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SECTION G

# Globe Real Estate

## ORDER FROM CHAOS

Once cluttered, stuffy and wildly over-scaled, this Forest Hill home got the Big Fix **PAGE 2**



Architect Michael Taylor brightened the once brooding interior by enlarging windows, removing walls and replacing an old staircase with an open-riser version. PHOTOS BY VIRGINIA MACDONALD



# Forest Hill home gets an overhaul

A wildly overscaled Tudoroid changed to meet a young family's needs



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Last week, I visited a large Forest Hill house that was born bad, circa 1970.

Photographs show a wildly overscaled Tudoroid front with twee trim. Michael Taylor, principal in the Toronto firm of Taylor Smyth architects, says he sees traces of Frank Lloyd Wright's famous prairie houses in the façade's geometry. But making a big, eye-popping impression seems to have been on the original designer's mind, not Wright.

Inside, things were worse. The space was diced up into too many rooms and nooks and crannies, each shut off from the next, and the layout was cluttered and stuffy. Dark wood panelling spread an atmosphere of faux-baronial gloom and tedium.

This place was bought by its present owners about 15 years ago. The woman in this couple told me they loved the spacious terrace and yard at the back, and they appreciated more about the house itself than I do. They appreciated their purchase less, it appears, after the house began filling up with offspring — three so far — and with modern and contemporary painting, sculpture, photography and video art. While thinking about ways to obtain more space and light for their growing family and their collection, they considered tearing the house down and starting over. They also thought about keeping the house and adding a wing at the rear.

In the end, however, they hired Michael Taylor to do something within the residence's existing 11,170-square-foot fabric. It was a tall order. The couple wanted to live every day with their artworks, but they did not want their house transformed into a hushed sanctum. Their young children had to be able to play freely, buzz around and grow up amid artistic pieces, some of them museum-sized. The renovation was meant to convert the brooding, dark interior, not into a sanctuary for connoisseurs, but into a bright, busy contemporary family home for five people.

Mr. Taylor's recently completed responses to this commission have been straightforward, to the point and sensitive to the owners' requirements.

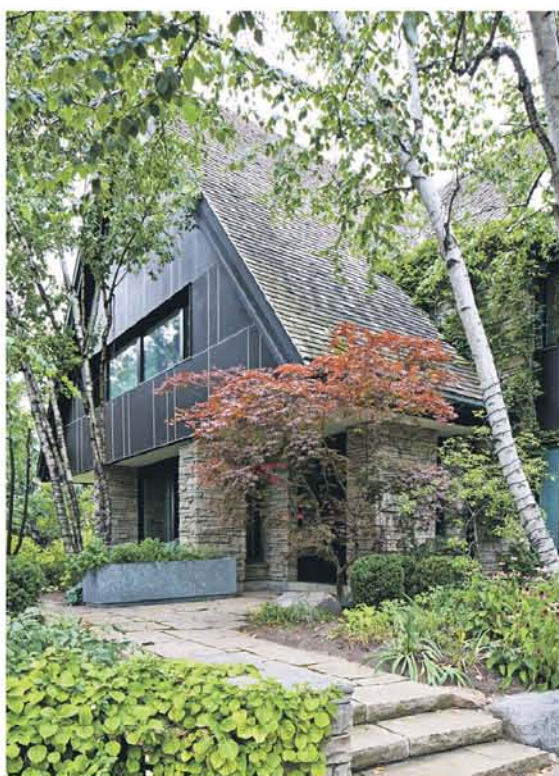
Outside, the architect's changes have not been radical. He has taken away the Tudorish frippery from the façade and filled in the huge, overbearing gables with plain, blackened plywood surfaces edged by narrow strips of aluminum. While not muting the preposterous shape of the exterior, these moves improve its mood.

But it is inside that Mr. Taylor's creativity shows itself most energetically. Gone, for example, is the lugubrious panelling from every corridor and room except a small library where the couple likes to retire and relax and watch their tropical fish manoeuvre in a large aquarium. The removal of the woodwork has freed up expanses of blank wall for the couple's photographs and canvases.

The spatial scheme has been clarified and brightened. The ponderous staircase, once walled in at the top, has been replaced by an airy flight of treads that float up to the wide, well-lit second-level mezzanine, where each of the three children has a homework station, which strictly cut off the place from the rest of the main



Architect Michael Taylor strove to improve the mood of the place with subtle touches, such as black plywood on the overbearing gables. VIRGINIA MACDONALD



floor, have been demolished, allowing the site to re-emerge as a setting for art. Formerly segregated into its own room, the kitchen now occupies one side of a large open-plan area featuring a dining table and relaxed, conversational seating.

All the windows in the house are new and many have been considerably enlarged. The effect of this fresh exposure to the outside world is occasionally striking. In the north-facing master bedroom, for instance, a lovely view over the rear garden and pool, formerly blocked by mean windows, is now visible through a great curtain of glass.

If there's anything wanting in this uncomplicated, largely successful overhaul, it's daring of the sort evident in much of the artwork the couple have collected.

Why, for example, is there a traditional living room? Despite the hypnotic video installation over the fireplace and other artworks

here, the place seems lifeless, stiff. Mr. Taylor's client said this room is used primarily for large-format entertaining. So be it: but there was something strange about coming upon such a forsaken spot in the middle of a house that is otherwise animated and clearly meant to be lived in by the family, all the time.

And why have most of the art walls been painted white? Perhaps this isn't so hard to figure out. The visual politics of modern art museums, and, of course, art books, long ago accustomed aficionados to seeing paintings and sculptures and photographs against stark white backgrounds, and without distracting frames.

But there is no law that says art has to be displayed that way. Expressive colour and pattern may some day be as important in the presentation of artworks as they are in contemporary art itself — but not yet — not, at least, in this sure-footed, no-nonsense renovation.



While now family friendly — the children have their own homework nooks — the renovations also freed up wall space to display the parents' extensive art collection. PHOTOS BY VIRGINIA MACDONALD