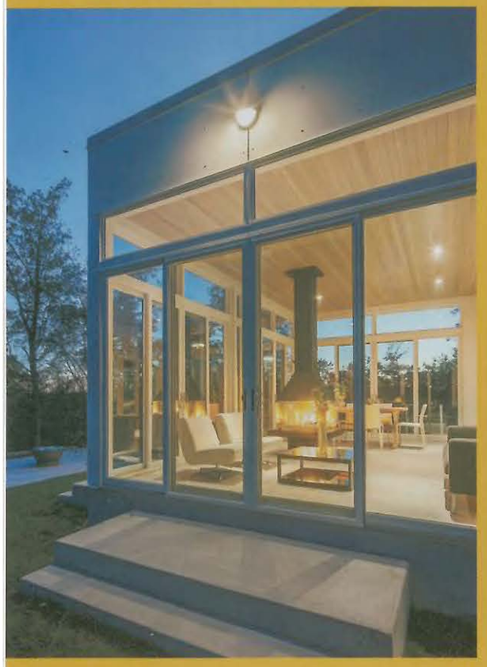
MAIN FLOOR
A entrance
B library/music room
C family room
D dining room
E kitchen
F pantry
G porch
H mudroom
I garage

The couple was further impressed when Rick Shean, who works at the firm, trekked over to Cantley on a cold winter's morning and made a video of their property, extolling the virtues of the site. Shean had slogged through the deep snow with a camera, taking the opportunity afforded by the leafless trees to point out where he envisioned the views from the various rooms of the house. "We were sitting there viewing this video in Montreal, and we felt like we were watching *The Blair Witch Project*, with the jiggly hand-held camera, the forest, and the crunching of the snow," says Marc with a laugh. But that wintertime walk would lead to a house that is perfectly situated to take advantage of the views both down the Gatineau River toward Ottawa and across the river to the ski hills of Camp Fortune. "For us, it was just forest," says Natalie. "But Rick could see the opportunities from the beginning. He positioned the house so perfectly that the views are amazing from everywhere."

Above Since moving in last summer, the family has been happily surprised by just how much they use the porch. Described by Natalie as her dream room, the sunny retreat boasts windows on three sides, which look out over the forested hills and the swimming pool. On the fourth side, accordion doors open fully to the open-concept kitchen and living room

SECOND FLOOR
A master bedroom
B closet
C balcony
D ensuite bathroom
E office
F bathroom
G laundry
H bathroom
I bedroom
J bedroom





Our Favourite Things | Natalie and Marc

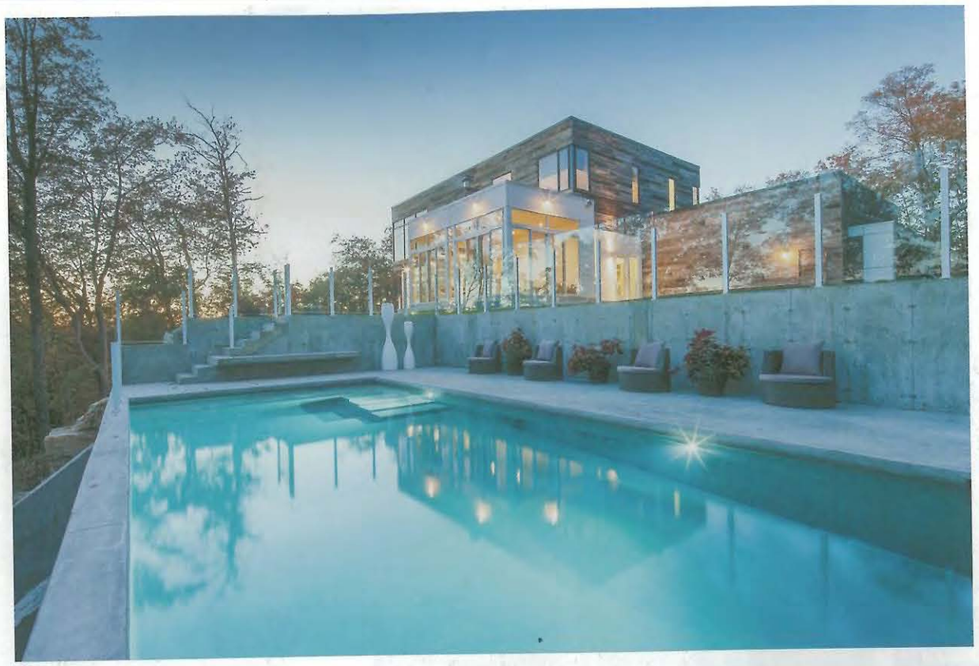
The Custom Lamp
Created by Montreal lighting designer Samuel Lambert, the custom lamp in the second-floor stairwell makes a bold statement. "It's the only thing of colour in the entire house," says Marc. Though it was originally inspired by the image of a lamp made from an old buoy that Natalie spotted on the Houzz design website, the Lambert rendition is much more refined, with a subtle red-and-black patina.

The Master Balcony
Hovering as if suspended in space, the balcony connects the master bedroom to the master bathroom. "The full glass railing gives us the feeling we're floating in the air," says Marc.

The Pantry
Natalie confesses to being "an addict of the Food Network for far too many years, so I always wanted a pantry." The open-style storage room lets her see everything and access it quickly. "This was the first room I set up when we moved in," she says. "It's a utilitarian space but also very homey." A large window and the absence of a door between the pantry and the kitchen ensure the space is always bright.

The Views
"Everywhere you look, the views are amazing," says Natalie. "And if the house had been even slightly to one side or the other, you wouldn't have gotten the same effect." Adds Marc: "We obviously knew the views were going to be nice, but they're just crazy. Everywhere. That was an unexpected — and happy — surprise for us."

The Porch
This is where the family chose to have their first dinner when they moved into their new house last summer. "With all the doors open, you can sit in here just enjoying the views and the wind playing through," says Marc. With their first winter on the horizon, the couple looks forward to closing those same doors and appreciating nature while sitting on a cozy sectional, the wood-burning fireplace warming the room.



Left Though Natalie and Marc knew they wanted a pool, they were adamant that it should blend in with its natural surroundings. With that in mind, Rick Shean of Christopher Simmonds Architect designed a concrete pool that is neatly set into the landscape. Designed to be minimalist, the grey concrete and clear fencing ensure that it doesn't stand out. **Below** Taken from the backyard, this photograph gives a good sense of the "layers" of the house, the porch visible to the right of the photo and the dramatic "floating" balcony off the master bedroom to the left. Because the house is built on a slope, much of the "basement" level is actually above ground. **Bottom** This dusk shot, taken from the front corner of the house, demonstrates how beautifully the house is integrated into the slope of the hill

Making it "even better" meant Shean and contractor Donald Thom of Timber Wolf Developments spent countless hours devising creative solutions to unusual design problems — and paying attention to each exquisite detail. Where's the television, you might ask. Press a button, and the flat-screen slowly rises out of its recessed hiding place beneath the living room floor. The blinds? Also cleverly hidden in recessed spots in the ceiling. And the visually clunky vent hood most of us have above the stove? A sleek downdraft vent takes care of that issue, rising out of the kitchen island when needed. But while these elements are revealed upon exploration, the dramatic "floating" balcony off the master bedroom has instant wow factor. Extending between the bedroom and the master bathroom, it seems to hover on air, impossibly light. Ask Shean or Thom, and they'll launch into an explanation of the complicated steel structure that ties the balcony into the house. But ask Natalie and Marc about it, and you'll get a very different take on an engineering feat. "It gives us the feeling we're floating in the air," Marc says simply.

The couple says they're still awed daily by their new home, inspired by the setting, the views, and the knowledge that this remarkable house is theirs to share with family and friends. While the kitchen is the heart of their home, they're happily surprised by just how much time they spend in the expansive porch. Described by Natalie as her dream room, the sunny retreat boasts windows on three sides and accordion doors that open fully to the open-concept kitchen and living room. All fall, the family has been enjoying nature without the bugs, and come winter, the room will stay cozy courtesy of a wood-burning fireplace. "A few weeks after we moved in, our son began saying goodnight to the birds and trees before bed," says Marc. "That never happened in Montreal."

"This is exactly how we pictured our life here," adds Natalie. "Family-oriented and with nature all around. And this house makes me smile every day."