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SECTION G

# Globe Real Estate



## BACK TO THE FUTURE

Heritage curb appeal tied to a modern core **PAGE 8**



Owners David Dattels and Jennifer Grant called on architect Heather Dubbeldam to rejig an aging rooming house. **TOM ARBAN; BOB GUNDU**

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# A hidden Annex gem shines anew

Used and abused over the years – being a rooming house didn't help – a 19th-century home gets well-deserved 21st-century sex appeal



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There's a wonderful exchange in Phyllis Brett Young's 1960 novel *The Torontonians*: Visiting a friend in London, frustrated suburban housewife Karen Whitney, the protagonist, gets an earful about what's wrong with Torontonians.

"I never could understand why Toronto people should spend a fortune on a house and then go live in the basement," the friend says.

Suggesting there is a "definite trend" toward coming upstairs, Karen's husband, Rick, offers the explanation that the basement recreation room was the only place Torontonians "felt free to express themselves uninhibited by mores with which they were no longer actually in agreement."

While so very much has changed since then, there are some things Torontonians still keep hidden.

Behind many old façades in traditional neighbourhoods, such as Rosedale, Forest Hill, Lawrence Park and the Annex, a lust for Modernism is being sated. Architects and clients are coming together to create open, airy interiors unadorned by crown moulding and dark panelling; yet, from the street, they're allowing these places to continue to tell the story of Toronto a century ago.

For instance, walk down one Annex street in particular and the warm red brick, stone lintels, dormer windows and shingled roofs continue uninterrupted.

However, one mid-block home with a bold third-floor turret and welcoming front porch, hides 21st-century sexy inside. Well, today it does.

When architect Heather Dubbeldam of Dubbeldam Architecture + Design answered the call of David Dattels and Jennifer Grant a few years ago, this grand Annex lady was anything but sexy. Vacant for two years, the home had suffered the indignity of being carved into an 11-unit rooming house; not only was plumbing everywhere, but secondary walls with newer wiring had been placed in front of old walls with knob-and-tube. Save for a few radiators, all traces of 19th-century sexy had been erased, and 20th-century additions popped out of the back wall without architectural rhyme or reason.

In other words, the couple, who had just returned to Toronto after a five-year stay overseas in London, were free to express themselves in any architectural language they chose.

"I'm a historian," Ms. Grant says. "We loved the historic house, but there wasn't anything worth salvaging inside; so, we looked at saving as much of the house as we could."

"It took a lot of vision to see what it could be," Mr. Dattels adds.

So everything was stripped to the studs. In the backyard, a massive pink-stuccoed "coach house" (in name only, it was not built in the horse-and-buggy era) took up too much valuable real estate – "It looked like a motel in the backyard," Ms. Grant quips – and so, was razed, despite being in relatively good condition.

Eighteen months, piles of architectural drawings and countless hours of labour later, this hidden Annex gem is out in the open. Open the front door, and "every square inch" has received Ms. Dubbeldam's touch, "even some of the details, even some of the door handles," says architect Joseph Villahermosa, standing in the foyer, ready to give the grand tour. And as wonderful as the foyer's big closet and built-in seating is, these take a back seat to the opaque-and-transparent screen that "frames specific views of the living room" – one highlight is the 3-D artwork by Patrick Hughes on the living room wall, which "moves" as one walks.

Straight ahead, there's a wood-clad pod containing a gas fireplace, powder room and some of the home's mechanical and structural systems. Beyond that are the less formal spaces designed by Ms. Dubbeldam: a big kitchen enrobed in Statuario marble, a dining room with a table crowned by a trio of Tom Dixon light fixtures, and an informal seating area beside floor-to-ceiling windows that connect to the new outdoor deck. Past the



'We loved the historic house, but there wasn't anything worth salvaging,' owner Jennifer Grant says. A stripped-to-the-studs makeover ensued. BOB GUNDU



Architect Heather Dubbeldam oversaw the renovation and 'every square inch' benefited from her tasteful touch. PHOTOS BY TOM ARBAN

deck is a new, smaller coach house dressed in the same reddish-brown, fibre-cement panels with a window that wraps around a corner to dissolve the hard edge.

Similarly, back inside, a floor-to-ceiling walnut room divider between the kitchen and dining area also dissolves some of its mass with a corner cut out (as well as a pass-through that frames a view of the large Edward Burtynsky photograph).

While the main floor is designed for entertaining – there's overflow seating built into the pod – the couple has done very little since three little ones came into their lives. "Actually, this type of open space works well for kids and, because the design is so beautiful and so much of it is millwork, the kids are able to run around and we don't need a lot of decor items," Ms. Grant explains, with her youngest in a baby carrier.

On the second floor, Mr. Villahermosa tiptoes past the children's bedrooms to show off the home office, which runs the length of the home, and then climbs the handsome stairway to the third floor, where a stunning master bedroom, dual walk-in closets and a big master bath provide a refuge for the homeowners.

Most stunning is the portion of the bedroom contained within the home's turret, where Ms.

Dubbeldam has punched the ceiling up as high as possible – standing here is like standing under a giant witch's hat.

Although the couple has asked to keep the exterior view of the turret a secret, there's no mystery as to why Toronto is one of the most successful cities in the world: Every downtown neighbourhood is bursting with vibrant people ... some so vibrant, they'll restore dignity back to an old rooming house.