

A hold-out bungalow on a street of mega-mansions
is given a new lease on life. By Alex Bozikovic

Ranch Dressing



HALFWAY THROUGH the last century, the old equestrian trails of midtown Toronto made way for a patch of suburbia. Low ranch houses slipped between the tall trees, hiding pool parties in their two-acre backyards. Today, the Bridle Path is one of the most expensive enclaves in the country, and the original, modest houses are being knocked down, one by one, in favour of vainglorious monstrosities. Prince lives here in a \$5-million contemporary mansion, and Conrad Black built a gated neo-Georgian manor with a domed library copied from an 18th-century Oxford original.

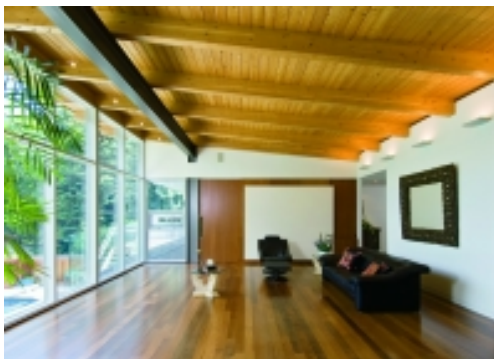
Still, one of the mid-century modernist houses has had its spirit preserved. From the street, its cream stone front is unremarkable. It's not until you enter that the true grace of the home becomes clear. A custom wall unit of cherrywood and Lagos limestone lines the front hall. Straight ahead, a massive bay window opens the living room to a verdant ravine. Floors of Brazilian ipe hardwood flow through an open, generous layout.

The house is a hidden treasure, and that suits its owners just fine. The well-travelled couple, with roots in India and east Africa, aren't fond of the neighbourhood's ostentation. But they were looking for wide-open space, and the massive ravine lot with swimming pool sealed the deal. Compared



Fully equipped: the family's kitchen, big enough for holiday gatherings, is dominated by a cantilevered cherry table

Built in the late 1950s, the backsplit was a mess of ornately decorated small rooms—the library featured imitation Louis XIV panelling. At first the new owners thought a few touch-ups would do the trick



Sun-kissed: a glass curtain wall and large skylights open the principal rooms to the outdoors

with a cramped and pricey home in London, England, where they lived until the early 1990s, it was even a bargain.

But the backsplit itself, built in the late 1950s, was a mess of ornately decorated small rooms—the library featured imitation Louis XIV panelling. The couple, longtime renters, had never been through a renovation, and at first they thought a few cosmetic touch-ups would do the trick. “I felt just changing the carpets would be enough,” laughs the wife, a homemaker. “Little did she know!” says her husband.

Instead, they began to imagine a California modern-style home, combining the laid-back open spaces of her Kenyan childhood and the “hard modern” esthetic that he, an engineer by training, favoured. But razing the house and starting from scratch seemed daunting, and expensive. Once the couple settled on a full renovation, they were nervous to start knocking down walls. “We kind of want to be sure of what we’re going to get before we get it,” the husband says. So they took the step, unusual for a residential project, of holding an architectural competition.

Michael Taylor, principal of Taylor Smyth Architects, presented the winning vision. Clean-cut and youthful, he’s a veteran of some of Canada’s most prominent architecture firms, most recently KPMB and his former partnership Taylor Hariri Pontarini. These days, he and partner Robert Smyth produce acclaimed designs for residences and public buildings.

The house had low, seven-and-a-half-foot ceilings. “So the challenge,” says Taylor, “was to get a sense of loftiness without ripping everything down.” He answered with a series of cleverly placed skylights, each with a wide, irregularly shaped well to enhance its effect. The new great room has a 24-foot-wide and 15-foot-tall bay window built of industrial-steel I-beams and a commercial-grade glass curtain wall. The steel is softened by Douglas fir roof beams, which slope across the great room to meet humble drywall. Natural materials repeat

throughout the public rooms: the original fireplace has been covered by an expanse of smooth and flamed limestone and topped with a cherrywood display cabinet; the same stone shows up on the floor with a smooth, honed finish.

Cherrywood reappears on the other side of the room, in a custom cabinet that marks off a sitting area. It combines hidden storage for an entertainment centre, display shelves and matching pocket doors that can close off the sitting area and the kitchen beyond, or leave it open for entertaining.

Taylor speaks of these rooms as “a series of compositions all employing the same palette of materials.” Indeed, the showpiece kitchen sports a table made of cherry butcher block—its cantilevered off the large island on a steel I-beam. A wall of cabinets is a two-tone jigsaw puzzle of natural cherry and pale lacquered MDF cabinets, blending with the off-white walls to create a sense of visual play.

With its broad counters and chef-style Wolf gas stove, this kitchen won’t be mistaken for its former, cramped space. The wife, a serious cook, says the six-foot-five Taylor kept her and her husband’s relatively short stature in mind. “Two or three inches is nothing for Taylor, but it’s everything to me,” she says. Counters and upper cabinets were lowered to put them in easy reach.

Likewise, the 35-foot-long back deck is a collaboration between architect and clients. Taylor followed his plan to extend the kitchen’s ipe floor to the outside, but at the couple’s suggestion installed clear, not wooden, railings. The tempered glass allows them to keep an eye on their two young daughters and the swaying birch trees beyond. It’s close to the modernist ideal of a home open to nature—and the perfect setting for a pool party.

While the house now lives up to its original promise, it may not survive should its present owners move on. “This is a small house on a lot this size,” the husband admits, expecting it will some day be replaced by another faux château. For now, Taylor’s transformation proves there’s promise in even the most workmanlike suburban designs. □