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New Kid on the Block

A young north-side resident is turning heads

By Jennifer Garrett



DESIGNER'S CORNER: Kyle Dumbleton designed the cream-colored couch in his living room while still a graduate student in the architecture program at UW—Milwaukee. So the couch came before the house, but it fits perfectly.

Photo by John Cizmas

Meet Boris. He's got a flat top, a garage door in his living room, a fraternal twin sister named Doris and a pet betta fish named Juan-Ton. He's not your average guy. In fact, he's not a guy at all. He's a house on the north side of town, and his neighborhood has never seen the likes of him.

Boris is the brainchild of Bark Design, a collaboration of Chris Gosch, who works at the Alexander Company by day, and his business partner Kevin Schmotzer. Gosch says he and Schmotzer scoured Madison and Milwaukee for years to find lots without building restrictions that would prevent them from erecting a flat-roofed modern house. They finally found two on the north side and Boris was conceived.

"Most of the restrictions and covenants in subdivisions restrict flat roofs and siding types and landscaping ... [They] basically prevent you from doing anything that is not a standard cookie-cutter house," Gosch says. He also noted that limitations on carports and one-car garages are prevalent in most new developments. "The nice thing is that most of the restrictive covenants [in this neighborhood] ran out a week before I broke ground."

Gosch and Schmotzer always intended to sell Boris, so they listed the house on a for-sale-by-owner website before construction began. The modern design caught the eye of Kyle Dumbleton, a designer in the process of obtaining his architecture license, and his wife Shana, a recent graduate with a master's degree in educational counseling. It was a perfect match.

Dumbleton says Boris is exactly what he was looking for when he moved from Milwaukee to Madison last summer. The twenty-eight-year-old designer for Renschler Company had very specific ideas about what his first house would look like. "I wouldn't live in a house unless it's modern," he says.

The three-bedroom, two-and-a-half-bath house cost around ninety dollars per square foot (excluding the land) -- a veritable bargain in today's market. And you'd never notice that they cut any corners -- because they didn't. Dumbleton and Gosch made deliberate choices, not compromises, to create a one-of-a-kind house in an otherwise modest, unassuming neighborhood. So while the twenty-two-hundred-square-foot home didn't break the bank, it did break a lot of



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Photos by John Cizmas

There's the flat roof. There's the glass garage door that opens up while a screen scrolls down, turning the entire living room into a screened porch. There is the rubber flooring in the kitchen, particleboard instead of drywall on the ceiling and raw plywood shelving that Kyle and Shana installed in the living room. The house is built on a slab on grade, meaning that there is no basement or crawlspace below. There is an extra-long garage with room enough for one car, bike gear and all the other usuals. In front of that is a carport. Upstairs, half of the master bathroom is actually in the bedroom. The commercial-grade windows look industrial, only they open (unlike their commercial counterparts). There is no trim anywhere.

Gosch says neighbors were nervous at first, but worry gave way to curiosity as the house went up. Dumbleton says the north-side neighborhood has ultimately been welcoming of the divergent design. "I think most Madisonians are pretty accepting of differences," he says.

That gives him hope that Boris might have some cousins born in the vicinity. "I think Madison really needs more diverse housing. I think that really adds to the flavor of the street," he says. "I don't think they all have to be modern."

He does think they all should be thoughtfully designed. "Homes are really expensive, so you should get what you pay for," he says. "Most people wouldn't buy a car if it was the wrong color. People should be the same way about their housing."

This month Boris will be welcoming his sister Doris next door. Gosch and Scmotzer are "aggressively pursuing" lots in Middleton that should be home to Boris and Doris's siblings someday. And eventually Dumbleton hopes to have a hand in creating the next generation of modern houses in Madison. "I like to design most things I touch," he says. "I'll probably do our next house."

We're hoping that the living-room garage-door thing is a dominant

architectural gene.

Jennifer Garrett is associate editor of Madison Magazine.

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