Turning Back the Clock

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Once chopped into apartments and stripped of everything that made it stately, this 120-year-old Toronto home was reverently restored to its former glory. It might be even better than before.

Entry Rich wood, a green-and-white marble floor, and a grand staircase define the home's entrance. Leaded-glass windows and the wooden lamp on the staircase's newel are original features.

Living room The armchairs' floral fabric started the room's palette of pinky-brown, merlot, and teal. A curved-cove plaster ceiling adds detail. To replace a poorly updated fireplace, a local stone company crafted a new marble mantelpiece that could easily pass for an Edwardian-era original. **Study** The circa-1800s English desk was an investment piece while the console behind it was more budget-friendly—an example of the designers' approach to furnishings. **Powder room** An ornate gold mirror and a marble washstand are classic choices. "It's nothing over the top," designer Lindsay Mens says, "but everything is luxurious."

Several months into a massive renovation of a century-old Toronto home, lead designer Lindsay Mens and associate designer Ashley Ylanko were on-site, poring over project details, when a curious neighbor dropped by. He gazed around the wood-paneled entryway and peeked into the lavishly appointed living room, then pronounced with surprise, "Oh, you kept it the way it was."

It was the highest praise—that the house looked like its original self—but it was also completely untrue. Because almost nothing was kept the way it was.

Over the decades, the stately Edwardian residence had been subjected to many indignities that couldn't be easily undone. It had been subdivided into multiple units. Its brick exterior had been covered in aluminum siding. Much of the character—deep moldings, wide casings around windows, and wall paneling—had been stripped during repairs and updates. "The house was in such bad condition that it was easier to take it down to the studs," Mens says.

"You could see it had once been a beautiful home," says architect Richard Wengle, "and I was excited that I got to do something with it to bring it back."

Because houses in this part of Toronto stand nearly "shoulder to shoulder," as Wengle describes it, there's almost no way to expand on either side. Instead, Wengle bumped out the back of the house to allow for an expansive new kitchen that flows into a breakfast nook and a cozy family room—modern necessities the existing home didn't have.

The second and third floors were graced with new gables and roof lines so the rooms are spacious and sunny. The primary suite and a handsome study now occupy the second level, while three additional bedrooms are tucked on the third floor.

“THERE’S A DISTINCTION OF DIVISION USING ARCHWAYS, CEILINGS, AND DIFFERENT TREATMENTS. THAT CREATES COZINESS AND A MORE INTERESTING HOME.”
—architect Richard Wengle

The intricate wallpaper by Designers Guild was the jumping-off point for the dining room. After the paper was installed, the designers realized they needed nothing else on the walls—no artwork, no mirrors. The refined red lacquered hutch, a 1790 English piece, fits just so between windows in the bay. Opting for a less expensive wooden chest (one of a pair) provided the high-low balance the designers aimed for throughout the project.

Kitchen and breakfast nook Sunlight pours through a skylight over the furniture-style island and the large window above the banquette. "It's such a unique, cozy, and charming space, especially for a city home," designer Ashley Ylanko says. "We wanted it to feel like a little piece of the English countryside in the middle of the city." **Family room** The nearby gathering area has a cozy mood outfitted with built-in bookcases, a fireplace, a mohair ottoman, and an extra-deep sofa. "It's all lounge, all comfort," Mens says.

On the main floor, the home's footprint was almost completely overhauled. Only the entryway and its staircase stayed in their original locations. (The stairs were rebuilt to bring them up to code.) Bolt Developments oversaw the construction that reassigned every room placement to make sense for a modern family. Spaces for entertaining are near the front of the home while cozier family areas are at the back.

Transitions between rooms were moved, reconfigured, and widened "so the house appears larger, light is shared between rooms, and there are sight lines from one area to the next," Wengle says. Each doorway frames a view of the adjoining room. "These are features of new houses, and we were able to do them here," he adds.

While grand in stature, individual rooms in the home's 4,400 square feet are cozy. "There's not a lot of space for furniture," Wengle says. So the team snugged built-ins into several rooms to amplify the available storage.

Mens and Ylanko put their magic touch on every piece, embellishing the breakfast room hutch with brass trim and hardware, flanking dressers in the primary bedroom with columns, and edging bookcases in the family room with deep baseboards, crown molding, and additional lighting.

With the home's beautiful bones restored, the designers set their sights on dressing the walls, ceilings, and floors. Accommodating both homeowners' desires required a deft touch: He wanted layered maximalism, and she longed for lightness and romance. "We achieved a really good balance with that," Ylanko says. "The kitchen, family room, and bedrooms feel softer, brighter, and lighter, while the front-of-house spaces—the rooms for entertaining—went moodier." It's an appealing blend of masculine and feminine that feels fresh but homey.

To replace the gorgeous millwork that originally distinguished the home, the designers sent pieces of the existing crown molding, baseboard, and door trim to a millworker and plasterer to use as templates to re-create the elements. The craftspeople took small liberties with a few details, but by and large "the home now looks like it did back in the day, but in reality, every bit of it is new," Ylanko says.

Primary suite The adult retreat separates sleeping and lounging spaces. A wall of millwork in the tight bedroom holds built-in dressers and creates a passageway into the sitting room. A bird-print paper, custom chaise, cascading chandelier, and starburst ceiling medallion (a reproduction of another found in the house) define the space. Doors integrated into the hallway's millwork close off the rooms.

Primary suite Grass-cloth wallpaper sweeps around the bedroom for neutral texture, and furnishings pair a new four-poster with an antique French bench. In the bathroom, the marble veining on the countertop lent its pinky-brown color to the walls, ceiling, and tile insets as well as the off-black for the vanity. Unlacquered brass hardware will age beautifully.

> WE EXCEL AT MAKING A SPACE FEEL LIVED IN AND COLLECTED AND NOT OF A CERTAIN TIME PERIOD. THAT'S WHERE THE SOUL OF A HOUSE COMES FROM.
>
> —designer Lindsay Mens

For furniture and accessories, the designers started nearly from scratch. "We wanted the house to feel historical but not frozen in time," Ylanko says.

They searched high and low for furnishings that are, well, both high and low. The chairs and wooden chest in the dining room were relative bargains from antiques stores; the dining table and wall mural were splurges.

Where needed, the designers bought new (a Kelly Wearstler coffee table in the living room) or custom-designed pieces based on antiques (the living room sofa and the primary sitting room chaise). "It's a really good balance," Ylanko says. "The furniture has the sense that this piece might have belonged to a mother or grandmother. It seems like it could have been curated over decades."

It's notable how much time, effort, and labor goes into re-creating an old house so it appears refreshed rather than refurbished. "It looks seamless and doesn't feel like a renovation," Wengle says. "It feels like the original house that we maybe just came in and painted."

Interior design: Lindsay Mens and Ashley Ylanko
Architecture: Richard Wengle