

# Extreme make-over

Reno lore dictates that every project takes longer and costs more than anticipated. So what happens when an architect works on her own place? History repeats itself

**IN A LIVING ROOM JUST OFF AN OCTAGONAL** hall, a mother is showing her little boy the model of their house. Adam, aged four, wears a yellow hard hat and listens intently as she explains. "There's your room, Adam. This is what our house will look like when we move back in." To me, she continues, "We're keeping the staircase and the exterior walls but not much else." Adam has heard all this before. His mother, Joanne Pukier, is both the client and project architect on a renovation so radical it begs another name.

It's July 2003, and the Pukiers—Joanne, her husband, Brian, Adam, his almost-two-year-old sister, Tali, and their golden retriever, Rudy—are living on Heathdale, an archetypal Toronto street near Bathurst and St. Clair. Solid, comfortable brick boxes follow Heathdale's meandering contours from Bathurst to a pedestrian bridge that spans the Cedarvale Ravine.

Joanne and Brian love the street's mix of early- to mid-century styles. When they lived on nearby Alcina, they would walk over, fantasizing about a house coming up for sale on the ravine side of the block. In 2001, one did—a two-storey brick "hodgepodge," in Joanne's word, with a two-storey porch and faux Tudor stylings on the gabled roof. It had nothing to do with their modernist taste, and at the time they thought it was too big for them. But the location and the oak-treed lot that spilled into the ravine were irresistible. They bought it and lived in it for a year while considering their options.

For Brian, a corporate lawyer with an uxorious streak, it was a given that his wife would design their house, whether new or renovated. "She once told me it was every architect's dream to do her own house," he explains, as if that settled that. For the architect, it was slightly more complicated. Joanne didn't fancy the idea of designing her first contemporary house without collegial support. She had recently joined Taylor Smyth Architects, and she made the partners a pro-

posal unique in their experience: she wanted to be the firm's client while working on her own house as part of the design team. Michael Taylor and Robert Smyth considered the problem of their young associate wearing two hats, and "We had a very frank talk with Joanne," says Taylor. "We said, 'We don't want this office to just be a place for you to sit and design your house.' She said, 'No problem.'"

Taylor became partner-in-charge, while Joanne assumed the title project architect, working closely with another member of the firm, Xiaohua Lee. As happens in a small office, everyone put in an occasional oar. Joanne's memories of growing up in a 1950s-style bungalow in Hogg's Hollow, where the spaces flowed into each other, were key reference points. She admired the sense of fun Taylor brought to designing and his ability to walk away from his own ideas when they didn't work; he relished her passion. For six months, Joanne worked three days a week on the design, drawing every corner of the house.

In the summer of 2003, drawing gave way to action. The Pukiers rented a two-bedroom apartment one street away, on Claxton, where they would live during construction. Farewell to the paisley-wallpapered octagonal hall and to the centre-hall plan in general. Joanne found it too classical, too confining and too boring. She looked forward to pushing the renovation envelope as far as she could, and emerging with a contemporary house that would suit her sensibility. The Pukiers planned to return to their house in March 2004.

What they didn't foresee was the eight-month project stretching to a year and a half, the process encompassing a range of emotions—from elation to bafflement to frustration and back again. Herewith, a diary of the reno.

**AUGUST 15, 2003** First, the house loses its head. The gabled roof comes off, a "drastic" idea that Joanne credits to Taylor,

and Taylor credits to Smyth. The original notion for the house had been to enlarge and "liberate," as Joanne says, the first floor, tidy up the second floor without changing much, and finish the sloping attic for a master suite high up in the trees. But shearing off the top and extending the walls up to a new, flat roof will provide more space and give the house a contemporary look.

The two-storey veranda that reminded Joanne of an old-fashioned motel gets torn down, and the front door moves west, away from centre stage. She prefers a more unobtrusive entrance, where "the opening into the house is not celebrated." A big hole gets punched out at the back of the house, which will eventually lead to a generous, one-storey family room.

At this point, the Pukier home becomes "the site." There's a picture of Adam, suitably grave, standing in what looks to be a war zone, walls reduced to studs and a thick mulch of rubble underfoot. As the destruction mounts and the former front yard fills up with an excavator, a Dumpster, stacks of bricks and a trailer, the neighbours wonder why the Pukiers didn't just tear the house down. Taylor, Smyth and Brian Pukier always thought it would be more economical to renovate, although Joanne argued that the material that will be similar (the Pukiers declined to divulge specific amounts). Design constraints finally won the day: because of modern building codes, a new house would have to be much narrower. The original footprint would stay.

**SEPTEMBER 30, 2003** Joanne is excited. She's settled on the material that will counterpoint the traditional brick skin—a seamed, matte, charcoal grey zinc that will cover the third-floor exterior as well as other sections of the house. Calling the choice "the biggest leap," she sometimes worries the top floor may look too industrial or like a mechanical room, the box atop a high-rise that holds its air conditioning and other innards. But her opti-



The finished product balances a traditional brick skin with charcoal grey zinc panelling



The original house was a two-storey brick hodgepodge with faux Tudor stylings



The family room is housed in a one-storey extension that looks out over the ravine

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LORNE BRIDGEMAN, OPPOSITE PAGE, BOTTOM LEFT, COURTESY OF TAYLOR SMYTH ARCHITECTS

**DESIGN** continued

mistic side is convinced it will be “dramatic and particular.”

Joanne and Taylor have always liked the idea of materials wrapping and folding, tying the old and new parts together and accentuating the house's intersecting rectangles. Now, with the zinc chosen, Taylor finds that the wrapping “has started to take on a mind of its own.” He quotes the American architect Louis Kahn's question, “What does the building want to be?” and insists that, once you develop a language and a direction, the house follows its own logic. At the moment, that logic seems to demand folding the zinc down the front of the house from the third floor to the first; there, the protruding vertical stripe includes a bay window.

The second floor has also had an unexpected development. With three generous bedrooms, laundry room and bathroom ringing a square hall, it was meant to be

wiring, Joanne admits. The roof is on, but the windows, which would typically be in at this point, have been delayed, so the builders have sealed all the holes with plastic. For the first time, she mentions to Brian that moving back in March may not happen: “We've asked for a revised project schedule.” Tradespeople are waiting for the right moment to install heating, air conditioning, central vacuum and the security system.

At the same time, Joanne is choosing the last of the fixtures and lights, mostly incandescent; they're unfashionable, but she likes their warmer glow. One of the luxury touches is slated for the master bathroom high in the trees—a smashing floor of pebbles set in resin. And she's already made her first irrevocable mistake, two light switches lined up vertically: “You don't stack your switches. This will bug me for the rest of my life.”

She looks at the house's skeleton and

correct order and with maximum efficiency. Ideally, she'd like to see three or four different subtrades working on the house at the same time, but more often these days she notes only one or two.

**MARCH 9, 2004** An e-mail from Joanne: “All I can say is that the phrase ‘No news is good news’ does not apply to the construction industry. Since we last met, there has been no visible progress on our home—in fact, there has not been much progress at all. The pressure is on!”

Meanwhile, the Pukiers make a decision that slows progress even further. Taylor had imagined the inside of the house as completely new and white. Joanne surprises him by wanting to save the rectilinear Arts and Crafts staircase that extended from the first floor to the third, though she intends to paint its dark oak and Douglas fir white. Now, however, Brian decides he likes the old wood. Hon-

ern houses, which are far more challenging and unforgiving than traditional ones. Period styles, he notes, rely on trim and moulding to cover the joints: “We celebrate the joints! The drywall has to be finished perfectly. So does the way the zinc has to slide over in front of the brick.” Frustrated by the labour-intensive, sometimes almost experimental work, the builders require some guidance by the architects, and that adds time. “So there was some handholding,” Taylor concludes diplomatically. “There's just not the dedication we hoped for,” Joanne adds, “and we're being left to muddle through.”

**AUGUST 4, 2004** Rachel Fay Pukier is born. For the next few weeks, everyone on the site works hard. Perhaps they're impressed with the efficiency of this nine-month production, while the eight-month renovation is now in its 13th. Perhaps they're just aware that a family of five could use larger quarters.

Although the house still looks unfinished, the apparently endless to-do list is shortening. Rough grading, the beginning of landscaping, is going on outside. A trim carpenter is tending to the cedar siding on the front porch and a planter on the back deck. Joanne is checking out some final appliances and blinds.

While she is occupied with her newborn, Brian takes over as site manager. Now that he's more intimately involved, he's finding it much more demanding than he expected.

**SEPTEMBER 30, 2004** Although the front yard still looks like a construction site and the zinc-and-cedar canopy over the entrance rests on temporary wood-and-steel posts, the house is nearing completion. The millworkers have saved for last the installation of the bravura, free-floating kitchen table that folds down from a butcher-block counter.

Actually, much of the house has been ready for months, but hidden under protective coverings. Because the potential for damage in a construction site is high, things are wrapped in plastic as soon as they're completed—including tile and walnut floors. Now, in the last three weeks, the wraps come off. The building starts to look like a house.

**OCTOBER 16, 2004** Seven and a half months later than planned, the expanded Pukier family moves back in. Tali misses her proximity to her toys (now in the basement) and her parents: after the cozy confines of the apartment, she resents the beautifully restored staircase between her room and her parents'. She's

the only one who voices reservations.

After thinking he understood the redo inside and out, Brian is “surprised at how cool it is.” Asked to pick his favourite spot, he's torn between the kitchen table, which looks out onto the ravine, and the soothing quiet of the master bedroom (“tucked in the back, half hidden in the trees”).

The external wrapping and folding that Taylor imagined has continued inside. A blackened steel shelf in the front hall flows into a floating bench; the white Corian vanity in the master bathroom folds itself onto the tiled tub surround; Brian's prized CD shelves in the family room frame the TV wall on two sides.

“Visually, we're trying to tempt you on,” Joanne says. “The wrapping makes you curious, and it leads you through the space. You can't go right through this house; the existing brick box forces you to meander. This way, you're encouraged to see around the corners; it becomes less formal and more playful.” She has hit on an unexpected aspect of her smashing handsome house—its clean-lined, joyous inventiveness.

**DECEMBER 6, 2004** The season's first snow is falling, transforming the view from the family room into a Hansel and Gretel forest. More important, Rachel, aged four months, is venturing into solid food today. More is landing around her mouth than in it, but her mother is taking photographs to commemorate the milestone.

The house has rapidly become a home, albeit an astonishingly uncluttered one. Every modern architect assures you that she abhors “stuff,” and is devoted to spare and clean. The difference with Joanne is that she means it; tchotchkes make exceedingly rare appearances.

“I like big and bold,” Joanne explains, sitting at the cantilevered kitchen table. She counts only five focal points, or “moves,” in her word, on this floor. When architects see her white kitchen and ask why she didn't choose a modish stainless steel fridge, stove and microwave, she answers: “The appliances are background. This”—she thwacks the table—“is the move, the stainless steel sink that connects to the butcher block that morphs into the table.”

“A good client is one who pushes you,” Taylor says. “This was a good client who was in the office and a part of the team.” The client-architect is feeling so mellow that the long delay seems increasingly like ancient history. As Rachel warbles on her lap, Joanne looks around at white walls, walnut, steel and stone, and says with enormous conviction, “This makes me very happy.”



The house has several focal points, including the kitchen's cantilevered table and the master bath's floor of pebbles set in resin

merely spruced up. But when the carpenters tried to level the floors, it became clear it would be easier to take down the walls and double up the floor joists instead.

The third floor is roughed in. Joanne and her husband often work late at night, so she has positioned a long, slim study near the master bedroom. When the sun shines on the clean studs and boards, the new storey looks like a golden, celestial jungle gym.

She estimates they're three to four weeks behind schedule, and winter is approaching, but Brian (whom she calls the CFO of the project) is not going to permit them to stay in the apartment much beyond the beginning of spring. They haven't fully unpacked on Claxton, because the perch is so temporary.

**DECEMBER 1, 2003** Snow blows around the site, still more like a forest of studs than a house. It's not ideal weather for

seeing the fleshed-out home. At the top of the stairs on the third floor, she's planning to hang their wedding picture—a sentimental announcement that this is the couple's hideaway. On the second floor, she points out Adam's room, Tali's room and says casually of the remaining one, “This is the bedroom for my as-yet-unconceived third child.”

**FEBRUARY 2, 2004** The project architect wears matching baby blue mittens and hat as she runs between the builder's trailer and the house. She's also pregnant. The third child is proceeding on schedule, which is more than can be said for the house. The drywall is up, so it looks more like a house, less like a lattice. But the sluggish pace worries Joanne. Orchestrating carpenters, electricians, millworkers and the other subtrades, she says, is a crucial part of the builder's work, ensuring that they proceed in the

ouring that wish involves two to three weeks. The drywalling under the stairs that was done in January has to be removed to provide access: a trim carpenter detaches every tread and alters it to reduce squeaking; then two people strip, sand and stain the oak and fir to coordinate with the new walnut floor. Because the staircase is out of commission, work on the upper floors stops.

**JUNE 7, 2004** The cork flooring in the kitchen is being installed, and limestone for the front hall is being laid. The zinc panelling is going up. But the desultory tempo baffles the client-architect. Why, when she lives around the corner and is constantly available for consultation, are they experiencing the same mysterious slowdowns and delays that plague her hands-off and less savvy owners?

Taylor makes the point that contractors don't get much opportunity to build mod-