

The Gazette

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PHOTOS: STEVE MONTPETIT/STEVE MONTPETIT.COM

The 600-square-foot top floor is not particularly expansive in itself, but the flow of the renovated space leaves a very different impression.

The happy place

AN ATTIC IS GUTTED in a Plateau townhouse to allow for a third-floor sanctuary

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SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

When I ask architect Laurent McComber to describe his pictured renovation project in a phrase, it gets us talking about how fascinating it is that some things just don't translate.

In a phrase, he'd describe the project with the name it already has, "Juliette aux combles." The word "combe" has two connotations — attic or happiness — both equally applicable. The wooden shelves at the centre of the space are built from the same wood that made up the small attic that was once here. Juliette, one of the owners, is quite happy about how it all turned out. But McComber and I agree that "Juliette in the attic" just doesn't have the same panache.

The project is the third floor of a Plateau townhouse, originally built in 1885. The family of four had got the first two floors renovated previously, and called upon McComber to gut the attic and transform this space into something of a sanctuary for the parents.

Before these renovations, everything on the third floor was in terrible shape. The floors were damaged; the plaster was falling apart; the ceiling was poorly insulated and leaked when it rained; the attic, which was really more of a crawl space, was hardly used and took up way too much space, making the

ceiling shorter.

The purpose of the project was to repair, restore and renovate the third floor so it could serve the multiple purposes of master bedroom, art studio, office, library and lounge. "We wanted to put all those functions together on the third floor; so it would

also give the parents their own private quarters," McComber explains.

The concept centres on the stairway, which marks the entrance, and the central shelving, probably the most noticeable thing here, with its beige wood diverging from the ubiquitous whiteness. The

stairs, railings and adjacent brick wall were restored and painted over to keep a hint of the house's historic cachet.

The shelving wraps around three wall surfaces, providing storage for the many books and miscellany that had been crowding the second floor. One of the

planks is also a little wider to create a work surface. All of the wood was sourced from the now-defunct attic, though McComber warns that working with reclaimed material has its challenges.

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The shelving and stairway are the focal points, with the original brick stair wall painted white.



At the back, the cantilevered roof was renovated and the balcony on the third floor is sleeker and lets more light in.

SANCTUARY Guttled attic space breathes new, illuminated life

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"There are often nails embedded into the planks, or even dust and sand, and that dulls saw blades, which are costly to replace," he says. "Still, it makes for a nice story: we kept the existing wood and gave it a second life."

The shelving unit cleverly conceals the linear walk-in closet that leads to the bathroom, an effect that's better observed from the bordering master bedroom. The owners call this zone "the shell," since the winding shelves, somewhat reminiscent of a conch's shape, envelop a shiny and smooth interior (namely the marble mosaic tiles).

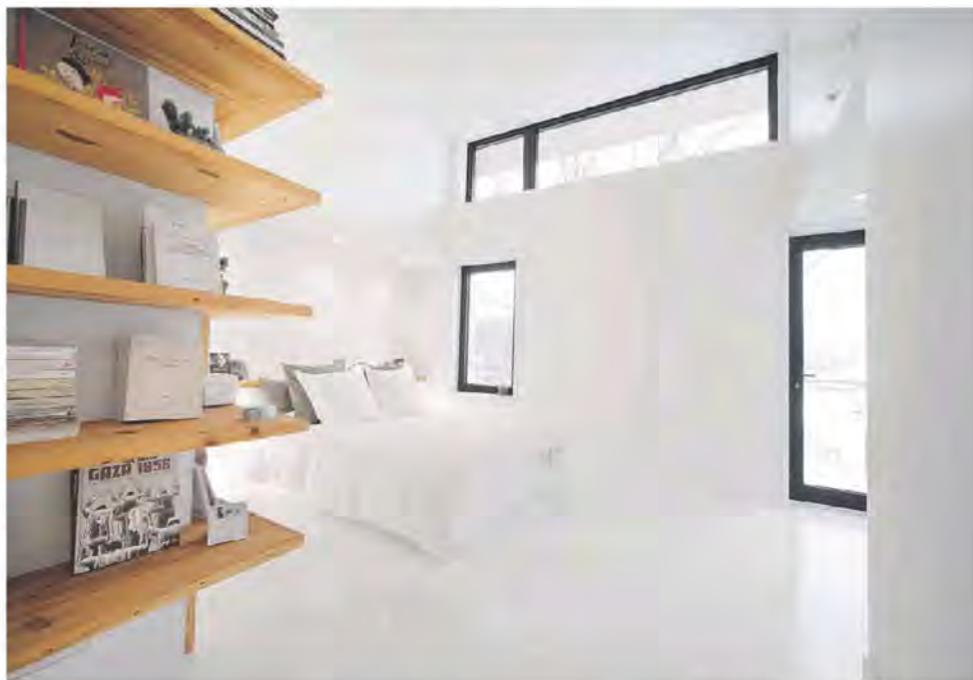
There is no door blocking the bathroom; it's a straight path from the master bedroom. There are only the closet's sliding doors, which, when closed, create a small hallway passage.

"When people build a walk-in closet," McComber points out, "it's usually closed up in its own space, so it's darker. We tried not to do that."

In general, this area, which is near the back of the house, benefits from new windows: two verticals and one panoramic. McComber also removed the balcony poles on which the large cantilevered roofing rested, blocking much of the sunlight; he replaced it with a smaller, pole-less version to keep that part of the house cool in the summer and warm during winter. The light bounces off the mostly white surfaces.

There's a palpable flow to the third floor that wasn't there before. Part of that was achieved by tearing down the walls that used to separate rooms, which opened everything up like a loft. Still, the owners didn't want their space to look like a modern condo, so McComber worked to maintain some of its original elements. That meant preserving the flooring, which was repainted and evened out with self-levelling concrete.

It seems cliché to use the term "feng shui," so we'll



The renovated windows and glass door swath the third floor in natural light.

PHOTOS: STEVE MONTPETIT/STEVEMONTPETIT.COM



LED lights are embedded around the bathroom, creating ideal illumination.



The master bedroom, seen from the bathroom, is a clean and bright haven.

use "circulation" instead, because that's what Juliette aux combles ultimately achieves: unencumbered fluidity.

"Your perception of a room will change according to where you see it from," McComber says. "We try to re-

group those circulations, because if there are too many, it kills a room. You wouldn't want the bed to be next to the staircase, for example."

To that end, the shelving acts like a core, holding it all together: It's the most obvious

reference point from the stairway, it's where most of the busy activities occur, and it lends privacy to the areas that need it.

It's how an attic that was falling apart turned into a solid happy place.

The 600-square-foot project was completed in 2013 with prefinished steel cladding for the facade. For the interiors, gypsum, brick, salvaged wood, marble mosaic and painted wood flooring were used. The woodwork-

Tips from the architect:

■ Renovating the top floor of a house can be challenging. Because we needed to open up the roof, there was a risk of flooding or other weather-related issues, so we were forced to work on only one half of the third floor at a time, and we had a drainage system set up.

■ The moment you alter a load-bearing wall or the way the rooms are configured, it can have an impact on fire safety. So that's the kind of thing that has to be carefully considered and intelligently designed around.

■ With a historic house in a historic neighbourhood, expect to adhere to a coherent esthetic at street level. In this case, the new front windows we installed had to have central mullions, where we would rather have used uniform panels to get more light.

■ Always think about where your door is going to land when you open it, especially in a small space. That's why I used sliding doors or none at all in this project.

ing was done by L'Arbre (larbre.ca), and the contractor was P.A. Construction, 514-951-1018.

Laurent McComber founded his firm L. McComber Itée (lmccomber.ca) in 2005, and eventually was joined by David Grenier and Olivier Lord. On top of several home renovations, L. McComber Itée is behind many residential designs, as well as commercial projects like the Crudessence restaurant and bar, Boulangerie Guillaume on St-Laurent Blvd, and the Via Capitale office on Mont-Royal Ave. and de la Roche St. L. McComber Itée received an award in 2009 from the Ordre des architectes du Québec for its Lignes aériennes project, and its work was presented at the 2007 Venice Biennale.