

Old space, brand new lines

Roomy, but crowded condo is transformed into a light space perfect for entertaining

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The mid-nineties were a dark time in condo design. Literally. It was the era of mocha-coloured cabinets, heavy cream-coloured walls and chopped up room layouts. (French doors into a breakfast nook might sound lovely, but not when it cuts the kitchen off from natural light, as it so often did.)

But in early 2017, as Nesmith and Ingrid Chingcuanco considered buying such a premillennial place, they weren't deterred by the dated elements. They could look past the popcorn ceilings and strange entry vestibule (it was laid out like an octagon, so it "had weird angles," Nesmith says), because they were intrigued by the size of the downtown Toronto apartment.

At around 1,300 square feet with 10-foot ceilings, the two-bedroom unit was about a third larger than where they were living in another nearby condo. "The old space was very tight for entertaining," Ingrid says. "Whenever we had family over, we had to rent the party room. We wanted a bigger space, so everyone could come in and be comfortable."

Within 24 hours of seeing the prospective home for the first time, they decided to buy. "We looked at it one night then offered the next morning," Nesmith says. "We wanted to wait to see it again on the weekend, but we had to expedite because there was already another bid."

Not that they had any illusions that the place was move-in ready. After closing the deal, "we only moved in for three weeks," Nesmith says, "to get a feel for how we wanted to change things." Functionality was a key focus. Instead of keeping a third bathroom, for example, they realized they'd rather have a full laundry room, one where they could hand dry their clothes ("drying machines fade the colours," Ingrid says).

The couple also quickly went about finding a designer to update the layout and the aesthetics. "I wanted something modern," Nesmith says. "I felt like modern would work with the giant corner window in the living room."

The architect they ended up hiring, Michael Taylor, has co-run his own firm — Toronto's Taylor Smyth Architects — for nearly 20 years. But he had never redesigned a condo interior before. That said, Ingrid and Nesmith admired his detail-rich but clean-lined aesthetic, notably a laneway house he had designed for himself where warm woods offset an otherwise rough, industrial palette. They had an instinct that he and his team would be able to pull off something special.

"When we first met with Michael, we didn't bring inspiration photos or drawings," Nesmith says. "It was a conversation. We gave him three adjectives — warm, modern and bright. We had some ideas on the functionality, but otherwise we wanted to give [Taylor Smyth] the freedom to design. They are the professionals, not us."

That trust has been rewarded with a truly stunning place. Walking in now, it's hard to even imagine the *Friends*-era clutter and darkness. Instead of a strange octagonal foyer, an open, airy vestibule either leads into the sun-filled master bedroom (complete with a custom headboard and



Toronto architect Michael Taylor had never redesigned a condo interior before, but the Chingcuanco's admired his detail-rich, clean-lined aesthetic.



Mr. Taylor opened up the formerly cluttered condo, creating an airy vestibule and open living-dining space. The walls and ceiling were stripped back to the raw concrete. PHOTOS BY TOM ARBAN

floating bedside tables), or down an oak-lined corridor into the open living-dining space (formerly multiple rooms, including divided dining and sitting areas and a breakfast nook), which is itself wrapped in oak but distinguished by a much higher ceiling height.

"The change in height is nice," Mr. Taylor says, "because it accentuates the drama of the corner windows, and the amazing views up Bay Street. The wood is nice because it adds a sense of intimacy and warmth, something that can be lacking in a typical condo."

The glow of all the timber is particularly evident because Mr. Taylor also stripped the walls and ceiling of the space back to the raw concrete, removing all the extraneous French doors and maze-making gypsum walls to create an edgy, interesting contrast. "It was a bit of a risk," he says, "because we didn't know what you're going to see. We didn't know what condition the concrete would be in."

Going back to the raw shell was one leap of faith that Ingrid in particular was hesitant about. "I was a little bit nervous initially," she says. "I was worried that it would look cold, and I wanted warm." But "now I really like it," she says, pointing out how much character and texture it brings to the space.

Conversely, some of the other unusual changes they made caused less concern. For example, in addition to eliminating one full bathroom in favour of having a walk-in laundry area (Ingrid loves the new drying racks), the couple also got rid of the bathtub in their ensuite to have more room for a larger closet.

"People warned us that some of these things might affect resale," Nesmith says. "But that wasn't a concern for us. We didn't buy the place to flip it. We love it here. This is our terminal home."

"It didn't make sense for us to think of resale," Ingrid adds, "if we're going to have to live with the design until we're 90." Plus, she points out, the space has more than fulfilled its purpose. Family gatherings have become a lot more comfortable since they moved into the finished space in August, 2018. "Everyone loves it." They recently had 21 people over, and there was space to spare, with people spreading out between the dining and living areas. The Chingcuanco's party room days might be over, but the party has just begun.