

Welcome to the Bishop Street residence, a former office building that's been reinvigorated with a bold new design. Emma Hill decided to take a closer look.

Emma Hill

Set on a narrow dead-end street in Yorkville, Toronto, the Bishop Street residence is a conversion of a small office building into a two-storey home.

Initially constructed in the 1940s as an ironmonger's workshop, the building was substantially reconfigured in 1985 by Barton Myers to become a graphic design studio. In its latest incarnation, a conscious decision has been made to preserve the shell of the previous version while exposing the original steel structure.

Michael Taylor of Taylor Smyth Architects explained: 'By a strange coincidence as well as undertaking the latest Bishop Street residence project I also worked for the architect who undertook the original 1980s conversion (although I wasn't personally involved with this). It was a great office, but after 20 years the building was starting to show its age a little.'

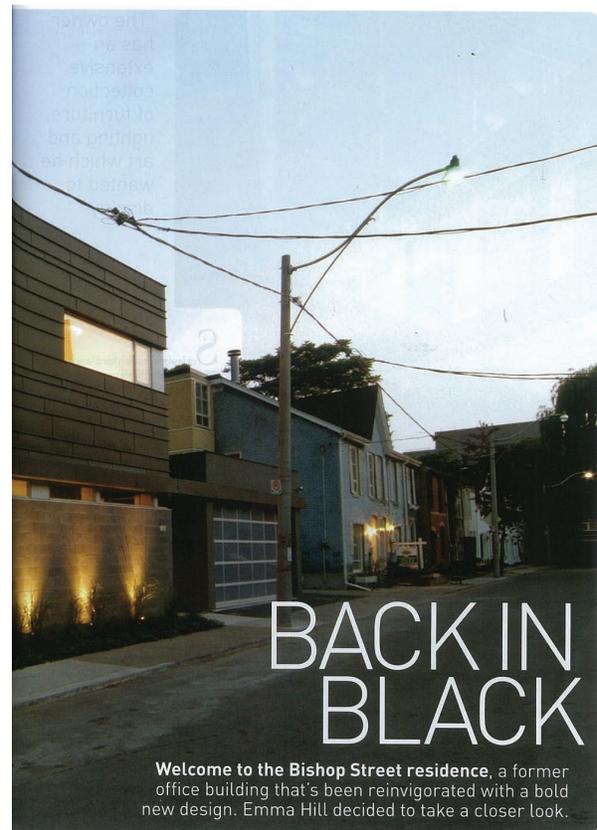
Taylor's client Ken Zuckerman, who is a developer with a keen eye for design, was quick to spot the building's potential and asked the architect to help him to transform it into a modern bachelor pad.

One of the client's key requests was to provide the perfect backdrop for his existing belongings. Taylor commented: 'The owner has an extensive collection of furniture, lighting and art which he wanted to display. He also wanted the glass garage door so we could visually frame his collection of cars.'

The architects took to the task of displaying Zucerman's belongings with gusto, creating the perfect nook for this striking Ingo Maurer glass bench embedded with LED lights, and using the double-height living space to great effect, suspending a large statement light from the ceiling.

The clear glass floor is another statement piece, seemingly hovering beneath a sky-lit slot with the same dimensions, channeling a stream of light straight down to the ground floor and offering possibilities for spectacle from below.

Given the almost theatrical staging of the space and the dramatic use of glass and bold black details there was always a risk that this project might turn into a show-home, rather than a comfortable, usable abode. However, Taylor's deft hand and his client's unwavering enthusiasm for the project ensured that this has remained an intensely personal space, albeit one filled with a host of rather desirable toys!



PHOTOS: Ben Rahn/A-Frame

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Taylor said that because his client was so passionate about the conversion, he adjusted his usual way of working to give Zuckerman more input into the build, explaining: 'Normally we would present a client with a set of drawings and would base our build around them. However, on this project the design evolved over time. It actually worked really well because no matter how much you try to image what something's going to look like as you're drawing it, nothing can take the place of standing in the space with your client as you consider the best possible solution.' He added: 'It was challenging but also satisfying to have a client who was so involved.'

As the architect explained: 'One of the biggest challenges was how the building should relate to the street. It's right up against the sidewalk. Ordinarily you'd have more of a buffer between the house and the street so we really had to think about how to address the issue of privacy.'

This context led to the design of a street façade that is primarily solid, broken only by narrow slot windows that crack open the wall to let in natural light strategically. The façade was re-clad in a palette of black zinc and grey concrete that evokes the building's industrial origins. Behind this solid wall is a hidden urban sanctuary opening up into a generous private garden courtyard. Here, limestone paving is combined with wood decking and fencing of Ipe. The only hint of this courtyard is the warm colour of the Ipe gate located at the end of the breezeway between the house and the new garage.

Taylor commented: 'We wanted to keep the bones of the building, so it was about responding to the property and responding to the site. I think with hindsight one of the things I'm most proud of is the way the European-style courtyard relates to the house. The client was very enthusiastic about having a whole glass wall linking the interior and exterior spaces and adding it has meant that the outside space feels like an outdoors room, something I've always been interested in.'

Other highlights of the home include the sleek glass floors, a hidden stairway which is tucked away behind the main space and striking custom-made acrylic wine cooler. The walls of the master bedroom are all glass, with a curtain to screen the room off from the rest of the home at the push of a button.

One of the biggest strengths of the project lies in the way the architects have created the kind of drama and visual theatre you'd usually find in your favourite store or restaurant, rather than a home. With its industrial-inspired materials and strong palette it would be tempting to sum this home up as 'the ultimate bachelor pad', but this would be an oversimplification of a clever design. With this project Taylor and Zuckerman have brought a forgotten office building back to life, sensitively preserving its best features while adapting it to suit a different usage and a new era.

No mere show pony of a property this home shows that there's light at the end of the tunnel for Toronto's disused office spaces. We just hope that the latest round of renovations all have the charm and flair of the Bishop Street residence.