

TEXT BY

Alex Bozickovic

PHOTOS BY | @GRAYDONHERRIOTT

Michael Graydon +
Nikole Herriott

A new cedar and glass dining pavilion extends through the back of a weekend retreat in rural Ontario designed by architect Brian O'Brien for Ben Sykes and Erin Connor. The 19th-century timber and stone structure, formerly a one-room schoolhouse (inset), proved to be the perfect palimpsest for a modern intervention.



To start the next chapter in their lives, Ben Sykes and Erin Connor went back to school. The couple wanted a place in the country, and they had their eyes on rolling, rural Grey County, two hours northwest of their home in Toronto. While searching for property there, they came upon an unexpected building for sale: a one-room schoolhouse with thick stone walls that was built nearly a century and a half ago.

“I have to admit, we hadn’t looked at any schools before,” Ben, a partner at a commercial real estate firm, says with a laugh, >

A Toronto couple turn an abandoned 147-year-old schoolhouse into an elegant country getaway.

Class Act



The second-floor landing (above) looks out on original trusswork that was formerly hidden in the attic (inset). In the double-height living area (right), a pair of vintage Sirocco chairs by Arne Norell face an oval coffee table from Elte. Erin holds the couple's son in front of pantry shelving by Fischer Custom Cabinets (opposite).



“but we were willing to renovate, and we wanted something where we could mix old and new.” The structure, which had served kids from two townships, was last used in the 1960s, but the basement was still filled with desks and there was “a blackboard and a picture of the school principal on the wall,” says Erin, a marketing director.

The building overlooks pastures and the dramatic topography of the Niagara Escarpment. The wide-open interior presented many possibilities. The couple had previously rented a nearby country house for vacations and liked the design, so they hired its architect, Brian O’Brian

of Works Office, in Toronto. Together, they puzzled out different options for turning the school into a home. “In addition to being a fully open space,” O’Brian recalls, “it had a very high ceiling with amazing trusswork, so we found a way to use that to our advantage.”

The architect and his team built physical models of five design options, looking at how to maximize the space. In the end, they split half the building into two levels: two bedrooms and a bath downstairs and a primary bedroom suite above. The landing outside the suite is at eye level with the original trusses, believed to be old-growth pine and hemlock. “Those trees



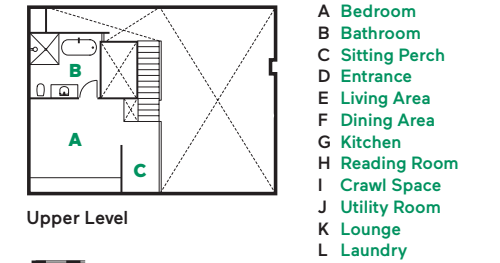
ILLUSTRATION: LOHNES + WRIGHT



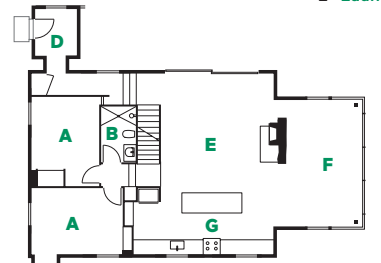
1873 Schoolhouse



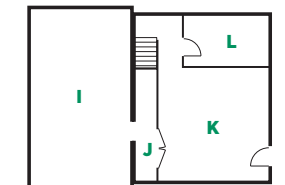
ARCHITECT Works Office of Brian O’Brian Architect
LOCATION Meaford, Ontario



Upper Level



Main Level



Lower Level

“People stop us and say, ‘Oh, I went to school here,’ or, ‘My mom went here,’ and they’re so glad we’ve restored the building.” BEN SYKES, RESIDENT

were probably around in the 1600s,” Ben says, gesturing toward the ancient timber.

O’Brian left the other side of the house open to the rafters, creating a double-height living room and an open kitchen fitted with Shaker-style cabinets. He also raised the floor 21 inches for better viewing angles and to get closer to the trusses. At the eastern end, O’Brian punched open the building to add a dining pavilion enclosed in glass walls and charred cedar cladding. Set on a pair of thin steel pillars that penetrate the interior and rise to the roof, it overlooks a copse of apple trees where Ben harvested the ripe fruit last fall. On our recent visit, a fresh

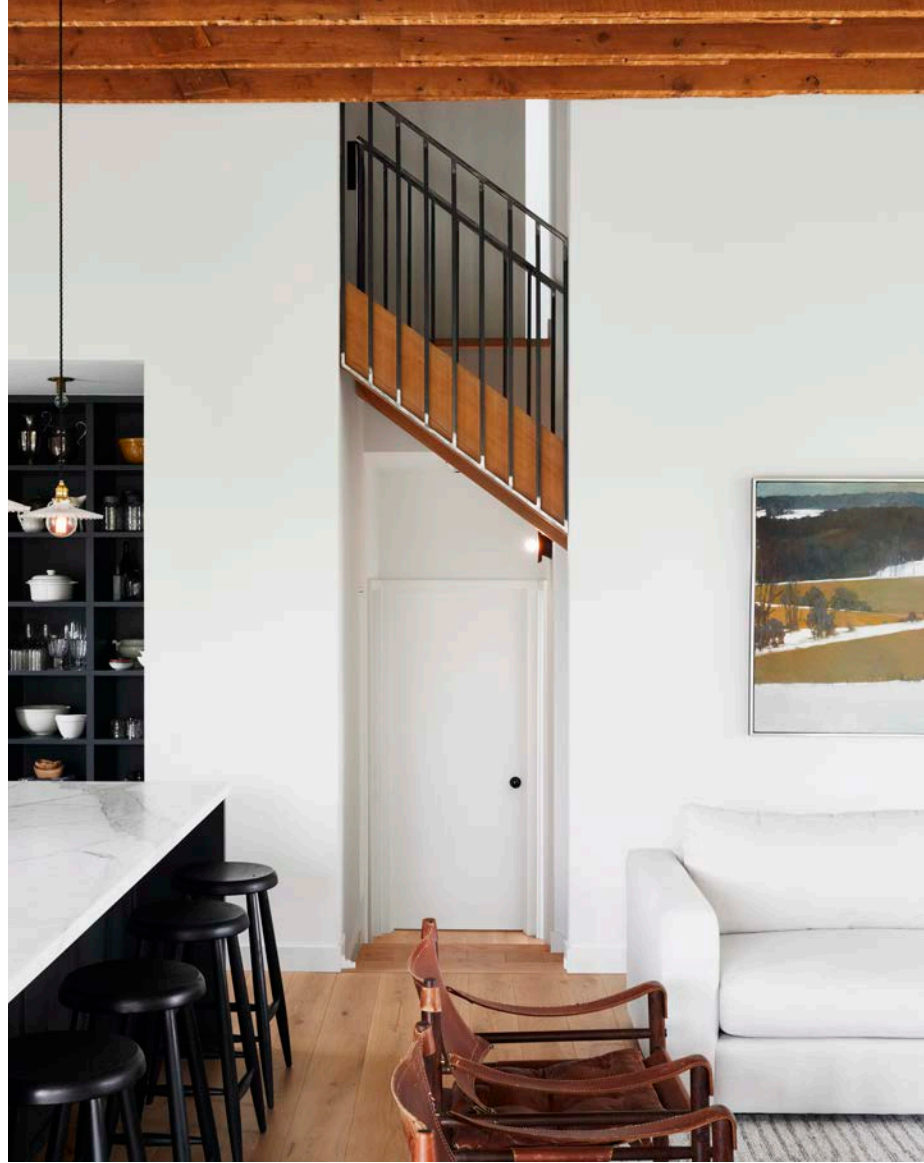
apple crisp was still warm in the kitchen.

O’Brian left part of the original 18-inch-thick exterior wall between the living room and the new pavilion. The hand-size fieldstones, restored by mason Chris Hunt, are now the backdrop for a woodburning Rumford fireplace that shows the architect’s eye for detail. It sits asymmetrically on a thin concrete hearth and steel wood-storage base, and a painted drywall chimney tapers on one side as it rises to the ceiling. For the architect, this sculptural white volume is a nod to Portuguese greats such as Eduardo Souto de Moura, who, when working with old buildings, “do something that is very stripped down and >

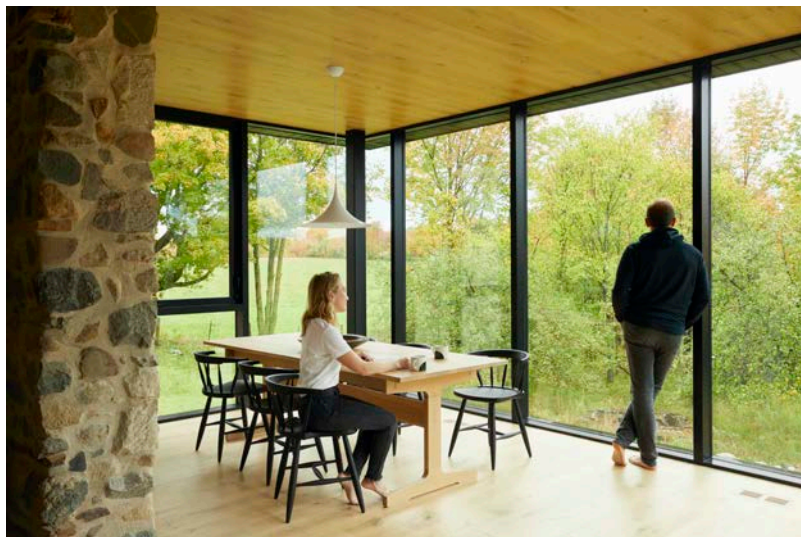
renovation



One of the school's two entry vestibules (inset) is now a foyer; the other is a small reading room. In the kitchen, bar stools by Atelier Arking line a marble-topped island (right). The dining room addition (below), which increased the total square footage to 2,700, features a Semi pendant by Bonderup & Thorup for Gubi and a table and chairs from Atelier Arking.



“The idea was not to make a total break between the existing building and the new work, but to allow a sort of deliberate overlap.” BRIAN O'BRIAN, ARCHITECT



contemporary in response,” he says.

This suited Erin and Ben, who signed off on a few other unusual twists: Their bedroom has an angled skylight that funnels in northern light, and the downstairs bathroom is capped with a light shaft that extends 23 feet up to the roof.

The couple have had plenty of time to appreciate these subtleties. During the construction, Erin became pregnant with their son, who is now two, and they finished the renovation just before the pandemic began. The weekend getaway for two turned into a full-time residence for three. “We’ve loved it here,” Erin says. “Now we want to bring some of what we’ve learned to enjoy about this place back to the city.” A century and a half on, the schoolhouse still has things to teach. ■