

NEW CATEGORY



Designer of the Year CHUCK MILLS DESIGN



Design with empathy

By Francie Healy

"I can drive down the street," says Chuck Mills, "and tell you exactly what's been added to houses."

He's not impressed with additions that seem to have been tacked on with no respect for the house itself.

"If there has been no attention paid to architectural style, or to colours or materials," he says, "an addition is going to stick out like a sore thumb."

Winner of the Greater Ottawa Home Builders' Association's inaugural Designer of the Year award, Chuck Mills is definitely anti-sore thumb.

He believes the look of neighbourhoods, especially established older areas like Westboro, can be compromised when an out-of-context building rises in their midst. It's one reason he's not crazy about contemporary design, particularly what he calls boxes made out of glass and steel – not if they don't visually belong.

"In my opinion, it's a bit of a slap in the face to the people who live there," he says. "I know, because I've talked to them." He's quick to add he doesn't criticize people who build and design contemporary types of architecture. "It's just not my style," he explains.

Chuck cares about neighbourhoods.

Westboro is one of them. His designs are probably easy to spot there, but not in a shocking way. They are the ones that look as though they've always meant to be there. They're in keeping with the spirit of the neighbourhood and the style of the homes. He likes to use a lot of wood, stone, timber detailing and natural colours, and a blended traditional with transitional style.

"I think that kind of warms it up and makes

it more inviting," he says. "It makes you want to go inside."

Chuck designs all over the city for clients in Rothwell Heights, Rockcliffe, Orleans, and other older areas of Ottawa. He's been in the business for 37 years, and on his own (Chuck Mills Residential Design and Development Inc.) since 1994.

He doesn't usually get asked to do contemporary design, because it's clear from his website (www.chuckmillsdesign.com) that it's not what he typically does. Some of his clients buy an old wartime house in order to tear it down and build something new, but Chuck's designs call for something that is relative to the neighbourhood.

He says his personal architectural style lies somewhere in the middle of Arts and Crafts or Craftsman style. "The type of detailing, materials and overall look tend to have a warmer, kind of homey feel to them," he explains.

But what really seems to set him apart is his empathetic approach to design.

"I pretend it's my house," he says simply, "and I know how I'd want it to look."

This is his professional credo: act as if you're in the clients' shoes.

"If I had to hire a designer or a builder, and I had to move out and make all the tens of thousands of decisions that my clients have to make, I'd want to be treated on a one-to-one basis. I try to be available to my clients all the time."

And he's honest, even when it hurts.

"I don't sugar-coat things," he says. "I don't believe in dancing around things, even if I know it means I'll lose a job." He says a potential client might give him a list of all the things they want, but Chuck might see they're way off budget.

"I tell them they can't do it," he says. "I have to give them a realistic idea of what they're facing rather than them having me design something they love but they can't afford to build. It's more important to me to be honest and upfront with people – way more important than just getting the job."

Chuck often works with Steve Barkhouse of Amsted Design-Build and Mark Patterson of Patterson Homes. The three have been friends for years. They're all solid members of the Home Builders Association. They even go to the annual Awards gala together and sit together. In the near future, Mark will be building a net zero home and he's asked Chuck to design it.

They're friends, but like athletes, they're not averse to competition with each other. Chuck admits he's highly competitive, and always has been. It can be tense, in a funny sort of way, when he and Steve or Mark are finalists for the same award, and there they are sitting at the same table together. "We just laugh about it," Chuck says. "and then we congratulate each other."

This year he won an award with Mark Patterson in the category of Renovation \$350,000 to \$499,000. But the inaugural award for Designer of the Year was extra-special.

"I've been entering the design awards for a long time, and I've won my share of them," he says, "but this was amazing."

He didn't have any idea beforehand if he was going to get it.

"I had my fingers and toes crossed," he admits, but he was "just ecstatic" when he won.

"It's a nice feather to have in my cap" he says.