



# From sidewalks to **seaside**

BY: DENISE FLINT

PHOTOS BY: BRIAN RICKS

One couple's transition from  
an oversized Victorian home to  
a modern paradise built for two

Dell Texmo and Keith Storey's home in St. Philip's, Newfoundland boasts an open-concept design for the living, dining and kitchen areas, making the space ideal for entertaining. Kitchen cabinetry and island by Artistic Kitchens in St. John's.



For almost three decades Dell Texmo and Keith Storey lived in a graceful Victorian house in the heart of St. John's, Newfoundland. With its large yard, spacious interior and six bedrooms, it was an ideal spot to raise their three children. But when the kids grew up and moved out, the couple realized that they were ready to leave as well. They started looking for a new home, one suitable for just the two of them. "There was too much stuff in my life," Dell says. "The idea of cleaning it all up and downsizing really appealed to me."

After all those years tucked under a canopy of elms and surrounded by other houses, their only criterion for the new place was a western view. "If it didn't have a sunset, we weren't going to buy it," Dell says. At first, they looked for a house but when nothing struck their fancy they started thinking about land. As so often happens in Newfoundland, word got around and a friend of a friend told them about a hectare of land for sale on the ocean in St. Philip's, a fishing village turned bedroom community 10 kilometres outside of St. John's. Overlooking scenic Conception Bay, St. Philip's bills itself as the place where "the sun meets the sea."

It couldn't have been more appropriate. After years of living in historic homes (their house in St. John's was their second Victorian), Dell and Keith decided to buy the land and start from scratch, building what they wanted from the ground up.

They chose Robert Mellin, a St. John's-based architect who also teaches at McGill University, to help them create their dream home. They'd known him for years and were familiar with his work. Though Mellin does a lot of restoration work, his new builds are very modern looking. Even so, he adds details that reference traditional Newfoundland housing, with his characteristic clapboard siding and flat roofs bringing a touch of the vernacular and a sense of continuity to the most contemporary design. He cites Christopher Alexander, author of *A Pattern Language*, as a major influence on his work. "Think of patterns," he says. "What makes a place a good place to be is how patterns relate to one another in a syntax of architecture."





Walls of windows, from The Window Shop in Mount Pearl, provide uninterrupted views from one room into another and dazzling ocean sightlines. All that sunlight means Dell's indoor plants have exploded since the move. Red lounger and grey sectional from The Bay. Dell chose a warm butterscotch tone for the hardwood floors from Floor Source in Paradise.





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“We like that he’s not just an architect,” Keith says. “He thinks about the way the house sits in the landscape.” The couple presented Mellin with their embryonic wish list, he came back with a couple of general ideas, and plans for the house grew from there. Beyond the sunset, Dell and Keith had other requirements for their new home. They wanted the majority of the living space to be on one level in an open-plan design incorporating the kitchen, dining room and living room. And they each needed unshared, individual office space.

Finally, it was essential to have an uninterrupted view. “I wanted to be able to come in the front door and see through the house to the ocean,” Dell says. She ended up with more than she’d hoped for. The open style of the design and the large west-facing windows means the ocean is visible through the house even before reaching the wide, glass entranceway. The house is almost incidental to the view. “Working with the topography, I thought it would be wise to enter at the upper level of the house,” Mellin says. “That keeps the house low with a non-monumental, low-key entrance.”

The ocean side is more imposing. The land slopes sharply down to the water and the roof slopes up to the sky. What starts out as the ground floor becomes the upstairs from the west side, with another storey and a basement tucked beneath. The siding continues under the deck so that the view lower down the slope hides the structural underpinnings. “I have a thing about a house not showing its underwear,” Mellin says with a laugh.

Despite Mellin’s assurances, Keith wanted to check out the view for himself. Before construction began, he and his son took a stepladder out to the site and Keith climbed to a precarious perch to make sure they’d be able to see past the belt of trees that shelters the house from the worst of the raging storms that are so much a part of maritime life. The view was fine but ensuring the house was high enough meant they abandoned the original plan to build on a slab and installed a full basement instead.

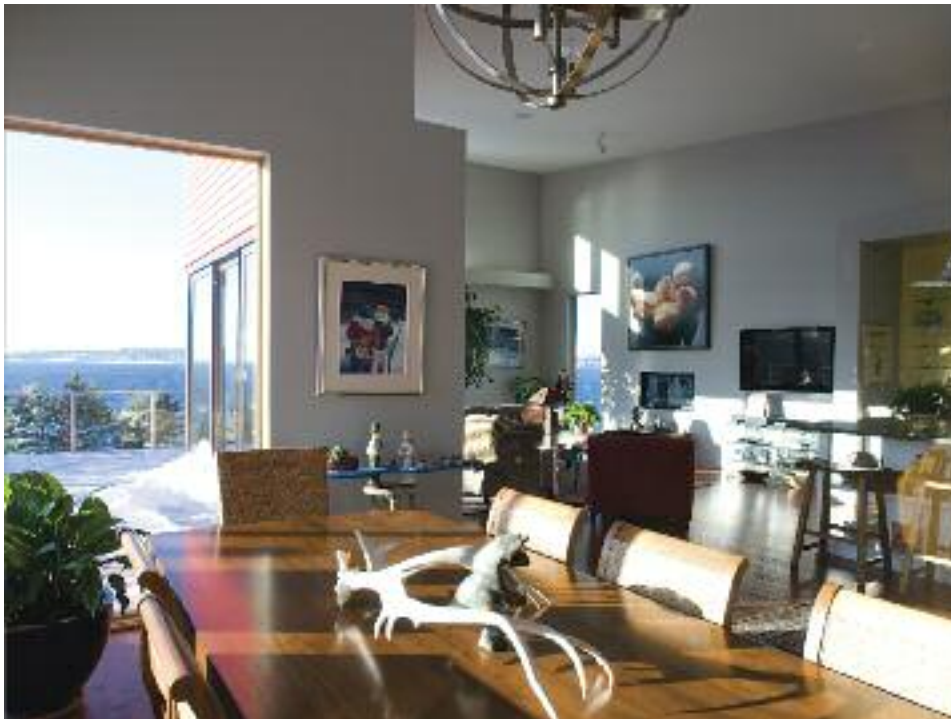
To keep the sightline pristine and to incorporate the house into its surroundings, they buried all wires. A retaining wall that runs along the side of the house mirrors the rustic rock construction of the original boundary wall that still defines what was once a pig farm. “Of course the rock is raw now but eventually it will age to match the original wall,” Mellin explains.

Continuing its nod to traditional Newfoundland construction while staying up to date, the house has Cape Cod finished wood siding. Made from lodge-pole pine, it’s sealed on all sides and goes up in a way similar to click flooring.

Stepping inside, the space opens from the front entrance both horizontally and vertically. A wider than usual side hall accommodates bookcases and leads to Keith’s office and the bedroom. Ahead of the entrance, the ceiling rises gradually from a standard height to almost 4.5 metres over a stunning wall of windows that marks the living room’s west wall. The kitchen and dining room lie to either side of the open space, with Dell’s office down a short flight of steps off the kitchen.







Silver and grey walls change hue constantly as they reflect sea and sky, with patterns of light dancing on the bolder coloured walls.

**OPPOSITE PAGE:** There's plenty of space to work with if Dell decides to switch up her collection of art and antiques.

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The windows in the living and dining areas go down to the floor and seamlessly incorporate French doors that lead to a spacious deck wrapped around the side of the house. In winter, the ever-changing sea and sky is on constant display; in summer, the boundary between indoors and outdoors is virtually non-existent. The continuity flows throughout the house by the colours chosen for the walls. No room features one colour. The west walls are grey or silver, echoing the ocean. Other walls are brighter shades. "You can see the sunset reflected in three or four places at once," Dell says. "It could be a painting or cones of light in the bulkhead reflecting the red walls."

For 22 years, Dell has owned Living Rooms, a shop catering to kitchen gadget and gracious-living devotees. She knows her stuff when it comes to housewares. The kitchen in her new home is a paean to her knowledge of what works where. The large double sink blends seamlessly into the stainless-steel countertop; the push of a button raises the exhaust fan from behind the island cooktop. Her eyes sparkle when she shows off the *pièce-de-résistance* nestled in the large fridge. "It has a built-in rack for white wine!" she says.

Dell and Keith equipped the rest of the house with a similar standard of quality. Highlights include a geothermal heating system, in-floor heating

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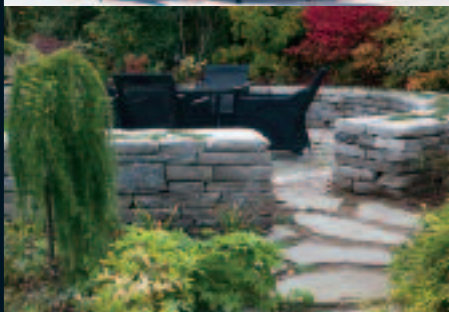
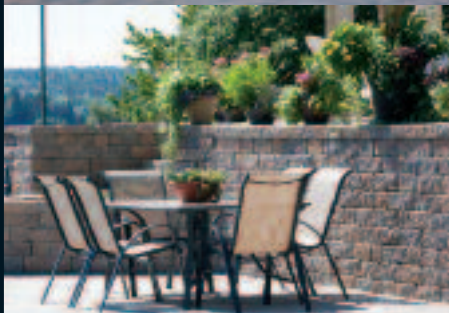
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**ABOVE:** A skylight over the bed fulfills architect Robert Mellin's requirement that natural light should always enter each room from at least two directions. Wall-to-ceiling closets and shelving eliminate the need for bureaus.

**LEFT:** Dell's office is just a few steps off the kitchen.

under the engineered hardwood and ceramic floors. They also chose floor-to-ceiling closets in the bedroom and an oversized, cobblestoned shower in the master bathroom.

After an antiques auction, an art auction, two garage sales and a lot of ruthless culling, the couple were left with their most treasured possessions. They've blended these seamlessly into the ambiance of their new home. "The old pieces work well and seem interesting in contrast to the newness of the house," Dell says.

During construction, the couple visited the property almost every day and found it a real learning experience. "There were lots of emotions and cycling from what you imagine it'll look like to what it does look like," Keith says. "When the foundations went in, it looked so small." "We didn't think there would be room for the bed in the bedroom!" Dell interjects, with a laugh. "But when the walls went up, it expanded enormously," Keith concludes.

Their biggest surprise was how comfortable everything felt once they finally moved in. "It was very hard work but it was a surprisingly easy move, mentally and emotionally," Keith says. "We were in our last house 26 years, but we've never looked back. There was no pain."



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The red exterior siding is enclosed in a shell of grey like a geode. A friend's gift to mark the end of the driveway references the road's original name: Pig Shit Lane.



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Dell concurs. "It was a major change in lifestyle but one we've embraced." Sometimes a journey is about a lot more than distance. When Dell and Keith decided it was time for a change, they may have only moved a few kilometres but they travelled a very long way. ❄️



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