

by Adele Weder



DON'T SETTLE FOR A BUNGALOW. MAKE IT A FETCHING BUNGALOFT.

THE BUNGALOW. THE LOFT.

One evokes a compact, cozy labyrinth; the other a wide-open, audacious space for avant-gardistes. A less likely architectural marriage there never was. But with the nuclear family reconfiguring and a design-savvy generation growing up, what was once improbable now seems inevitable. And how handy that the wedding should produce such a fetching new surname: the bungaloft.

Like most marriages of opposites, this architectural coupling works because one makes up for the shortcomings of the other. The loft concept—from the Paris garret to the Greenwich Village beatnik pad to the contemporary warehouse conversion—has always worked well for starving artists and outré novelists. Until, that is, they start spawning children or otherwise find themselves longing for outdoor space and greenery.

The bungalow concept worked well too—once. For most of the 20th century, the one-storey chocolate box of bedrooms, parlour,

Murray Siple wanted a suburban location but liked the loft aesthetic and needed its versatility. Solution: a bungaloft. Contemporary low-profile furniture is from Inform Interiors; www.informinteriors.com. Distinctive ladle-shaped light fixtures: Flos Luxmaster C, available from Living Space Interiors; www.livingspace.com.

Once a warren of drywall, Stephanie Robb's Vancouver Special was stripped to the joists—and left there.

"There were doors I couldn't fit through, walls I couldn't move around," says Siple, as he glides his wheels over the cherrywood through a phantom wall to the kitchen. He proceeds to make lattes, an activity that, with his limited hand mobility, is possible only because the design team gutted the original kitchen and strategically laid out a custom-height counter, sink and espresso maker. He jostles the lattes into position on a tray with the proud verve of a snowboarder displaying an extreme flexion turn. "You know, I'm always up on the latest music, the latest boards," says Siple. "I'm in the loop. And then I look at 'universal design' in magazines, and it's all white plastic Velero!" No, *let* universal design had to be cutting edge, from the exposed fir joist in the cutaway ceiling to the brise-soleil baffles of the skylight.

Bungalofs don't need to have an actual loft feature, but they do have to have the *feel* of a converted loft apartment. The building type known as the Vancouver Special is something of a West Coast joke: contractors threw up thousands in the 1960s and '70s with little regard for anything other than accommodating lots of people at the lowest possible cost. So tongues wagged when architect Stephanie Robb announced she was going to update one for her own family. While the Special's standard two-storey height departs from bungalow tradition, the two-suite house Robb purchased was pretty much like two bungalows double-decked onto one other: each a self-contained 525-square-foot hovel with severely demarcated living, kitchen and sleeping quarters. Undaunted, Robb stripped the ugly exterior cladding and pulled down interior walls to create a multitask living region for herself, husband and two daughters. Before, recalls Robb, "it was a warren of drywall. I think the most luxurious thing you can have is a sense of space. It's more important than an expensive refrigerator."

Robb added a small extension to the 1,050-square-foot home but otherwise let the materials—plywood millwork, concrete floor, recovered-fir open staircase—supply the atmosphere. "I like houses that encourage people to be right in the face of the people you live with," avers Robb. "The saddest houses are the ones where everyone's off in their separate bedrooms, watching television."

No chance of that around here: the gay cacophony of computer soundtrack, Eminem on the ghetto blaster, *That 70s Show* on the overhead television flow through the house, upstairs and down. Robb's 12-year-old daughter Marina confesses to mixed feelings. "It's too open—there's no privacy," she says. Robb may address that complaint by converting the detached garage into a getaway room.

Meanwhile the ground floor main-space ethos is anything goes. Robb's music parlour/rec room/library zone flows into the central living space. The kitchen is positioned in one corner but opens at both sides to the main zone. Old-time bungalows, of course, stashed the kitchen way off in the back. Bungalofs open it up to the living zone, often at the front of the house. It makes more sense, explains Housebrand's John Brown, to adjoin the back garden to the living



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Robb's front lawn became an enclosed courtyard opening onto the living area to provide precious square feet of additional space.

room, so you can take in the view or step outside into a private Eden.

For sure the bungalow schemes look and feel open, urbane and young. But how much of the loft's open concept is transferable to a bungalow demographic? "In a family you don't need a huge amount of privacy," insists Robb. Then, with a laugh, she adds, "Although my family members tell me differently!" When Robb muses about replacing the drywall around the bath/shower room with translucent panels, for instance, Marina wails back, "Mow—I like it the way it is!"

Ah, family. In part the bungalow is not so much a product of architectural hybridization but of human compromise: people demand big rooms but can't afford the increased square footage; they're modernists by default. On the other hand there is an undeniable sense of architectural rigour and appropriateness to this new form. Maybe it's the primordial draw of the original house: the one-room cave.

Or maybe not. Architect John Brown of Housebrand looks back instead to the early 20th century, when new ideas about living combined with the dawn of central heating first rendered open plans feasible. "The change started happening at the turn of the last century," says Brown. "It just took awhile to trickle down." **WJ**

Source: *Housebrand*; 403-229-4330; www.housebrand.ca, Acton Ostry Architects; www.actonostry.ca, 604-730-3344. Peckert and Robb; www.peckertandrobb.com; 604-732-0607.

Principles of the Bungalow

There's more to creating a bungalow than gutting the interior and installing track lighting. Experienced designers follow a few basic loft principles and then custom tailor to the needs of the client. Here, according to architect Russell Acton, are the principles applied to the Siple House, which can serve as a template for all aspiring bungalowers.

Bring Down the Wall

The most emphatic loft feature is the erasure of the barrier between kitchen and living/dining areas. You can still have a counter or an island but the key is openness: from the living area you can see, smell and hear whatever's going on in the kitchen, and vice versa. Be mindful of the repercussions: with the kitchen flaring into the living area, says Acton, "you need to spend money on a good, quiet dishwasher."

Raise the Ceiling

You want the illusion of vertical as well as horizontal space. The Siple House boasts a raised skylight in the kitchen, the gesture echoed in the living area with what Acton calls an "art skylight": a rectangular cutout in the ceiling that reveals the exposed joists.

Pump Up the Volume

Contractors will tell you that very small additions don't make sense in terms of bang for your buck, but architects will tell you different. Stephanie Robb added just a few feet onto the rear of her house, which injected a critical extra 150 square feet of living space. The Acton Ostry team pushed out a seating nook off the living area and lined it with windows. It's only three feet by 10 feet, but it spreads volumes. "It's not about the actual space, but the perception of space," says Acton.

Choose Your Palette Wisely

Don't lunge into architectural denial by redoing a workmanlike 1955 bungalow with all the latest slick materials. Instead celebrate the house's variegated character. The Siple House's quasi-industrial palette is "a mixture of fine and coarse," says Acton. They installed refined cherrywood flooring but also exposed the rugged original joists and applied stained plywood to the exterior. The kitchen features plastic laminate cupboards topped with a stainless-steel counter, topped to catch spill, but not stainless-steel fridge or stove, which are neither industrial nor current.

Bring Outside In

Unlike those downowners, you've got outdoor space, so enjoy it. Add view-strategic windows, and open the doors wide. For the Siple House terrace, Acton Ostry used a commercial-grade storefront system of sliding doors: two two-foot-by-five-foot sliders for a full 10-foot-wide expanse of glass onto the patio. "We added the outdoors to the indoors," says Acton. "That's the advantage these bungalows have over an urban loft."