

THE LOCAL PROJECT



HABITATS
FOREST



Maison Melba

Atelier L'Abri

09

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Frelighsburg is widely considered one of the most beautiful villages in Quebec. Located in the Eastern Townships region near the Vermont border, it's known for its unspoiled heritage vernacular and thriving agricultural community, specifically its apple orchards and cideries. In addition, the philosophy of permaculture – a closed loop, sustainable way of living – is embraced by many of the residents and local businesses, contributing to Frelighsburg's resonance.



It is no surprise then that Atelier L'Abri's client – a Montreal native considering a move to the countryside – was drawn to this humble township upon spying a dilapidated property for sale while riding his bike through the village. As it happens, the existing 1970s rural building encompassing living quarters and a large garage “was at the end of its life,” says architect Nicolas Lapierre. “But this is where we saw an opportunity to transform it and completely retrofit the building using a sustainable approach and Passive House principles.”

The resulting scope involved stripping back the form to the original timber frame and reimagining the internal layout to better respond to the client's lifestyle. Clad in new timber siding, which will “gradually shift from brown to grey under the influence of time and the elements,” comments Lapierre, the form retains the distinctive mansard-style silhouette. A standing seam metal roof and Passive House-certified triple-glazed windows complete the high-performing envelope, which not only looks contextually relevant but is robust enough to age gracefully.







It is in this idea of longevity that Lapierre believes the true pursuit of sustainable design finds its grounding. “The main idea is to create a building that is more responsible and that will last longer,” he says, likening the decision to specify higher-quality materials and utilise premium construction methods to investing in a timeless piece of furniture. “Viewing the project as something of permanence that can be passed onto future generations was very much the driving factor.” This sentiment was shared by the project’s collaborators, including the contractor, artisanal lime plaster specialist and the local makers whose pieces fill the interiors, culminating in an authentic and deeply integrated outcome.

Taking cues from the original form’s hybrid nature, Maison Melba contains a residence as well as a flexible quarters with a kitchen, gathering space and studio. There is also a greenhouse and extensive landscaping conceived by Écomestible—a local company specialising in ecological, edible and regenerative planting. The commercially leaning space facilitates workshops and retreats, strengthening the connection between this project and its locality and exuding the same sense of community redolent of the village itself. “Our client is a warm and welcoming person, and the commercial element of the project embodies his values of sharing and hospitality,” says architect Pia Hocheneder.



The adjacent residence is accessed via a double-height, enclosed breezeway emulating a European alleyway. Inside, a palette of Douglas fir, white oak, linen and limewash – which “works to enhance interior air quality, has low thermal conductivity and brings a calming feeling to the interior,” says Hocheneder – is subdued. Notably, freestanding furniture modules and fixed elements help to define the edges of this space in lieu of dividing walls. For example, a timber joinery unit not only separates the entrance from the living area but functions as a coat rack on the entry-facing side and a library on the other.

Similarly, a fireplace delineates the living nook from a larger gathering spot, heavy curtains bring privacy to the study and exposed timber beams – which are new but reference the home’s original structure – indicate the kitchen’s threshold. This diaphanous approach not only facilitates fluidity in how the plan is experienced but enhances the sense of tranquillity that permeates these walls, aided by an adept approach to acoustics and thoughtfully framed apertures.





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Back outside, the form – which sits beneath a weeping willow tree – will eventually be enveloped by the landscaping. Clusters of native plants will change colour with the seasons and fresh produce from the site’s greenhouse and fruit and vegetable plots will be harvested for guests and visitors alike. As an outcome, it is neatly aligned with the tenets of permaculture, from the intentionality of the built form and the site’s ecology to the community-minded philosophy Maison Melba so vehemently exudes.

