

Hamilton

It took 8 years to build this house out of shipping containers. Now the owner is considering changes

Geoffrey Young says home can 'ignite imagination as to what living space can be.'

[Saira Peesker](#) · CBC News · Posted: Feb 01, 2022 2:12 PM ET | Last Updated: February 1



Geoffrey Young stands in front of his home at 5 Arkledun Ave. in 2018, after the shipping containers that construct it were first assembled. He has spent much of the time since converting the stack of containers into a modern home. (Laura Clementson/CBC)

A collection of shipping containers is sure to catch the eye of drivers heading up and down the Jolley Cut, one of the winding roads in Hamilton bridging the lower city to the Mountain.

The unusual red and grey structure is actually Geoffrey Young's home and took about eight years to build.

Now, after a year inside, he's already thinking about modifying it to make way for a new baby – but says part of the beauty of this type of construction is that moving a wall is no big deal.

"I sought out to build the most adaptable and worthwhile place possible within budget," says Young, noting the eight-container construction's exterior walls are structural, while the interior walls of the containers can be cut free and moved to a new spot using drywall.

To plan for his new baby, he's considering turning a roomy, L-shaped bedroom into two smaller ones.



The inside of the container house is mostly drywalled with modern finishes, but owner Geoffrey Young left the container walls exposed in some places for effect. (Supplied/Geoffrey Young)

"The underlying point of the whole thing is to get people to consider their built environment and how it affects them and their lives... also, just to kind

of ignite imagination as to what living space can be" he said, during a recent tour of his home conducted over Zoom.

In its current configuration, the six-bedroom home is spread over three floors, a traditional concrete basement with two levels of containers stacked on top.

While much of the interior of the home uses drywall, and looks modern and familiar, Young has left some of the container walls visible for effect.

The house – which cost between \$700,000 and \$750,000 to build – is located on Arkledun Avenue, the road that connects to the lower end of the Jolley Cut, leading to great views of the city facing north.

It's construction is such that several more shipping containers could be added on to the top in the future to create a taller building, or more units, says Young, but adds the structure would likely require further reinforcement.

City 'tough to deal with,' says owner

Young is a philosophical jack-of-all-trades who worked in community radio and disaster relief before beginning the eight-year-long process to design and build his dream home.

He's had much professional help along the way, but learned to frame, install flooring and hang drywall while building the home, where he lives with his partner, their child and a tenant.



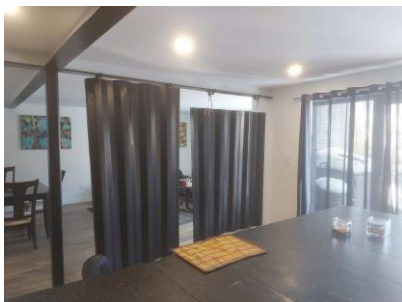
The house is at the bottom end of the Jolley Cut, and has lots of natural light and city views. (Supplied/Geoffrey Young)

He says he's also had a lot to learn about dealing with the city, a process he says added significant time to what he'd initially forecast for the project.

He bought the lot from the city for \$100,000 – the previous house there burned down years ago, he says – and found sewer pipes from several neighbouring houses ran through it.

"It's a really tough municipality to deal with," Young says. "Going in, I was under the impression it would be a collaboration between me and the city... and it didn't kind of work like that."

Young said the back and forth with the city added "a lot of cost and a lot of time."



The shipping container house on Arkledun Ave. is made of four containers, laid side-by-side, for each floor above the foundation. (Supplied/Geoffrey Young)

The city's planning department said the building permit process took place over about three months, which is routine, but did not provide the time it took Young's project to obtain site plan approval or any other necessary permits.

Spokesperson Michelle Shantz said while this remains the only home of this style in Hamilton, the uniqueness of the project would not affect the length of the process.

"The building permit application process does not change based on the complexity/uniqueness of the house to be constructed," she wrote in an email sent Tuesday.

'Tourist visits' every day

Young's container project, built on a formerly empty lot, is one of many infill developments that will have to take place in the coming years in order for Hamilton to accommodate the firm urban boundary council voted for last year.

To accommodate a projected population increase of 236,000 people over the next 30 years, new developments will have to be built within current city limits. In that time, according to city staff, Hamilton will need 110,000 more housing units.

He's not alone in his struggle, according to Bill Curran, principal of Thier Curran Architects, who said the city's planning rules must change in order for infill and intensification projects to happen more quickly and easily.

Curran cited a report by the Ontario Association of Architects that called the site plan approval (SPA) process – a major step in the construction permitting process – broken.

Here in Hamilton, "we see... timelines just for site plan approval of at least 12 months, often over 24 to 36 months, for buildings that take under a year to build... And SPA is but one element of planning and building permit approvals required for any project," Curran wrote in an email. "[It's] evidence of a huge disconnect."

Now that he's finished his project, Young says he can't help but wonder what he could get for the unique house and its 3,600 square feet of largely open-concept living space, if he were to put it on the market.

It's come a long way from the days when the lot was just an abandoned city property, layered with bricks, carpeting and broken pipes from the house that burned down there 60 years earlier.

He says passersby are constantly stopping to take photos of the building and its stark geometric design.

"We still get two or three tourist visits or 'long looks' per day."