

A HOME *with a mission*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDREW FEARMAN

Innovative residence adds year-round life to historic site

Every home Selena McConnell designs has custom elements. But this was the first time she'd designed one with a chapel, or had the relics of martyrs placed in the floor.

It was also the first time parts of her design had to be approved by the Vatican.

"This was a fascinating, amazing project," says Selena, a senior designer with Royal Homes.

Royal Homes was commissioned to build Maison Ste. Marie House, a residence for the six priests at the Martyr's Shrine, the national historic site in Midland that commemorates the lives and deaths of the 17th century Jesuit martyrs.

The new residence replaces a seasonal home where the priests had only been able to live from May to October. Having a year-round home lets them offer pastoral services to the entire community, including four parishes, a high school, a psychiatric hospital and CFB Borden.

"Every decision we made was a large decision, because it impacted many people," says Rev. Michael Knox SJ, the Director of Martyr's Shrine.

Apostolic planning

Planning the home included a time of Apostolic Discernment, ten weeks of daily prayer and discussion by all six priests to outline the principles and needs that would guide the design.

"It was very important that it look and feel like a home, even though it had to incorporate some institutional elements," says Selena. The design also needed to embrace the 400-year-old heritage of the site, and serve as home to a Religious Community – the priests who live there, and the visiting Religious who can now use the former residence as a guest house.

And all of it needed to be done in the middle of a historic site that sees 130,000 visitors annually.

Every element of the final design involved balancing different priorities. Windows needed to capture abundant natural light and take in the superb views of the Wye Valley, but also be positioned so that pilgrims at the Stations of the Cross wouldn't find themselves peering in on the priests eating breakfast sixty feet away.

The home is a private part of the site, but it still has somewhat public areas. Selena and Fr. Michael

identified the degree of privacy each area needed, and laid out the home accordingly.

The home is built into a hillside, with the entry on the downhill side. "Rather than thinking of this as the basement, we decided to treat it as the main entryway," says Fr. Michael. The most public parts of the home – a spiritual counselling room and the chapel – are located just off the front door, allowing clients to visit for a counselling appointment, or guests to attend a private worship service, without venturing any farther into the house.

Echoes of history

Even before stepping inside, the design balances multiple priorities. The community wanted a home that would echo 17th century French cottages – buildings that would have been familiar to St. Jean de Brebeuf and the other priests who gave their lives here. Exterior elements include a tall, wooden front door, and an exterior clad in Tudor timbers and stucco.

However, financial prudence demanded a home that would last for years without requiring costly maintenance. "Stucco can cause problems in this climate," says Fr. Michael, "so we used cement board, using timbers to hide the seams." The timbers themselves are composite rather than wood, so they will never need staining. And the tall wooden door? Fibreglass, which looks like wood but won't ever warp.

Inside, the fittings are spare and clean – a masculine look in keeping with a home built for men. The ceiling of the chapel is lined with cedar, mimicking the look of a traditional longhouse. "Cedar is a healing wood in the tradition of the Wyandot people," explains Fr. Michael.

Elsewhere, the wood trim is simple, dark-stained pine. Fittings, from door handles to cupboard hinges, are mainly black iron – again, reflecting materials and styles that would have been familiar to the first priests at this site.

Luxurious yet frugal

The visual style continues throughout the house, even into the kitchen, which features simple shaker-style door fronts and black fittings, but is equipped to cook for more than 20 people.

"Some people wanted an industrial kitchen with lots of stainless steel," says Fr. Michael. But the wooden cabinetry – with a deep silgranite apron sink and anti-bacterial corian countertops – serves the same purpose with much greater style.



Rev. Michael Knox SJ, Director of Martyr's Shrine, and Selena McConnell, Senior Designer with Royal Homes



"And all the cabinetry is Royal Homes standard grade," says Selena. "None of it is upgraded."

The communal living space – areas for sitting, reading and conversing, as well as a refectory that can seat 20 people for dinner – are open and airy, the first Jesuit home in the country to have an open concept design.

The bedrooms, on the other hand, are laid out in a way that

emphasizes privacy. "We did not want a long corridor with rooms opposite each other, like a hotel," says Selena.

With a combination of prefab and on-site construction, the home was completed over the winter. In the spring, the priests moved in to Maison Ste-Marie House, and a new chapter in the long history of the Martyr's Shrine began. **DS**

BY ANDREW WAGNER-CHAZALON

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The new residence was designed to complement the existing structures on the national historic site.