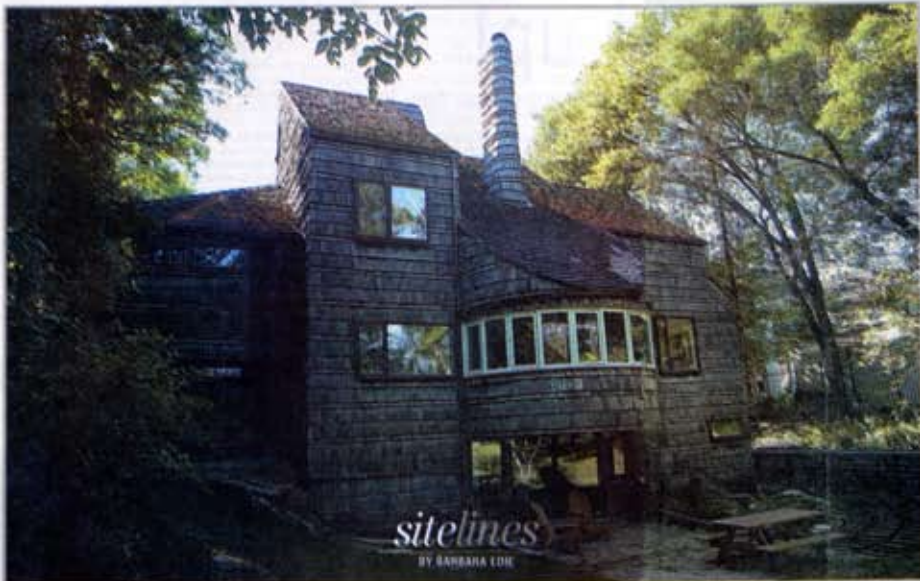


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The multi-level sloping roof of the house Etienne Gaboury designed as his residence in 1968 is meant to echo native lean-tos.

Local architect Étienne Gaboury designed a house with spaces that soar, ascending even as they reflect the flat prairie below

Up, up and away

THERE was a time when architect Étienne Gaboury, renowned locally, nationally and internationally for his innovative designs, didn't like being called an "artist-architect."

He thought the label may have prevented some people from hiring him — clients who felt his creative designs were too "out there."

Today, the 75-year-old says he doesn't mind being called an artist, and it affirms his belief that architecture — like art — has the power to both inspire and transform.

When you enter a building or space designed by this seemingly reserved, soft-spoken Franco-Manitoban, you can easily make the leap from architecture to art.

This philosophy is evident in many of his signature projects: the striking vertical structure that anchors the Esplanade Riel bridge, now a Winnipeg icon; the famous spiral-shaped Precious Blood Church, whose swirling beams were designed to carry one's spirit upward; and a unique prairie-style house that rises to almost impossible heights from the banks of the Red River.

Gaboury's work is about ascending. He believes that architecture can take you "higher."

My house takes me higher every day. I live at 90 River Rd., the aforementioned 3,800-square-foot house that Gaboury designed in 1968 as his residence, and as his own artistic and architectural statement.

Praised as a defining piece of Canadian architecture, 90 River Rd. is known for its original style and undeniable regionalism — a place where creative form meets practical function, and where prairie metaphors become physical reality.

The house is a juxtaposition of prairie shapes and references. The multi-level sloping roof represents a series of native lean-tos that place their backs to the northern elements and fold in to protect the interior.

A round, bowed window and cantilevered space at the back of the house evoke images of a Western grain elevator, while a silo-like chimney soars to a limitless prairie sky. The exterior walls, chimney and roof are all wrapped in cedar shakes that help the house dissolve into the surrounding woods.

Having grown up on a Manitoba farm, Gaboury also appreciates the importance of the prairie light and the sun's significance in our orientation.

"The Prairies are like the desert ... the only way you know where you are is by the sun," he says.

This house is designed to follow the natural cadence of the sun and the rhythm of the day — rooms and windows are strategically placed to maximize natural light. The bedrooms, in the east, allow

"The essence of architecture is space structured for human beings, but the ultimate goal is symbolic, metaphorical or spiritual, like any other art form. The difference with architecture is that it links art with the practical."

— Étienne Gaboury



A high, curved wood ceiling in the dining room draws the eye upward.

one to rise with the sun; windows and skylights at the center of the house illuminate the family room and kitchen throughout the day, and the dining and living areas face west to bring in the long, lingering light of the evening.

How light falls in an architectural space is of great importance says Gaboury. The definition of space depends on it. At 90 River Rd., one of the first things you notice is the quality and quantity of natural light, how even small spaces are illuminated, such as the ensuite bathroom by a well-placed skylight. The textured, white stucco walls, consistent throughout the home, add to the light and at times make me feel as if I'm in California. That, and the morning light that streams through a red, sunburst stained-glass window, and reflects a soft, rose-coloured globe on the walls.

In addition to stained-glass windows, 90 River Rd. borrows other elements from Gaboury's church designs, including curved ceilings of cedar lath and a wide, solid cedar front door that locks and moves more like a wall than a door.

This unusual entrance is intentional; the five-foot wide door turns on a pivot rather than on hinges and as "the wall" opens up to greet you, it changes the space and the experience. Symbolically, you are entering somewhere new, Gaboury explains. True to form, this massive door has inspired, impressed and mystified many who have passed through it.

Upon entering this expansive space of cedar and light, almost everyone — friends, family, business associates, and even couriers — is struck by the jaw-dropping height of the ceilings of endless series of curves and accents. They immediately look up — they can't help it.

If Frank Lloyd Wright's prairie-style architecture reflects flat, low horizons, 90 River Rd. is decidedly vertical. Though a house of many levels and steep inclines, it is 45 feet at its highest point. "A stunning elevation," as Gaboury says, and one that still brings an expression of awe when he looks at the blueprints.

For me, what stands out about this extraordinary space is the experiential quality of the house — the feeling of being in a living, breathing work of art, a place that moves you, that challenges your perceptions and, as Gaboury says, houses both body and soul.

After almost two years of living here, it is the conscious flow of the house, a symphony of beautiful spaces that connect seamlessly from one to the next, and the movement of the light from one season to the next, that still cause me to stop, take notice and breathe it all in.

Between that and the living Red River postcard that is my backyard, I can't imagine how I'll feel in 30 years.

Barbara Fidle is a writer, photographer and owner of RiverRoad Communications.

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A semi-circular seating area nestles into a curved bank of windows in the sitting room.



Light streams in through a high window over the dining room; note the skylight at left.