

# Dark House Illuminates Modern Options for Urban Infill

By Nancy Saunders



**R**ike Burkhardt is building a house. (Well, technically, Fred Wagenaar Carpentry is building the house that was designed by Brian O'Brian of O'Brian Muehleisen Architecture Studio.) A Lakehead graduate and former resident of Thunder Bay, Burkhardt moved back temporarily from Toronto with her young son so she could oversee the project.

"I think of this project as more than just building a house. I like to think it covers some of the principles of good city building and meets the objectives of urban infill, which a lot of cities are encouraging as ways to deal with sprawl issues." The term urban infill refers to building on vacant or undeveloped land within an existing community—in essence, filling in the gaps. Some of Burkhardt's motives include "bringing investment and new housing stock to the downtown core, making efficient use of existing city infrastructure, and trying to combine affordability with good design."

Burkhardt and O'Brian started with five initial concepts before choosing Dark House. "One of the things we wanted to do was something more modern, but also reflective of local architectural materials—materials you find around here, what people used to

build with like wood, and concrete stucco for the exterior," she says. Not a fan of high contrast, Burkhardt has chosen black stucco and black window frames for the house's exterior, sharing O'Brian's vision of a black house providing a nice contrast against the snow of Thunder Bay's winters.

"We're adding a modern twist to a historic Thunder Bay neighbourhood with respect for the local architecture." Dark House fits in with the neighbourhood but also has more modern features, including asymmetrical windows, an open layout, and compact design. Of great importance to Burkhardt was "creating a non-toxic indoor environment by choosing 'green' finishes, but ones that can be easily ordered." Fred Wagenaar and son Lyndon have used durable, low-maintenance and local materials where possible, like ash flooring from Precision Lumber, a local sawmill in Murillo.

Once finished, Dark House will offer the flexibility of being a family home, or a rental property. Burkhardt admits that she and her son have fallen in love again with Thunder Bay over the course of the project, and are considering extending their stay past its completion.