

SLICE AND SPLYCE

A DETACHED HOME IN VANCOUVER'S UP-AND-COMING SOMA DISTRICT CARVES AN AVERAGE-SIZED SPACE INTO LIGHT-FILLED GEOMETRIC VOLUMES.

PROJECT East Van House, Vancouver, British Columbia
DESIGNER Splyce Design
TEXT Courtney Healey
PHOTOS Ivan Hunter

Superlatives get attention—the tallest tower, the hugest house, the tiniest microloft. So what about average? By the numbers, the East Van House by Vancouver's Splyce Design is decidedly that. At just under 2,300 square feet on an average-sized lot, an average number of rooms were built for an average cost. What stands, however, is anything but.

When Splyce's Nigel Parish first met his client at a downtown coffee shop, she arrived carrying a monograph from the Japanese design office SANAA. The two went on to discuss the work of British minimalist John Pawson. There's perhaps no better pair of precedents that evoke images of austere white volumes. Parish and his client then spent the better part of a year looking for the right property. She originally hoped to find an urban infill lot, but quickly realized that small lots in the city core are priced high for developers to aggregate them. The search shift-

ed further east to the recently rebranded South Main (or SoMa) district that bridges Vancouver's Mount Pleasant and Riley Park neighbourhoods. SoMa is a trendy area with a mix of cafés, artisan bike stores and designer tattoo parlours rapidly appearing amongst a shrinking number of furniture dealers, electronics repair shops and noodle joints.

While the chosen lot is of average size, it is somewhat atypically proportioned at 50' x 75' with no lane access (compared to the typical 33' x 120' residential lot). The anomaly is explained by a rear adjacency to a schoolyard. As a result, the house has an attached garage facing the street, a rarity in Vancouver. In this area of town, a peculiar zoning bylaw from the early 2000s produced the so-called "Mohawk Special"—low-pitched two-storey houses topped with Home Depot-like shed structures. Parish embraced the prescriptive requirements and quickly



ABOVE East Van House blends West Coast materials, such as cedar slat cladding and a standing-seam metal roof, with clean-lined geometries inspired by Japanese and British minimalism. The resulting house stands out from its eclectic neighbours in the SoMa district of Vancouver.

worked through potential massing models, settling on an asymmetrical geometry that was aesthetically pleasing and conformed to the bylaws.

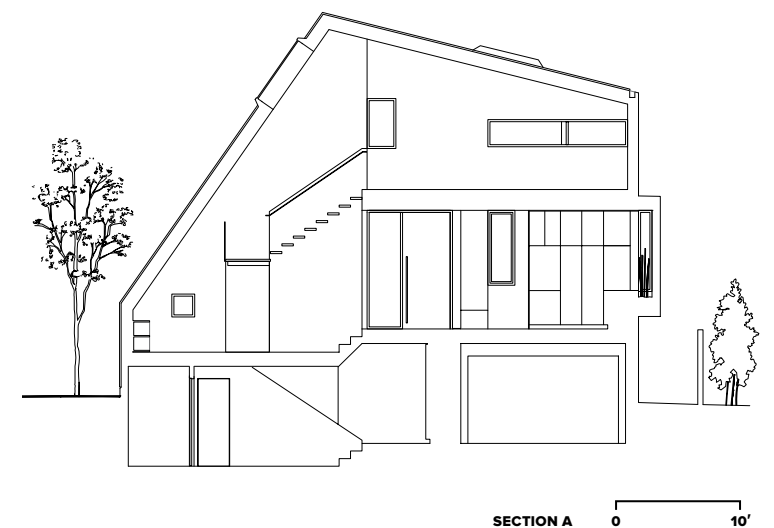
From the street, the house presents a wide flat face, and is decidedly spare compared to its gingerbread neighbours. Inside, a compact plan creates a sense of entry and threshold on the short site without squeezing too much space from the living areas. The client wanted a high degree of privacy from the street, so Parish filled the front half of the main level with circulation, storage and service areas, and laid out the kitchen, living and dining areas across the back half. The plan more or less repeats upstairs, with circulation and office at the front, master bedroom and

bath along the back. This simple plan gains interest with subtle sectional shifts created by a line of stairs bisecting the house from east to west. The allotment varies from a few steps between the kitchen and living room to a 30-foot-tall stair volume extending the height of the house.

While designed for a single occupant, the house includes room to grow. The open office on the second level is roughed in for a bathroom, and Parish has planned where a wall and door could be placed to create a compact third bedroom. The garden level contains the garage, laundry, and a guest bedroom and bathroom, and could be separated from the main floor and rented out in the future.



ABOVE The rear of the house opens into a compact, smartly designed backyard that includes a firepit, ornamental garden and patch of lawn.
LEFT A wide landing on the main floor serves as a cozy library and reading nook. Windows at the front of the house are deliberately kept small, enhancing the home's character as a private retreat.



SECTION A 0 10'



On the ground level, Parish strategically placed small windows for privacy on the north, east and west elevations. To the south, a wall of sliding doors opens out into the garden. Like a cat, his client likes to follow the sun through the house; thus the deft placement of windows and skylights creates a dynamic play of light on white surfaces throughout the day. Swatches of morning light are thrown onto kitchen counters and into the master bath, tracking around to the garden by midday. Long ribbons of afternoon light illuminate the reading nook, stair landings and upstairs bedroom. The office enjoys mountain views and uniform north light throughout the day.

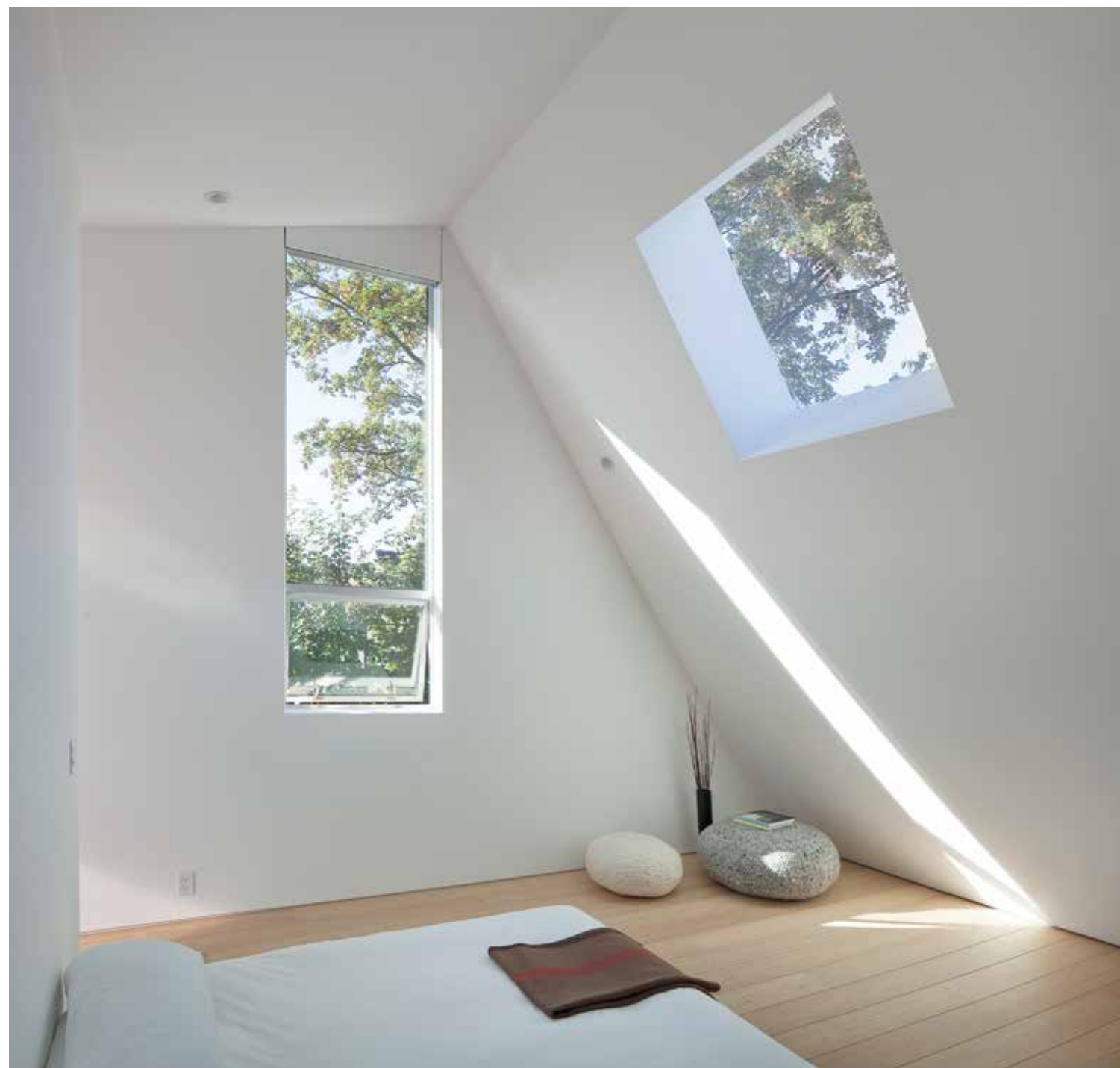
Skylights are sized and located to avoid views of surrounding roofs, so even though the house is only a few feet from either neighbour, it maintains a sense of retreat. This is perhaps most effective in the master bath, where sliding glass doors extend the shower space onto a cedar-screened terrace.

Splyce is also responsible for the exterior landscape design. At the street, a low concrete wall and gradient of planting beds lead up to the front steps. Trees are placed to screen windows, enhancing the feeling of privacy. The small backyard is divided into quadrants: an outdoor kitchen anchoring the southeast corner, a firepit to the southwest, a small ornamental garden in the northwest corner, and a wooden deck to the north. The deck adjoins the kitchen/dining areas and sits level with the adjacent schoolyard. New perimeter plantings, once grown in, will mask the school's retaining wall and chain-link fence.

The design elegantly blends a contemporary aesthetic of flush details and flat surfaces with the kind of nooks and crannies necessary to accommodate the collateral of daily life. Many modern residences



ABOVE A 30-foot-tall open-riser stair slices through the house, doubling as a three-storey-high light well. **TOP RIGHT** Three steps and a fire-place separate the living room from the dining room, while a flanking set of sliding glass doors encourages a sense of continuity between the spaces.



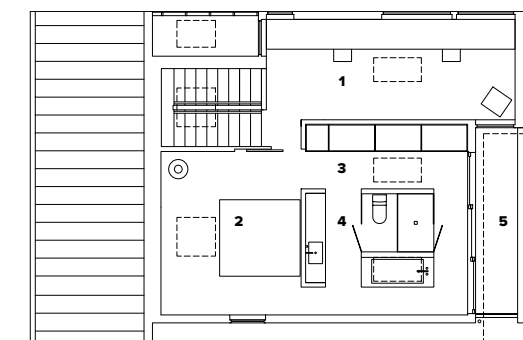
are so tightly planned that there's no place to drop your bags or to let stuff pile up before being put neatly away: this house can take it.

East Van House also represents a largely successful marriage between the minimalist volumes that sparked the first meeting between client and designer, and a West Coast palette of cedar slats, grey stucco and folded standing-seam metal. The marriage is not unfailingly harmonious: for instance, approaching the front door, the cedar slats that appeared integral to the façade from a distance are revealed to be a thin scrim, and an underbelly of wood and steel bracing is exposed overhead. But such disorienting moments are few and far between. The overall effect is of a modest house with generous spatial volumes and an artful approach to light and views: an average house that is decidedly uncommon. ◀▲

Courtney Healey is the Director of Lodge Think Tank and an intern architect at PUBLIC in Vancouver.

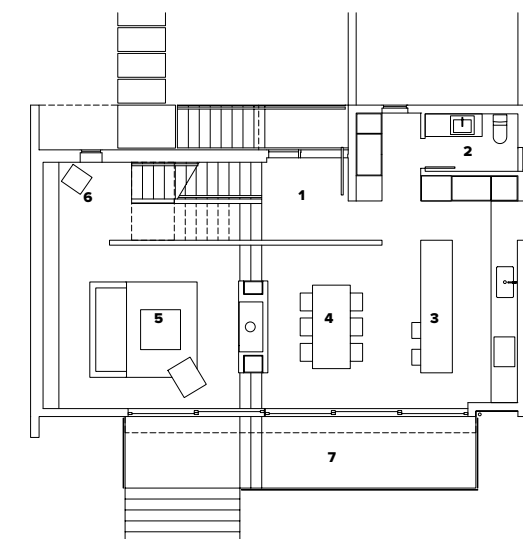
ABOVE Sunlight spills into the master bedroom, while a window in the angled wall offers treetop views from bed. **OPPOSITE, TOP TO BOTTOM** An exterior wood screen maintains privacy despite the completely glazed wall of the luxuriously elegant bathroom; glass doors open the shower and tub areas to a screened rooftop patio for a spa-like bathing experience.

CLIENT WITHHELD | **DESIGN TEAM** NIGEL PARISH | **STRUCTURAL** WHM STRUCTURAL ENGINEERS | **LANDSCAPE** SPLYCE DESIGN | **INTERIORS** SPLYCE DESIGN | **CONTRACTOR** POWERS CONSTRUCTION | **AREA** 2,300 FT² | **BUDGET** WITHHELD | **COMPLETION** SPRING 2013



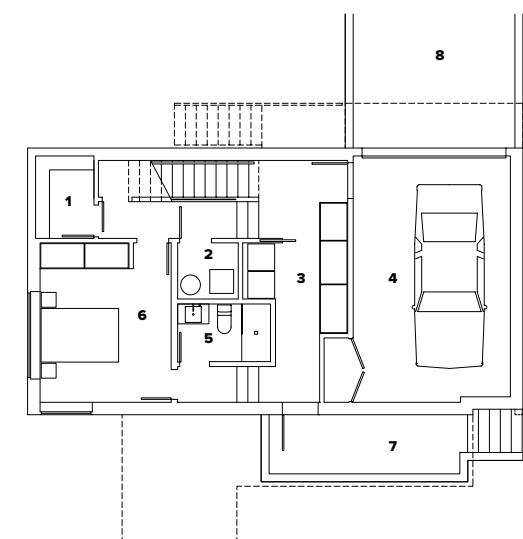
SECOND FLOOR

- 1 OFFICE/FLEX ROOM
- 2 MASTER BEDROOM
- 3 DRESSING
- 4 BATHROOM
- 5 DECK



GROUND FLOOR

- 1 ENTRY
- 2 POWDER ROOM
- 3 KITCHEN
- 4 DINING
- 5 LIVING
- 6 READING NOOK
- 7 DECK



BASEMENT

- 1 WINE ROOM
- 2 UTILITY ROOM
- 3 MUDROOM/LAUNDRY
- 4 GARAGE
- 5 BATHROOM
- 6 BEDROOM
- 7 GARDEN STORAGE
- 8 DRIVEWAY

