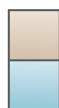


# Two solitudes

In Ottawa, architects Jim Colizza and Anthony Bruni create a light-filled duplex whose back-to-back halves – each with its own personality – are equally refined.

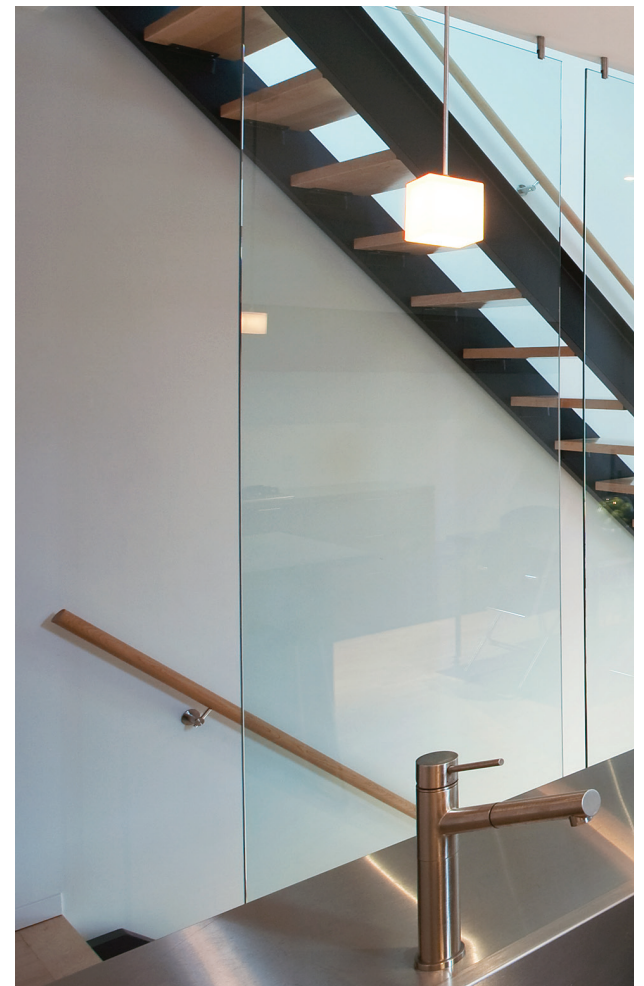
—By Rhys Phillips



Given the narrow width of the site, the duplex's primary form starts as a simple three-storey vertical box at the back of the lot, with a second, moderately longer box grafted to the front.

Photography by Peter Fritz

**Below** In the front unit, entry stairs rise in front of a floor-to-ceiling window. The first tread and landing are designed as a bench for putting on/taking off shoes, and a place to sit and talk with guests. **Top right** Sculptural cabinets stretch along the kitchen wall, sinking down to act as a low commode as they pass the dining area, then morphing seamlessly into a raised hearth for a room-focusing minimalist firebox. **Bottom right** South-facing windows flood the main living space with light. Sheets of transparent tempered glass separate the stairs (both entry and upper) and the kitchen, allowing even more light – from the third-floor skylight – to wash the walls and enliven the space.





Ottawa's Parkdale neighbourhood, despite its bucolic moniker, has had its fair share of problems over the last decade. A community of modest 19th-century workers' houses interspersed with vestiges of light industry, it suffered from an infestation of street prostitution and a nasty drug trade. More recently, however, community mobilization and improved policing have had a positive effect. The area is now catching up with the revitalization of the rest of the low-scaled but urban landscape that stretches from the western base of Parliament Hill out along Wellington Street and Richmond Road. Around the small but long-running and much-loved Parkdale farmers market, the arrival of the Great Canadian Theatre Company's new performance house, trendy bistros, converted lofts and new low-rises are having an impact.

Like all such transformations, there was a time when land prices did not reflect the community's potential. This fortuitous anomaly allowed architect Jim Colizza (of James A. Colizza Architect) to purchase a modest side yard only two doors from the market. The objective, he tells me, was to design a duplex that would provide both his daughter Victoria and Anthony Bruni, an architect and soon to be a firm partner, affordable entries into the housing market. The result is an animated, back-to-back double that, despite a narrow lot allowing no east-facing windows and only limited openings on the west, boasts spacious, light-filled residences.

Designing the units was a collaborative process that continued throughout the construction process. Not only did the two Carleton University architecture graduates (Colizza, '76, and Bruni, '99) work closely together, Victoria, a graduate of interior design studies in Florence, Italy, now working in IT, also had considerable input. While each unit is resolutely modern, each also reflects both the preferences and even gender of its principle owner.

Given the narrow (25-foot) width of the site, the duplex's primary form starts as a simple three-storey vertical box at the back of the lot, with a second, moderately longer box grafted to the front. While this street-facing volume is in theory larger, it has been eroded away at the ground level to accommodate parking and a separate access to the back unit. As a result, both units comprise a compact 1,200 square feet. But if the front box appears the most



dynamic on the outside, the roles are somewhat reversed inside.

With only an entry vestibule at the ground level, Bruni's primary living area is a piano noble, a grand – if 500 square feet can be called grand – all-in-one space elevated above the street. But the fully glazed south wall opens onto a generous cantilevered terrace, thus sustaining a mediated contact with the street. Openness to the street is also signalled by the entry stairs, which rise and turn in front of a large, uncovered floor-to-ceiling window. The fully open interior space is Bruni's take on his family's home in Sault St. Marie, where life rotated around a large kitchen-cum-gathering spot: "That is where our lives played out."

This reference aside, Bruni's environmental preference is for the minimal, "the understated but not necessarily the subdued," he says. "I want space that is more restful and comfortable but also continuous and not compartmentalized." The full kitchen merges without breaks with the dining area and the living room, forming a single, integrated public space. To increase the perception of space, the most bulky kitchen cupboard is tucked into a corner, there are no bulkheads, and the kitchen island is rotated to run parallel with the room's length. Maple plywood cabinets are custom designed with the simplest of lines and stained a brown colour derived from hours of experimentation. These stretch along the walls, sinking down to act as a low commode as they pass the dining area, until they morph seamlessly into the raised hearth for a room-focusing minimalist fire-box. The absence of design clutter is necessary in small places, says Colizza, who has won multiple awards for the dynamic interior quality of his social-housing projects. "But," he continues, "it is the time taken to integrate seamlessly all the services that is crucial to maximize small spaces."

Both the hearth and its detail-free firebox have been stained with gun blue (a liquid used to treat metal gun parts), which has literally etched the surface with light rust. The raised hearth is a mottled brown-rust colour while the box appears brown-blue – the result of the former being hot-rolled steel and the latter-cold rolled. The opportunity to design as the house took shape, says Bruni, was one of the beauties of doing the project. For example: "As I saw how the sunlight hit the west wall. I was able to introduce



**Opposite** As in the entry, the upper stair's stringers are simple black I-beams, with maple steps attached using narrow metal fixtures that make each step appear to float. Used in lieu of railings, the stair's tempered glass captures various reflections and subtle images.

**Right** In the back unit, all-maple stairs leading to the mezzanine (second) level and to the third floor are screened by a white metal grid. Generous glazing ensures that the north-facing living-room loft is always full of natural light. As with the front unit, white walls provide a blank canvas for the play of light and shadow.



west-facing punched windows, necessarily narrow but situated precisely to maximize the sun's impact." Afternoon light catches the glass panels screening the stairwell.

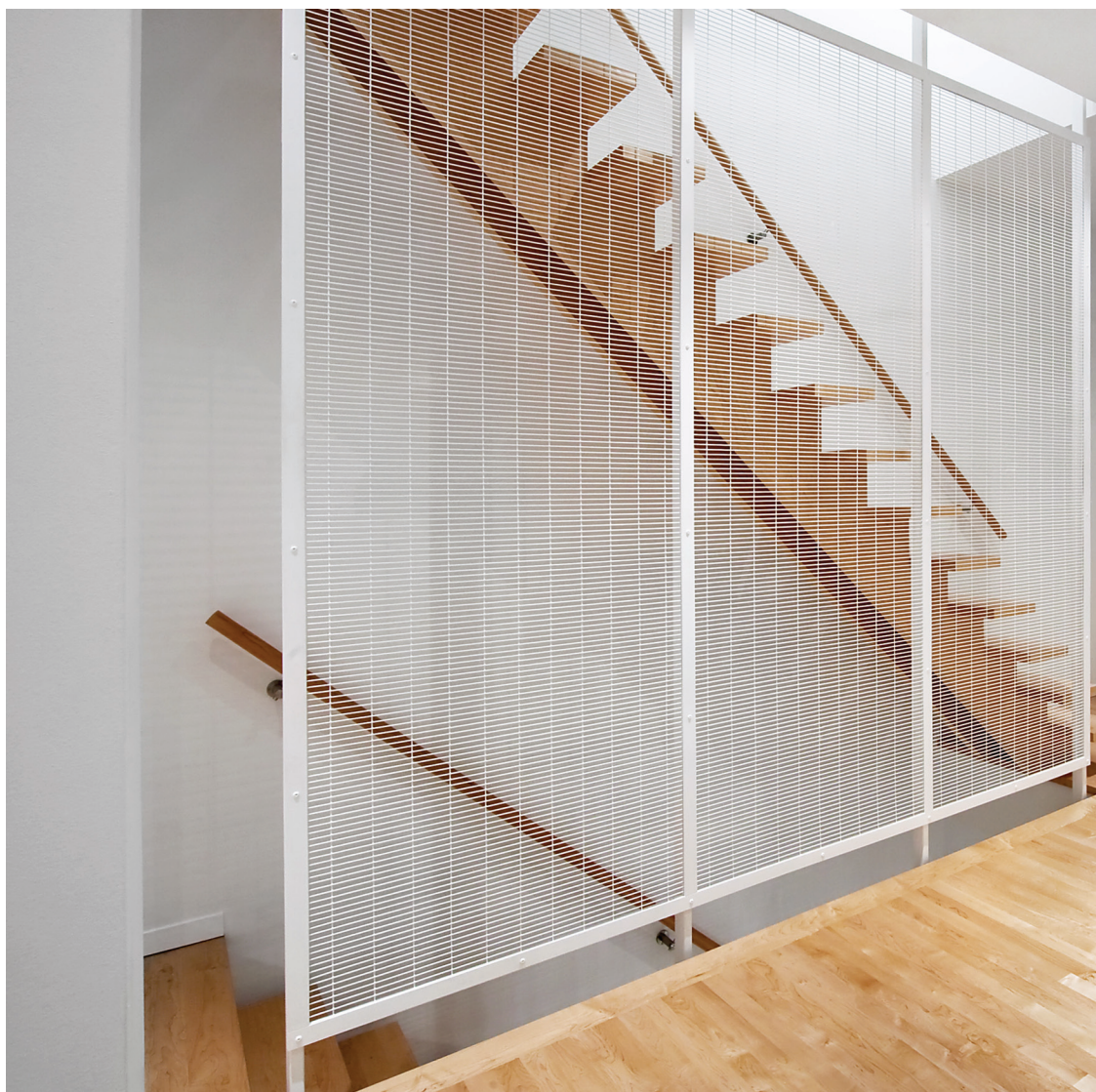
This stairwell is uncluttered by elaborate heavy balustrades. Instead, two floor-to-ceiling, transparent glass panels attached with discrete hardware separate the kitchen and stairs. The stairs' stringers are simple black I-beams, with maple steps attached using narrow metal fixtures that make each step appear to float.

If Bruni's unit has a studied calm with masculine overtones in its materials and details, Victoria Colizza's unit is spatially more dynamic and richer in tone, giving the interior a somewhat more feminine aesthetic. This is not to say it is anything but robustly modern. Unlike the front unit, the main living spaces are stretched over two integrated floors. Entry is directly into the dining area, separated by a concrete-topped counter from the galley kitchen. The dining area is a northwest-facing, double-height corner space overlooked by the living-room loft.

"When you approach the unit," says Colizza, "there is a transparency on the first level that lets you see right through the first floor, an idea taken from my first experience with Dutch urban housing." The double-height, heavily glazed corner both accentuates and diffuses this axial view while ensuring this north- and backyard-facing house is full of natural light. "This sense of connection with the exterior includes the mezzanine-level living-room loft, centred on a fireplace with the same simple geometry as Bruni's, but with a black melamine box on an extended concrete hearth.

The all-maple stairs connecting the three levels employs a double middle beam with cantilevered steps to produce a richly mellow spine rising through the house. Instead of glass, however, the stairs are screened by a .5-by-3-inch white metal grid. "The idea derives from a veil," says Colizza, "intended to mediate but not negate the relationship between spaces." When the sun hits the screen, including from a skylight over the stairwell, there is a play of shape and shadow, he adds.

The Bruni/Colizza residences demonstrate that careful attention to detail and light, as well as the avoidance of unnecessary clutter, can produce fine living spaces in even modest, tightly compacted urban dwellings. ❏





**Top left** The white metal screen, used in lieu of railings, creates an elegant veil in front of the stairs. **Bottom left** Entry to the unit is directly into the dining area, separated by a concrete-topped counter from the galley kitchen. The living-room loft overlooks this northwest-facing, double-height corner space. A horizontal window (far left) provides a panoramic view of Ottawa's much-loved Parkdale farmers market. **Below** The first and second levels were designed as one continuous, playful space, with visual connections and multiple vantage points. The fireplace has the same simple geometry as the front unit's, but with a black melamine box on an extended concrete hearth.

