

Housing Design Awards: Ottawa's coming of age



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Judges overwhelmingly favour contemporary spaces, with architect Chris Simmonds leading the charge



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OTTAWA — It's a mod, mod, mod, mod world, at least if this year's Housing Design Awards are anything to go by.

After a slow, steady move away from our conservative design roots, Ottawa's builders, designers and decorators are pushing the modern envelope.

"Either the clientele is becoming more diverse or the builders are," says Sandra Gibbons, co-ordinator of the kitchen and bath design program at Algonquin College and one of the judges of this year's awards. "The Ottawa market is becoming more sophisticated."

Her comments were echoed by fellow judges during a day-long session in August where winners were chosen in blind judging from among 147 entries in 38 categories.

Those winners were announced Saturday night at a Convention Centre gala hosted by the Greater Ottawa Home Builders' Association.

Leading the contemporary charge was architect and modern champion Christopher Simmonds, who dominated the winners' list, scooping up almost one-quarter of the awards for a Zen barn, an Alta Vista bungalow, a riverfront property and an infill double, which all aim to connect the inside with the outdoors to create a sustainable, peaceful living space. Although the association was unable to confirm that his firm's nine wins were a record in the 30-year history of the awards, no one could recall anyone ever winning that many.

"It's a bit overwhelming," a dumbstruck Simmonds said after a continual parade to the stage to accept his nine trophies. "We're happy for our clients; they got great houses. That's what architecture is all about."

Simmonds had two tables of staff and clients at the gala (including table No. 13; an omen, perhaps?) and brought them all up on stage for his final win of the evening.

“That’s very important to me,” he said of the move, “because every house is put together by a team.”

Simmonds was joined by a host of other modern examples, from renovations to custom builds and a smattering of production builder offerings.

RND Construction, which won with Simmonds on three of the winning designs, also tied for first with the renovation of a dated 1980s home, while company founder Roy Nandram was singled out for the Colonel Boss Award, which recognizes outstanding service to the home builders’ association (GOHBA).

“I’m a little surprised to win it,” the humble Nandram said of getting the Colonel Boss Award. “The organization is recognizing my efforts — it’s a real honour.”

Nandram has chaired GOHBA’s building innovation committee since 2010 and is heavily involved in the renovators’ council.

Industry giant Minto Communities continued its green leadership, taking the trophy for green development of the year for Ampersand in Barrhaven’s Chapman Mills, as well as getting recognition for the thoughtful design of both of its model homes at Mahogany in Manotick.

“It’s very transitional, very current,” judge and designer Luc Crawford said of the models.

Minto’s sales and marketing manager, Marlene Borsboom, was pleased with the results, saying of the models in particular that there was a concerted effort to maintain the look and feel of the Manotick community in the design, which meant a two-year process to develop the models.

“Having won for these two homes, the Walnut and Poplar, I think that is just a testament to their dedication, the teams that were put in place to create these new homes,” she said. “It really is quite breathtaking when you go through ... I think they’re quite unique.”

Custom builder Roca Homes, along with the firm of architect Barry Hobin, edged out Minto and Legacy Homes to take the housing development of the year for an enclave near Woodroffe High School and continued the modern charge with the top condominium unit (again with Hobin), a custom Scandinavian-style kitchen that’s all about clean lines, and a deceptively simplistic looking staircase that won for housing details.

“It kind of looks like it floats,” noted judge and architect Shawn Lawrence.

“This is a great year,” Roca president Roberto Campagna said after the company’s fourth win. “The two projects that we won for are very important to us.”

Not surprisingly, the big builder model homes were not quite as daring. Often lagging behind the more adventurous custom builds in their design, they’re hampered by the need to appeal to the widest selection of buyers and will make changes slowly. That often means designs are at best transitional, particularly on exteriors, with perhaps a bit more risk shown inside.

Yet many of this year’s winners at least continued the trend toward a bolder use of colour, mixing up predictable neutrals with hits of red, chocolate brown and more.

Among the daring were Richcraft, with a larger-than-life townhome in Barrhaven (it also won a GOHBA sales and marketing award, or Sammy, earlier this fall), and eQ Homes, which splashed red on the walls of its Malibu model at eQuinelle in Kemptville (it also won a Sammy).

Tartan, which grabbed an impressive four trophies for model homes at Findlay Creek south of Leitrim Road, used a combination of bold colour, unique detailing and flexible layout to get the judges' attention.

Tartan president Ian Nicol was thrilled.

"It helps us understand our place in the market and where we fit in," he said. "It tells us we're on the right track."

Kitchens and bathrooms were among the most popular categories, with winning entries decked out with luxurious features.

Deslaurier Custom Cabinets snagged two trophies for a Westboro condo bathroom and kitchen that stood out with judges for its fun use of colour, lighting and ceiling treatment.

"This is exceptional," said Crawford. "It's over the top, very dramatic, very Miami."

In the most contested category of the evening, 15 entries competed for best custom bathroom, 91 square feet or more. Projects were all about clean lines and creating a personal retreat, with Simmonds coming out on top for a beautiful spa-like ensuite with an incredible view of the Ottawa River.

"You can't buy that view," Lawrence noted.

"Well you can, but you pay for it," laughed fellow judge Chris Hewitt, an architecture professor at Algonquin.

"You'd never get out of the tub," Lawrence added. "Put the fire on and watch the boats go by."

The judges also noted that most of the renovation entries focused on the main living areas of the home, particularly opening chopped up rooms to create one large space.

"It's where people live," said Crawford.

"I still find the large emphasis is on entertaining in the home," added Gibbons.

Interestingly, the Peoples' Choice Award, which was voted on by visitors to last weekend's Home & Design Show from among all entries and often leans toward more traditional projects, also followed the modern trend. The winner was the Simmonds/RND Zen barn.

Ottawa, it seems, is coming of age.

The winners

Small builder, 2,500 sq. ft. or less: Surface Developments

Large builder attached, 1,800 sq.ft. or less: Richcraft Homes

Large builder attached, 1,801 sq. ft. or more: Tartan Homes

Large builder single detached, 2,001 to 2,599 sq. ft., lot size 39 feet or less: Tartan Homes

Large builder single detached, 2,001 to 2,599 sq. ft., lot size 40 feet or more: eQ Homes

Large builder single detached, 2,600 to 3,499 sq. ft., lot size 39 feet or less: Tartan Homes

Large builder single detached, 2,600 to 3,499 sq. ft., lot size 40 feet or more: Minto Communities

Large builder single detached, 3,500 sq. ft. or more: Minto Communities

Custom home, 2,400 sq. ft. or less: Christopher Simmonds Architect and RND Construction

Custom home, 2,401 to 3,999 sq. ft.: Christopher Simmonds Architect

Custom home, 4,000 to 5,999 sq. ft.: Christopher Simmonds Architect

Custom home, over 6,000 sq. ft.: Brenmar Construction Corp.

Custom urban infill: Christopher Simmonds Architect and West Hill Homes

Housing development of the year: Roca Homes and Barry J. Hobin & Assoc. Architects

Condominium unit: Roca Homes and Barry J. Hobin & Assoc. Architects

Renovations/additions, under \$60,000: CKC Group

Renovations/additions, \$60,000 to \$99,999: OakWood Renovation Experts

Renovations/additions, \$100,000 to \$199,999: Tie: Luxurious Living Studio and RND Construction

Renovations/additions, \$200,000 to \$349,999: Revelstoke Developments

Renovations/additions, \$350,000 to \$499,999: Chuck Mills Residential Design & Development and Patterson Homes

Renovations/additions, \$500,000 and over: Urban Keios Design

Renovations/additions, basement: Just Basements

Production (tract) kitchen, 129 sq. ft. or less: Tartan Homes

Production (tract) kitchen, 130 sq. ft. or more: Deslaurier Custom Cabinets

Production (tract) bathroom: Deslaurier Custom Cabinets

Custom kitchen, 159 sq. ft. or less: KitchenCraft Cabinetry

Custom kitchen, 160 to 219 sq. ft.: Surface Developments and Muskoka Cabinet Company

Custom kitchen, 220 sq. ft. or more, \$74,999 or under: Roca Homes

Custom kitchen, 220 sq. ft. or more, \$75,000 and over: Chuck Mills Residential Design & Development Inc and Deslaurier Custom Cabinets

Custom bathroom, 90 sq. ft. or less: Astro Design Centre

Custom bathroom, 91 sq. ft. or more: Christopher Simmonds Architect

Green tract home of the year: Corvinelli Homes

Green custom home of the year: Christopher Simmonds Architect and RND Construction

Green development of the year: Minto Communities

Housing details: Roca Homes

Any room in the house: Christopher Simmonds Architect

Open category: Christopher Simmonds Architect

Renovator of the year: Sandy Hill Construction

Peoples' Choice Award: Christopher Simmonds Architect and RND Construction

Colonel Boss Award: Roy Nandram, RND Construction (presented annually to an individual for outstanding dedication and service to the association)

Fred Nielsen Award: Merkle Supply (presented annually to a company that has made an outstanding and lasting contribution to the association and the housing industry)

Enbridge Hall of Fame: PMA Brethour Realty Group