

HOMES & INTERIORS

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A TIDY PIECE OF WORK

Rethinking the layout and creating a space for everything has taken this house from quirky and cluttered to enviably cool, calm and collected

Photography Tim McGhie
Words Judy Diamond

The kitchen was enlarged by removing the wall at the end to make space for a banquette and table. Gillian Gillies designed tall cabinets to maximise storage and keep appliances hidden, giving the kitchen a streamlined appearance. Oak hardwood flooring completes the look



DETAILS

What A four-storey Edwardian house
Where Toronto, Canada
Interior designer Gillian Gillies Interiors



D

on't go crazy tidying up before Gillian Gillies comes round for a recce. The Canada-based interior designer, who started her career in her home town of Edinburgh, makes a point of seeking out the messiest corners of her clients' homes. "When I walk into someone's house for the first time, I always take note of all the places clutter seems to be accumulating – it's a clear indicator of where there's a storage problem," she explains.

She does this in the firm belief that an interior designer

should not simply make your home look nicer; the process should also fundamentally improve the quality of your life – and if Marie Kondo and co have taught us anything, it's that a tidy house really can bring you bliss: "Be honest about how you live, and really think about the flow of people and belongings through your home on a daily basis," says Gillies. "After all the expense and upheaval of a renovation, the last thing you want is to still be tripping over shoes in the hallway."

This advice was put to good use on this project in the leafy Riverdale neighbourhood of Toronto. The 100-year-old four-storey house was bought in 2004 by a couple who fell in love with its quirks and character and its ►

[Right] The relaxed yet elegant living room is an attractive mixture of period detailing (both original and careful replicas) and comfortable seating. The armchairs and sofas share a neutral colour scheme but each one is upholstered in a different fabric – velvet, leather and linen – to add interest and texture, all set against subtle Farrow & Ball shades (Fawn and Slipper Satin).

[Previous pages] Looking from the kitchen into the dining room, and from the dining room into the living room. The designer and owners did consider making much of the ground floor open-plan, but in the end were glad they decided against it. “This home really called for a more traditional layout, and having the kitchen open to the dining room would have meant foregoing a lot of storage,” says Gillies. “It would have changed the feel of the place too.”





wealth of original features. During the intervening years, though, as their family grew to include two children and a dog, the quirks turned into major annoyances. It had just one bathroom, for instance, and the basement that they'd planned to renovate had remained untouched.

No longer; over the course of the past decade, Gillies and her team have transformed this house a storey at a time, expanding, restoring and reorganising it to create a handsome, easy-living home without sacrificing any of its period charm. "Function led the design – the owners wanted rooms they could grow into as a family, rooms that would allow for large gatherings and celebrations, as well as intimate corners for quiet conversation."

The basement level was renovated first. It had scarcely been touched since the house was built, so the work required was substantial: the entire space had to be gutted, and then excavations were required to raise the ceiling from barely 6ft high to a more comfortable 9ft. Only then could a generous-sized family room, a laundry room and a shower room be created. A previously blocked-off window was uncovered, bringing in much-needed natural light.

"We wanted to make an inviting space for play dates, watching movies and hanging out," says the designer. "A lot of storage was needed to keep it feeling calm, but once we knew where the support columns and beams would be, we had a complete blank canvas."



Matching the new space to the rest of the house was a priority, so skirting boards and door frames were copied from upstairs and installed here. "Stained walnut was then chosen for the cabinetry – it gives a warmth and depth that can only be achieved through natural materials. We installed a reclaimed door to the laundry room – it has so much character and charm. My clients had a beautiful vintage bench and mirror that we put in the laundry room. All these small but deliberate decisions ensured this 'new' level felt like it was part of a century-old home."

It wasn't too long before Gillies was back for the next stage of the renovation: the ground floor. This time, it was the "woefully inadequate" kitchen that propelled the ►

[Left] Another view of the sitting room. The exposed brick around the fireplace is original, and is an appealing contrast with the polished wood of the mantelpiece, the Persian carpet and some of the owners' treasured art collection.

[Right] Walnut cabinetry wraps around two walls of the basement family room – like the huge three-sided sofa, it was designed by Gillian Gillies. The wallpaper is Schumacher's Agadir Screen by Martyn Lawrence Bullard

[Right] An eye-catching flock of birds takes flight in the hall.
[Below] A reclaimed timber door to the laundry room helps the newly created basement feel like it matches the upper floors. Simple base units from Ikea have been upgraded with Cambria quartz worktops. Farrow & Ball's bold Stiffkey blue adds depth. Gillies's walnut cabinets in the foreground hide a wealth of storage – there is even a fold-down bed behind the cupboard doors. **[Opposite]** The powder room on the ground floor is papered in Schumacher's Birds & Butterflies pattern

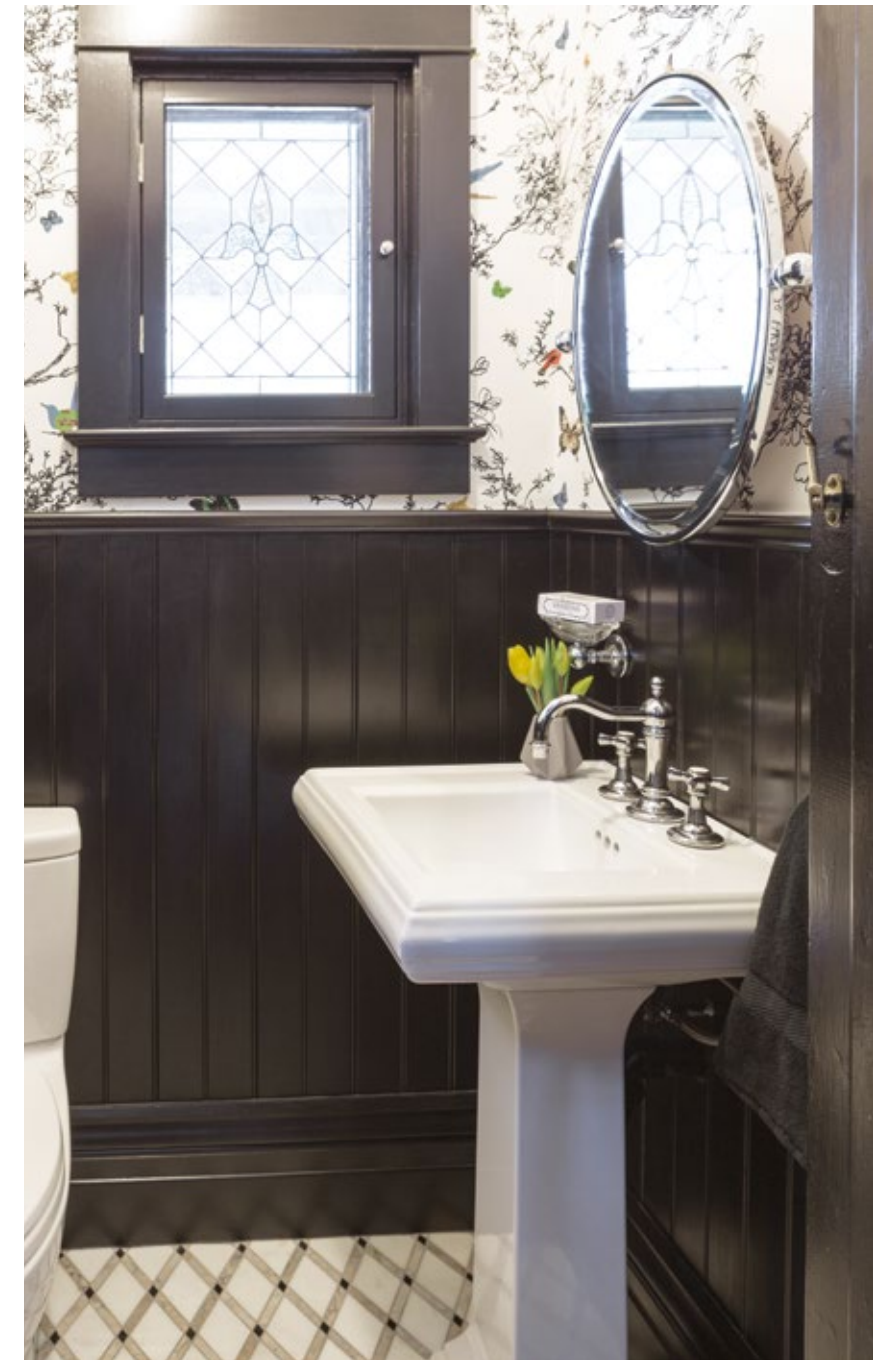


owners into action. With the family reluctant to move out despite the messy and time-consuming process that lay ahead, Gillies created a temporary kitchen for them in the laundry room downstairs. This gave her breathing space to get her team in and start taking down walls. “We had to remove a partition to open up the kitchen – it was a big job but it increased the amount of natural daylight that got in and created a spot for a built-in banquette and kitchen table,” she says.

In order to get as much storage into the room as possible without it feeling cramped, she designed cabinets that go right up to the ceiling. The appliances are concealed

behind custom panels to give a streamlined look, and although the island is on the small side, it too provides great storage. (Her advice for anyone thinking about a new kitchen bears repeating: “Design for the life you want, not the one that is currently weighing you down. Take stock of what you use on a regular basis and what you want to have easy access to. I always suggest emptying out your cabinets and doing a clear-out before a new kitchen is designed. People tend to amass a lot more stuff than they need, and it’s crucial to edit before a new space is designed.”)

The rest of the ground floor got a thorough refresh at the same time as the kitchen was being reshaped. White ▶





[Left] Making space for a second bathroom was a top priority for the redesign; this good-sized shower room in the basement met the brief. The 'unfitted' style of the vintage vanity unit suits the decor of the rest of the house. The wall is painted in Farrow & Ball's Mole's Breath

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oak copies of the original skirtings were made and installed throughout, as were precise replicas of the sash-and-case windows. A geometric wool carpet was laid in the dining room to widen the space visually, while in the living room the original exposed brick chimney breast wall was cleaned up and retained. The furniture has been upholstered in a neutral palette of cream and limestone but each piece is in a different material – leather, pinstripe, linen and velvet. Onto this have been layered brightly coloured accents, with a beautiful Persian carpet holding it all together.

It captures the “classically inviting” interior style that Gillies was aiming for. “I wanted this room and the rest of

the house to be lived in and enjoyed, not just viewed from a distance,” she explains.

There's an ease and simplicity to the palette that makes the rooms feel welcoming and harmonious, with a sense of flow. The natural materials, the oak skirtings and the subtle Farrow & Ball paint colours all contribute to a feeling of heritage. “Yes, I'm pleased with that,” agrees Gillies. “We upholstered the furnishings in fabrics that have classic patterns and colours with an air of longevity about them. That was the plan – even though much of what is here is new, it is still all very much in keeping with a house that's a century old.” ■