

The Outside-In House

*How a creative couple turned an urban
'doughnut hole' into a one-of-a-kind homestead*

By DUO DICKINSON

The heart of the home is open to the sky. Surrounded by full glass (mostly doors) this courtyard visually expands and connects all first-floor rooms — and brings light into an urban home without compromising security.

PHOTOGRAPHS: Anthony DeCarlo



The living room is part social gathering place, part gallery space — its lofted ceiling has its angled plans offset, allowing light to bounce around and fill the air.

ATHOME

New England is filled with densely clustered communities planned in centuries past. Like much of the rest of the region, greater New Haven experienced a rush to build homes after the Industrial Revolution brought thousands of families to live near its new and growing factories in the 19th century. The street grid that radiated out from New Haven's nine-square core 200 years ago created blocks of land that were rudely subdivided into simple rectangular lots.

Sometimes the parcels of land had an odd fit with the lots that split them up to get all those new residents places to live. In the case of one 1904 East Rock subdivision a "doughnut" of lots faced their narrow ends to the block's perimeter of streets, leaving a hole of open backyard space at its center. The developer gave over that hole to two lucky lots, making them twice as large as all the other plots of land surrounding them.

In 1974 Louis and Anna Holt Audette bought one of those double-sized sites with a classic early 20th century home on it. They renovated the house and over the next couple of decades raised two daughters in that home.

The best homes fuse families with the patch of earth on which they sit. Every family is different, of course, but all households evolve and adapt. No two sites are identical, and every site should be "listened to" when a home is built or adapted to fit the residents' idiosyncrasies. In this case a very special family found an innovative way to make an unusual site accommodate the changes every family experiences — in this case, changes that have spanned 35 years of occupancy.

Once the daughters fled for higher education and then adulthood, Louis and Anna knew their house was a misfit. As anyone owning an older home knows, you either love the never-ending repair and renovation or you leave it. In a reversal of the flight that emptied so many urban homes in mid-century New Haven, the Audettes wanted to leave their house but not its site.

Neither Anna nor Louis has followed the safe, predictable path well traveled. Louis has always been an entrepreneur — seeing the promise of new energy technologies decades before they became fashionably described as "green" — and has worked for many companies (some created by him) essentially in the role of the guy who gets things done. Mixed in with the rollercoaster ride of his management of start-up energy companies were stints being a project manager for commercial construction projects.

Anna Holt Audette is a nationally renowned and extraordinarily successful artist. In addition to being a provocative and productive painter, Anna taught for years at Southern Connecticut State University's Department of Fine Arts.

Before settling down in this patch of earth the Audettes spent a year and a half in India with their two young children, an experience that reflected their adventurous spirit and "walk the talk" attitude by which acting on inspiration forms the core of a creative life. Return to the site of their collegiate lives together, Yale, they reconnected with their friend George

Buchanan, a fellow undergrad and grad student.

It took only about 45 years, but their academic friendship provided the basis for a professional collaboration. Fairly fatigued by their existing home's never-ending demand for TLC (and the third-story walk up to Anna's studio), Louis seized on an idea: Their house sat on the panhandle of their outsized lot that included half of the block's internal doughnut hole. In an epiphany of possibility for urban homesteading, the Audettes realized they could create a new lot out of the "hole" and sell off the panhandle and needy old home.

Time to see an architect — and George Buchanan happens to be one. Indeed, Buchanan is one of the most respected and thoughtful architects in the region, having worked on a broad array of projects over the last 40 years with his New Haven firm.

As with most worthwhile undertakings, the liberating idea of an internal lot idyll needed a lot of dogged work to become reality. Buchanan's prodigious experience included working with zoning ordinances and local building officials to allow good ideas to bloom within local limitations.

This relatively modest project took about a year to earn its requisite approvals before breaking ground, because the newly created back lot needed variances due to its lack of "frontage" (property touching the street). "The irony is that the house we built has more distance between it and the existing homes than they have between each other," notes Louis.

Once the idea seemed possible, the Audettes leapt at the task of making it real. "We grabbed a box of doilies and napkins and started to sketch on them," recalls Anna. As ideas began to crystallize, Louis went to Buchanan's office with a model of his own design.

"That's a great idea," said the architect after seeing Louis' model and the vision of a house amid others' back yards. Great friendships and great house designs thrive on energetic interplay. What resulted from such fertile minds and deep expertise was an inversion of the typical American home's identity.

Not unlike the Pilgrims' vision of a "Shining City on a Hill," American homes typically have a public face and private rear, as well as windows that frame views from inside out while composing the home's visage for those encountering it. The Audette home's internally circumscribed site informs its design.

The studio is Anna Audette's sanctuary and workplace, immaculately organized to allow for maximum focus amid the top-lit openness. This space is a dramatic frame for the process and product of painting.



A place of color and books amid a house of space and light, the quiet counterpoint of the den also benefits from the vaulting ceilingscape that has skylighting at its peak.



The design the Audettes and Buchanan settled on does have a prominent focal front door, recessed with proudly tiled front steps, but the home's exterior is brutally simple, carefully proportioned and virtually opaque — a solid stucco'd mass with an occasional incised window, but crowned with an actively expressive standing seam metal roof, which in turn is provocatively capped by a series of ridge skylights over half of the active roofscape.



But the solidity of the exterior has a deliciously surprising center, revealed upon entry: just as the block had a hole at its center, so does this house. As with many Mediterranean and tropical residences that create courtyards for ventilation and outdoor privacy in densely built situations, this home gains those advantages, but also gains a huge benefit that is ever-present no matter where one is on the first floor. The entire courtyard has walls made of floor-to-ceiling glass — so light is everywhere and yet privacy from neighbors' backyards is assured. The courtyard is the focal heart of the house, set directly on center with the front door.

Living areas have vaulted ceilings where the ridge skylights bounce light off an offset ceiling and strategically sited windows allow for venting and backlighting, creating an environment typical of a great museum space where so many of Anna's large and gripping paintings are hung.

The kitchen is a virtual party space — a large island cast away from a cooking wall, set in a fully open space visually extended through into the courtyard and subtly through that exterior space back into the living room. The flooring in this heavily trafficked space is zesty unapologetic vinyl in several colors and patterns.

Entry, study, living, kitchen and dining form the front 'U' of the home's circular shape with the entire backside given over to the couple's private lives. A fabulous vaulted and skylit studio gives Anna a ground-floor workspace directly accessible to the semi-detached garage. Louis' workshop is a direct extension of the garage housing any number of models of flying machines and naval vessels. Its extension into the garage space allows long planks of lumber to be cut at the opening of a sliding door.

A small bump out of their interior lot's perimeter allowed for a resonant extension of their home's footprint to form a wonderfully linear and high-ceiling office space. This rest of the backside houses a pantry, bath, back stairway and closet space, creating a space that is both commodious and efficient.

The second story is accessed by two stairways — front open, back hidden — and feels like a completely separate world. A hall receives light as it aligns with an exterior wall where three bedrooms and two baths plus a laundry room feed off of them. A curved window sits above the front stair, and old family furniture makes for focal detail amid quiet space. Because no eventuality was overlooked by the Audettes and Buchanan, an elevator shaft was silently framed into the fabric of walls and floors, with elevator installation a simple retrofit if ever needed.

A new 6,000-square-foot house could easily be seen as a self-indulgent extravagance — but nothing could be further from the truth, as all parties worked hard to contain costs built and ongoing. "It's a sheet-rock house," allows Buchanan. Many windows are trimless, though some have oak sills.



Set in a wide open expansive family room space, the kitchen is the social hub of the house, complete with outsized island for serving food and those sipping wine in the company of the chefs.



A stoic solidly stucco's presence has a recessed focal entry to greet those who obtain access to this hidden treasure, and its crown of standing seam metal roof is an invigorated contrast to the blank walls that support it.

But color is applied in bold and calculated ways amid the washing of so much ambient light.

Simple roof trusses span large second-story spaces, as do floor trusses where needed, eliminating columns and bearing walls. Half the first floor sits on a concrete slab, all countertops are plastic laminate, and there is but one angle in the entire floor plan — all cost-saving features. Louis turned to Vermont, where many of his energy companies were founded, for beautiful ash flooring in public areas, as well as all the cabinetry and sourcing for much of the heating and cooling equipment purchased at wholesale costs.

But the biggest cost saving was in the selection of a builder Peter Lengyel, who allowed Louis to shop until he dropped to secure many materials and subcontractors at a lower cost than any responsible general contractor might assume when calculating hard-core costs — resulting in savings of \$180,000 by Louis' estimation.

The ongoing costs of occupancy are minimal thanks to strategic spending by the Audettes — for a large photovoltaic array that provides almost all electricity the home uses, a full-on geothermal system of wells that preconditions the water used for heating and cooling, and some extraordinarily sensitive controls of all systems but particularly the heat line that melts snow in the courtyard.

Money was spent on the exterior as well to minimize maintenance. Many empty-nesters opt for retirement communities where painting, patching and mowing are done by others, the costs buried in monthly fees. Here upfront investing in sturdy stucco and a standing seam metal roof simply obviates the need for maintenance.

A house that feels like an art gallery indeed houses an artist. The house also has shop and office space for an inventive entrepreneur. Clearly those are cause-and-effect design criteria — but an unseen reality also informed this house of flowing interior space. The Audettes host several large celebratory parties a year where music rules the house — no fewer than six groups of musicians have entertained scores of partiers throughout open spaces, courtyard and whatever surrounding outdoor space there may be.

As such, this is anything but an empty nest — it's the fulfillment of two lives lived together at full engagement, a

AtHome

Continued from 43

fullness that continues on past full-time employment into a time where life has a freedom that rewards lives of dedicated effort. Built without children living in the house, the home still accommodates the now fully grown offspring and newly arrived grandchildren. Whether it's a tapestry of one child's fabric design hung on a wall, or a crib tucked into a bedroom corner, the family flow is in full force within these walls.

The "Circle of Life" may not be a Disney cliché, but when rendered in crisp clarity by this home's plan and flow, domestic poetry ensues. And when art is actively created and displayed amid family memories embodied in relics and inventions, a house becomes more than a place to live. Declares Anna modestly,

"It has worked as well as we hoped."

The Audettes' house embodies value at its core — the dollars-and-cents kind where investment in construction pre-empts the slow bleed of ongoing utility and upkeep costs, as well as in the emotional realm, where art and family inform every element of its design.

In this home's genesis, three old friends came together to celebrate their friendship and a four-decade marriage in a building. This effort widened the circle where the builder of the dreams, Peter Lengyel, became a trusted co-conspirator — so much so that at the entry airlock a plaque naming architect and builder is starkly presented at eye level — reminding all who enter that even the most personal of possessions sometimes requires the best efforts of an extended family to be realized. ❖

Continued on 48