

Modernizing a timeless beauty

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Special to National Post Martha Uniacke Breen November 18, 2017 7:00 AM EST Last Updated November 18, 2017 7:00 AM EST
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November 18, 2017



The Toronto firm Superkül was handed a daunting but architecturally interesting assignment when the owners of this circa-1962 gem approached them.

Set at the foot of a wooded ridge in Toronto's Hogg's Hollow, the house was an excellent example of mid-20th-century aesthetics, with its airy front carport, sheltered courtyard, and bright, open interior. It even had picture windows – de rigeur in the '60s – that framed a panoramic view of the woods that rose behind the property.

“There was a very clear intent with the original house,” principal architect Meg Graham says of the home tucked away in the leafy, well-heeled neighbourhood at Yonge and York Mills.

“Contrary to the houses on either side, it was a bungalow, with a great deal of mid-century modern character. The front courtyard was exquisite; it was one of those design elements that encompassed the spirit of the house, which was really lovely.”

In contrast to some owners, who often see properties like this as hopelessly out of date and

valuable mainly for the (often wide) lots they occupy, the clients loved the house just as it was. (They particularly liked the carport, a quirky period icon, and specifically asked that it be kept more or less intact.) The challenge was to respectfully bring this timeless beauty forward into the present.

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“We felt the house had so much personality; nothing could compete with what was already there,” the owner says. “We wanted to truly respect the era of the house. So many of these houses are being torn down today. But we felt so many features were unique, like the carport and all these spaces for little gardens and architectural ‘moments.’ It had been done in such a thoughtful way, it would have been a shame to tear it down and start over.”

But still, there were practical problems. Primarily, the owners needed more room. With three teenagers, they needed more space to simply lounge and find places to spend time apart as well as together; the parents both also wanted home offices. In addition, a master suite added in the '70s was a bit of a time warp in its own right – but with its plain lines and dark panelling, it was inconsistent with the overall style.

Aesthetics aside, the state of architectural art has moved on during the subsequent decades. The original kitchen was small and enclosed, too cramped for a family of five who loves to cook. And while the picture windows at the back were as large as contemporary technology could offer, they were puny by modern standards. “So part of the mandate was to bring everything back together, as well as bringing it back to the landscape,” Graham says.



The kitchen is sleek and bright. Courtesy of Ben Rahn

The trick was to find ways to make it practical for its present-day occupants' needs, without compromising the original intent. This required more thought than simply adding on top or out back. Instead, working with builder Derek Nicholson Inc., they began by moving the staircase to the side, which allowed them to reconfigure and open up the interior without increasing the original footprint. The main floor ceiling was raised by 30 inches, instantly adding volume and light. And a second-floor podium was placed on top of the I-shaped rear section, stepped back from the front elevation to avoid a monolithic look. Vertical shading fins eliminate visual bulk, and make a pleasant rhyme with the vertical slats that perforate the sides of the carport.

A prelude

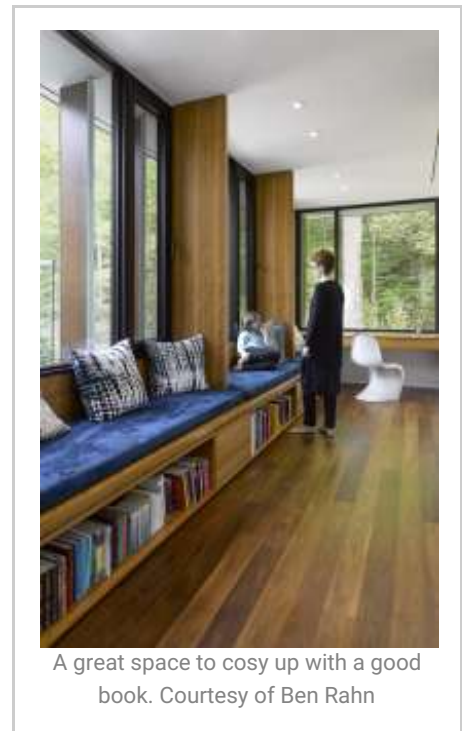
The front path meanders around the carport to a sheltered front door, past a courtyard of grasses and ground-covers, designed, as was all the landscaping, by Kate Fox-Whyte. The front offers a prelude to a palette of low-key, beautiful materials deployed outdoors and in, to complement the original white brick, including woods such as teak, cherry, mahogany and marine-grade stained plywood, and Cor-Ten weathered steel. The second-storey addition is clad in white cement board, which matches the brick in colour without being overtly matchy.

Past the teak front door, a short hallway leads to the main interior space, which opens out to embrace the woody view through floor-to-ceiling windows that stretch across almost the entire back. Just around to the right and down a step, a small den updates the original, whose wood-slat ceiling featured stylish curved edges at each end. The architects didn't reproduce the modish curves, but they kept the idea of wood slats, which gives the room a relaxed, curl-up-with-a-book coziness. "This is a prime example of what André and I like to call 'thickened' spaces," Graham explains. "These are spaces that are not so much dedicated to a single purpose, but designed to just sit and enjoy spending time in a variety of ways."

The main part of the house is divided in half by a double-faced fireplace, with a living area on one side and an expansive Bulthaup kitchen and dining area on the other. The fireplace, with its blackened steel, wrap-around hearth, concrete slab base and white drywall upper section, features a reveal at the ceiling, giving it the look of a freestanding piece. But the main event is the panoramic view of the patio, garden and the wild forest beyond it. "The owners say they've often seen deer and foxes walk by," Graham says.

Creating a second-storey addition for the kids' bedrooms allowed the team to repurpose the original bedrooms, including the master suite, into a cloistered wing with a pivoting door that encloses it from the main action when desired. Just past a short hallway is a pair of adjacent office spaces, overlooking the front landscaping; farther in, the master suite has its own wrap-around view of garden and woods. But one of the owners' favourite features is a tiny secret garden, which the architects carved out of a corner of the house. It's only visible through a strategically placed ensuite window – allowing a bather to contemplate the greenery, in privacy, while soaking in the tub.

The second-storey podium, which houses new, larger bedrooms for each of the family's three teenagers, has its own special space high above the rest of the house: a lookout with windows that wrap around one corner, built-in seats and bookcases and a work area at one end. It's another of the home's "thickened" spaces: equally suited for homework, reading, lounging, or simply gazing out and watching snow gently falling on the woods outside.



A great space to cosy up with a good book. Courtesy of Ben Rahn

“It’s a very peaceful house,” says the owner. “The materials it uses, especially all the different woods, have a very organic feeling to them. The flow of one area to the next, and all the little gardens and views, are simply exquisite. It’s a very Zen house.”



The living area has wonderful views and a fab fireplace. Courtesy of Ben Rahn