



Home of the Week A modern residence designed by renowned architect Ron Thom lies under a blanket of snow in Aurora. See story **PAGE 6** ➔

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RENOVATION

Homes strut on Designers Walk

Once Toronto's epicentre of design, the decor destination has had to reinvent itself to stay on top



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When architect Michael Taylor walked into the live/work spaces at Designers Walk, he felt instantly transported back to the 1980s. The terrazzo floors were a bit reminiscent of *Dynasty*; the units were dowdy.

But at the same time, Mr. Taylor recognized immediately how well the innovative design had held up through the dec-

ades. "It was one of those places where I walked in and said, 'Wow, I could really live here,'" says the principal with Taylor Smyth Architects.

The most intriguing feature was the "secret garden" located in the centre of each unit, he adds. "We were still struck by the wonderful central courtyard element that created this light well."

With such a strong organizing element, it didn't take a lot of imagination, the architect says, to strip away the last superficial reminders of 1982 and revamp the structure in 21st-century style.

Mr. Taylor was part of the team that turned the residences from outmoded rental properties into Designers Walk Lofts — eight luxury condominiums that have been selling at a blistering pace at prices starting at \$329,000 and ranging to about \$1.5-million. At last count, only one had yet to be sold.

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ARCHITECTURE



A Bridle Path home superbly renovated. KUWABARA PAYNE MCKENNA BLUMBERG ARCHITECTS



The ancien régime fantasia at Forest Hill Road and Heath Street West. RYAN CARTER/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Brickbats and bouquets

The Globe's housing critic gives his appraisal of the year's residential offerings



JOHN BENTLEY MAYS THE PERFECT HOUSE
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In the spirit of the gift-giving season, I've decided to end the year by handing out some architectural awards for Toronto's best and worst residential projects of 2007. I've seen some knockouts in both categories over the course of the year now passing away, but what follows is the cream of the crop.

Drum roll please!

FIXER-UPPER PRIZE FOR BEST RENOVATION

The winner, hands down, is the team of Tom Payne, Eric

Jensen and David Jesson, all of the Toronto architectural firm Kuwabara Payne McKenna Blumberg, for its eminently sensible redoing of an 8,500-square-foot modernist villa in The Bridle Path neighbourhood.

Originally designed for a two-acre site by Toronto architects William Carruthers and William Grierson, this long, low-slung house from 1969 is a classic product of its era: floor-to-ceiling glass walls enclosing an open flow of space, all sandwiched between flat hori-

zontal planes of concrete.

But by 2003, when the current owners moved in — a young couple with a growing family — the building needed serious freshening up, as well as more extensive surgery. Whereupon began the renovation and renewal of the place by Mr. Payne and his colleagues.

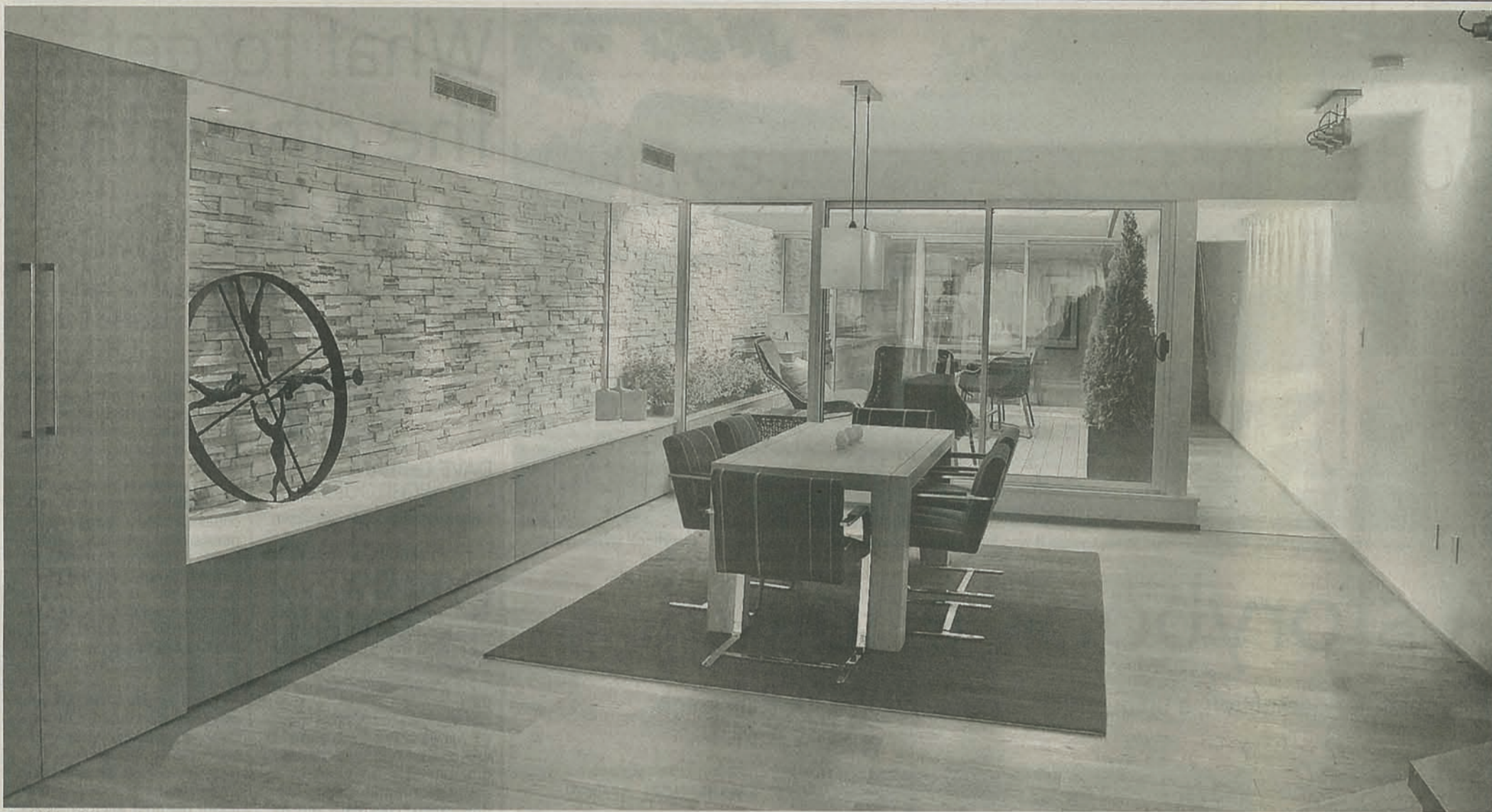
The designers introduced new glass and leather sliding doors in various places, much improving the internal rhythm of spatial compartments.

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NOTE TO READERS

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The living/dining area opens onto a private courtyard. PHOTOS FROM DESIGNERS WALK

Designers Walk became a mecca for designers

But the rejuvenation at Designers Walk involves more than real estate. A resource centre open to the public will let consumers wander in to see the wares for themselves. Some showrooms have always been open to visitors, but most have been accessible only to designers and architects.

Designers Walk became a sensation in Toronto's design and architecture community when it opened in the 1980s. The complex at Davenport and Bedford roads was a mecca for the interior designers, architects and fabric houses who set up their studios and showrooms among the four brick buildings developed by commercial designer Joab Igra.

Mr. Igra developed the complex from a pair of buildings built in 1948. Designers Walk had a village feel, with laneways connecting the buildings and a bistro on Bedford. Some tenants lived and worked above in the three floors of residential units.

Jennette Igra is the wife of Joab and mother of Ron. She remembers the hands-on care the family took when choosing the original design and finishes. "Every brick was hand-sorted and 30 per cent of the bricks were thrown away because they weren't exactly the right colour," Ms. Igra says. "And I was involved in sorting the bricks."

The Igras lived for a time in one of the residences as well. "We came from the design



Architect Michael Taylor wanted to keep the kitchen's colour palette light to take advantage of the natural light from the courtyard.

Every brick was hand-sorted and 30 per cent of the bricks were thrown away because they weren't exactly the right colour.

Jennette Igra

industry and really understood the problems that designers have. I think that's why it has been successful. We're not just landlords."

She recalls how quiet and undeveloped the Avenue Road and Davenport area was at the time. But Designers Walk was a catalyst for much of the change in the area.

"I guess we've had a lot to do with the growth of the neighbourhood," Ms. Igra says.

Ron Igra has since taken over the operations of Designers Walk from his father.

This decade also brought about an emerging trend: With the bonanza in home renovation and decorating programs on television, more educated consumers have been wanting to see for themselves the luxurious goodies residing in those showrooms.



A small window in the bathroom was replaced with sliding glass doors leading to a terrace.

"The public will be able to come and see products that they've never been able to see before," says Ms. Igra.

When it came time to refresh the real estate, Mr. Igra assembled a team from among the tenants. Taylor Smyth Architects has had its offices in Building one of Designers Walk for several years. Warren Hoffman of W Design Associates was the principal designer for the units.

On a recent tour of a one-bedroom condo, Mr. Taylor and Mr. Hoffman said their aim from the start was to take advantage of the natural light flooding in and keep the units bright.

Interior design firm Powell & Bonnell revamped one of the units and Mr. Igra asked them to design a show suite and the public areas. Mr. Taylor and his

team took some cues from what they had done - particularly in the kitchen where Mr. Taylor liked the minimalist, modern cabinets.

He followed a similar design and had the cabinets fabricated.

A massive island in the kitchen allows space for cooking and informal dining.

"People always congregate in the kitchen anyway and we thought the owner might end up entertaining in here."

Where the Taylor and W team diverged from the show suite was in the colour palette. While the Powell & Bonnell suite made use of dark wood, Mr. Taylor had the rift-cut oak floors stained a honey blonde. "We decided to break away from that and make it all about brightness and light." Upstairs, the team turned a

largely open space into clearly defined bedroom, bathroom and walk-in closet.

The bedroom window looks toward an adjacent industrial building. Mr. Taylor thinks that vista adds character and some of the grittiness of the big city.

"It's sort of like New York-style living, the way I see it," he says. "It's a bit tough."

The bathroom is large and luxurious with a walk-in shower, soaker tub and an outdoor terrace.

"The bathroom has a deck off it so it's a really sexy bathroom," says Mr. Taylor.

The architect had the former brick wall of the terrace wrapped in wood to make it feel warm and spa-like.

"It didn't feel very inviting. Now it just feels like an extension of the bathroom."

A translucent glass wall at the end of the bathtub also invites more light into the bedroom.

The building doesn't have the health clubs and other amenities of some condo buildings but it is centrally located with access to all kinds of shops and services.

The bistro Le Paradis is downstairs.

"If I lived here that would be my own private kitchen, I'm sure," says Mr. Taylor.

Ms. Igra, who has seen all of the changes over the years, feels that Designers Walk is reinvigorated.

"This very much revives the original intent," she says.