

## KONRAD GATES AND THERESA HURTUBISE, BUILT

### Banking on the allure of neighbourhood-friendly infills

**U**NLIKE SAUL ON THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS, no heavenly flash of light accompanied Konrad Gates' conversion. In 2008, he was working as a commercial tenant fit-up guy. He had some experience building homes for himself, but that was about it. One day he looked at his wife, Theresa Hurtubise, and said, "Let's try building houses." Half a dozen years and five speculative projects later, they're still at it, operating under the declarative name of built. "I do it because it's what I want to do," says Gates simply. "When people come to view the houses, they can see I'm excited. I truly like designing — I have my own ideas and I enjoy building them."

Those ideas lean toward modern neighbourhood-friendly infills in Old Ottawa South and other well-established areas. Gates' designs are unfussy, with large windows defining the facades. When we meet, it's in one half of his latest project, a three-bedroom semi on Harcourt Avenue in the Woodroffe area. Bright and welcoming, it boasts an open-concept design on the main floor and privacy at the bedroom level. It's listed at \$649,900.

Gates wasn't a stranger to the housing business when he had his career awakening. He grew up in Cornwall, Ontario, with parents who built and sold houses. His skills pair well with those of Hurtubise, who studied textile design and now serves as design consultant on built's projects and handles administration for the business. Because spec builders don't always have the clout of the big boys when it comes to critical factors like subtrade availability, they must be flexible and organized, says Hurtubise. "We're still working on the organized part," she adds with a grin.

In a security-conscious government town like Ottawa, it's considered a particularly daring move to leave the security of a salaried job for self-employment in the frequently volatile housing industry, especially when, like this couple, you have children. "It isn't for everyone. It's a whole-family commitment," confirms Hurtubise. At that moment, as if on cue, five-year old Cleo, who moments earlier was scampering about the house as though she lived there, grabs her dad's hands and asks for a swing.

It can also be a career fraught with risk and stress, says Gates. You design based on your own assessment of what the market wants and then hope you got it right. If you're Gates, you also absorb more of the costs for buyer-initiated design changes than a larger builder might just because, well, you're a pretty nice guy who wants others to be happy. You also log long hours because it's one way of keeping costs under control and ensuring that everything turns out as you'd envisioned. That means, for Gates and Hurtubise, extended work weeks broken up by time with Cleo and her nine-year-old sister Lilah or, in the summer, the occasional neighbourhood barbecue.

Still, the rewards are great. "We have clients we've developed relationships with. We get invited to their open houses every year," says Hurtubise.

Building this way also means Gates can design houses he believes are right for the times, even if that means bucking trends. "Right now, there are a lot of oversized houses on small lots," he says. "We want to build homes that aren't going to just overwhelm the neighbourhood. A house that's 1,800 or 2,000 square feet is ample in the city. Anything more, and you're wasting energy to heat and cool it."

His next project exemplifies that approach. Being built in partnership with a real-estate professional, it comprises four front-to-back semi-detached units in LeBreton Flats. The three-storey houses will be in the 1,300-square-foot range and sell for around \$500,000. As he points out, building smaller can mean affordable but still desirable living. Gates also focuses on designs that he describes as family-friendly. Nothing too fancy — no stairs with see-through risers that scare youngsters — but lots of natural light to link the inside and outside worlds. In the end, the reward is not just in the selling, but in the pleasure of building a house that will be loved. "I enjoy meeting the people, seeing them smile about the house. I try my best."



Coral tile adds a punch of colour in the Spadina Avenue home the couple built for their own family. The lively hue reminds Hurtubise of her grandmother, whose kitchen featured Arborite countertops in a similar shade.

PHOTOGRAPHY: JUSTIN VAN LEEUWEN (INTERIORS AND SINGLE DWELLING EXTERIOR)



built's semis and single on Sunnyside Avenue conform to the height and many flat roofs of neighbouring homes. The setback for front-of-house parking was in response to community wishes



Gates is currently working on built's upcoming project of front-to-back semis at LeBreton Flats

