

# HOMES & INTERIORS

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GUIDE



# Make yourself at home

Knowing what will make you content is the key to getting the design that's right for you, as this very personal renovation in Toronto shows

Photography Virginia Macdonald  
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Preparation, planning and working out every last detail is, according to Gillian Gillies, the only way to guarantee the success of a project. That's what ensured that the recent large-scale renovations at the award-winning interior designer's home in Toronto were completed on time and on budget. So it's ironic that taking exactly the opposite approach is how she ended up swapping Scotland for Canada in the first place. "I'm from Edinburgh, but a chance encounter with a Canadian in 2002 in St Lucia literally turned my world upside down in the most perfect of ways," she recalls. "I sold my beautiful flat in the west end of Glasgow, moved to Toronto later that same year to marry him, and opened my design firm there in 2004."

Buying this house was also unplanned: "It was a complete fluke that we even viewed it," she recalls. "Dean and I had been to see another house nearby and noticed this one was up for sale, so we just dropped in. The moment I walked through the front door, I knew it was for us. We bought it the next week and moved in a month later."

The attractive, leafy neighbourhood was a bonus, but the interior left a lot to be desired, with damp in the basement, dated decor and an awkward layout. Gillies was unfazed: "It was an ugly duckling – a mixture of bad taste and neglect. But it was perfect for me; the last thing I'd have wanted was to live with someone else's taste and choices."

The house, which dates from 1914, is arranged over three storeys, and within the first few years of living there, the couple renovated the lower level (family room, guest room, laundry room) and the top floor (master suite, two further bedrooms). The main floor's spacious living room, which connects to the dining room via its original glazed pocket doors, needed only cosmetic upgrading, but the dark, north-facing "woefully small" kitchen presented a more serious challenge. Tackling it, Gillies knew, would be a major project and a huge upheaval. She kept putting it off until, finally, four years ago, she was ready.

Her dedication to meticulous planning kicked in here ▶







the upheaval, something Gillies reckons was only made bearable by her extensive prep. Firstly, the design scheme was 100% complete and all the decisions had been made. Everything that would be needed had been bought and delivered and was being stored locally. "This keeps the time your trades spend on site down to a minimum, preventing four months sliding into five or six," she explains.

Secondly, the couple had sold or donated all the furniture they no longer wanted, while everything they were keeping was put into storage. "I started on this six months prior to the job commencing – there's nothing worse than constantly tripping over piles of boxes." Doing so also created space for the trades and all their tools. Lastly, they set up a temporary kitchen in the laundry room. "If you plan right, you can live through most renovations," she promises.

The changes have given the house a wonderful sense of flow between the spaces without going down the open-plan route. "Our friends were surprised that we didn't remove the dining-room wall and open it all up," she says, "but that's not how we live – my kitchen is beautiful, but I don't want to be in it as soon as I walk in the front door."

Knowing how you live and what will make you content is the key to getting the design that's right for you, she ►

and she spent two months working on the design. Once the layout was established, she sourced all the materials and the fixtures but didn't make any purchases until all the pricing was known. "Regardless of size, all renovations follow the same flow in my firm," she explains. "Clients come to me with a wishlist, but only once we have everything scaled, sourced and, most importantly, priced, can final decisions be made. Making selections on the go is always a recipe for blowing your budget. I'd advise anyone to take the time upfront, hire a professional and only when you know all the figures do you start on site."

First up, the back corner of the house was squared off, effectively tripling the kitchen's footprint. Two exterior walls had to be removed and replaced to achieve this. A large picture window was inserted and several internal doorways were widened. The kitchen was stripped back to the brick, and the flooring across the entire storey was replaced. For four months there were carpenters, electricians, plumbers, plasterers, painters and decorator in the house. "I lost count of the number of skips we needed for the rubble."

The couple had opted to stay put and live through



**DETAILS**  
 What A reconfigured and extended three-storey house  
 Where Toronto, Canada  
 Design Gillian Gillies Interiors



[Above] Gillian Gillies designed the kitchen and its units, which are made from spray-painted MDF. A quartz worksurface from Cambria is also used as part of the splashback, along with cream subway tiles. The curtains are made from Schumacher's Feline printed linen. "I planned out the interior of each cabinet and drawer to ensure that everything would fit. We have so much storage now," says the designer. [Left] The ornamental koi carp on Osborne & Little's Derwent wallpaper adds a playful element. The kitchen is linked to the rest of the house without being open-plan. [Top left] The garden has a largely green and white theme. [Previous pages] Landscape designer Virginie Gysel created the lush back garden. The front porch is a great place to shelter from the sun and catch up with neighbours. Warm wooden boards and blooms contrast with the pristine tiles. The painting of hydrangeas is by Canadian artist Julia Gilmore



“NO ONE REALLY WANTS TO RENOVATE. WE ALL JUST WANT THE BEST BIT AT THE END – THE BIG REVEAL”



**[Opposite]** The dining chairs are upholstered in a soft olive linen. A local cabinetmaker made the walnut table. The curtains, a Kobe linen, have a band of silk down the leading edge. The hardwood walnut flooring in this room and throughout has a custom sheen of 10% to give the effect of an oiled finish. **[Left]** The living-room walls are papered in the same Schumacher grasscloth as the dining room. A Designers Guild floral cushion adds a vibrant note to the pale sofa. **[Right]** A detail of the love seat, designed by Gillies. It has wooden arms and legs, grosgrain ribbon and stud detailing, and is covered in Kirkby Design's Orion velvet



insists: “Our home works because it was designed for us and the life we lead,” she says. “It’s a true representation of me and my husband. It’s tailored and structured, and everything has its place so clutter is kept to a minimum. At the same time, it’s warm and inviting – we have candles everywhere. It’s comforting and cocooning.”

The couple travel frequently for business and holidays, and many of their favourite decorative items were picked up abroad: a sketch of the Duomo in Florence, a peppermill from Copenhagen, pillowcases from France, photography from Edinburgh, a Turkish carpet, table

linens from Italy. “Your house should tell your story,” says the designer. “It should feed your soul and make you want to come home.”

“I’m a practical girl at heart, so all my decisions made have to pass the sensible test,” she continues. “Renovating and decorating your home is an investment and so I favour timeless classics. I’m very tactile and I like things to feel good, so I use natural materials – wool, linen and silks. I prefer texture to pattern and I like a room to have tension – which can be achieved by mixing metals, furniture from different design periods and having great artwork. I also like a small ▶





[Left] The koi turn up again, this time on a cushion in the breakfast nook. [Right] Another view of the dining room, which has a large painting by David Grieve on the wall: "I knew we needed something large and colourful for this space," says Gillies. "We'd just returned from a road trip through Prince Edward Island, passing field after field, so when we saw this piece, it resonated with us." The bench, upholstered in Zuma Black, a Kelly Wearstler fabric for Kravet, is handy for extra seating

dose of whimsy, hence the Koi fish wallpaper in my kitchen."

Through the new glazed door from the kitchen out to the garden is another beautifully personalised space. It was transformed last year when the internal work finally came to an end, with a new limestone patio and a 'cabana' which Gillies designed with shade and privacy in mind.

Landscape designer Virginie Gysel, of SPOTT Gardens, was brought in to help: "We wanted an immersive experience, to feel that we were really *in* the garden, not sitting looking at it. I wanted it to be primarily white and green, and Virginie brought in notes of chartreuse and darker evergreen foliage. We added lighting as well, which has really extended the time we spend outdoors into the evening."

The cabana – "our gorgeous little hideaway" – has given them more reason to stay out too. It has space for two armchairs and a sofa and there are plans to add a firepit for the cooler evenings. Likewise, the porch at the front of the house encourages contemplation of the garden and is a piece of

classic Canadian design that Gillies has come to greatly appreciate. "Toronto has bitterly cold winters, where the temperature can fall to -25°C. But in summer it can hit 35°C. The porch gives you shelter from the snow and makes a perfect shady spot in the heat."

It sounds like she is well and truly at home here, and even more so now that the dust has settled. So was it all worth it? "No one really wants to renovate," she admits. "We all just want the best bit at the end, the big reveal. But this can take many months. So you have to embrace it or you'll be miserable. Be prepared for it to get messy and to cost more than you want to spend. But once it's done, it's pretty amazing." ■