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# LEAP *of Faith*

*Design by* GILLIAN GILLIES

*Text by* AMANDA ROSS

*Photography by* VIRGINIA MACDONALD



TWO DESIGN-SAVVY HOMEOWNERS  
PASS THE DECORATING TORCH —  
AND THE KEYS TO THEIR TOWNHOUSE —  
TO GILLIAN GILLIES.





**LEFT AND OPPOSITE:** The fireplace surround in Nero Assoluto black marble adds gravitas in the living room. *Slipper chair, Lee Jofa; side table, coffee tables, Robert James Collection; sconces, Currey & Company; art (over mantel) by Meredith Bingham; wall colour, Wimborne White (239), Farrow & Ball.*



**HAVING BUILT, DESIGNED OR REFINISHED** six homes from Denver to Muskoka over the past 17 years, Aly and Alf Douglas are no strangers to intensive planning and process. But when they recently moved back to Toronto, the couple was keen to try something new: they wanted to live in an older urban home with easy access to shops, restaurants and walking paths — and they didn't want to build it or decorate it themselves.

They found an elegant, 1,900-square-foot red brick townhouse in Rosedale that perfectly fit the bill. But even though the 93-year-old, ivy-covered exterior was lovely and timeless, the interiors, which had been redone by a developer 10 years prior, needed some TLC. Enter designer Gillian Gillies. "I had never worked with a designer before, but I've messed up a lot in the past," says Aly. "I just wanted one time to get it right from the start!" They loved Gillian's style, her ability to make bold design elements work, and that her interiors cleverly used every inch of space. At the start, Aly asked

**RIGHT:** Homeowners Aly and Alf Douglas in their front hallway, where classic engineered French oak floors are offset by a fun animal-print runner. *Flooring, Moncer Specialty Flooring; stair runner, The Red Carpet & Rug Company.*







Designer Gillian Gillies. *Wallpaper* (background)  
by Christopher Farr Cloth, Kravet Canada.

## Rising STAR

In 2018, Gillian Gillies was named *H&H's* One to Watch. "I felt very honoured," says the Scottish-born designer. "There are so many great designers in Canada, and *House & Home* sets the bar very high." Since then, she's certainly been busy. After four years of searching for a larger office in Toronto, she recently landed a perfect — but completely raw — space, which she renovated in short order. "The new office allows me to showcase what I can do with colour, and what I do best — mixing patterns and textures," says Gillian. The designer has also just launched Gillian Gillies Heritage Blankets, a line of Scottish throws. Created at a mill in Ayrshire, Scotland, the blankets come in four different designs. "I've always wanted to design a collection that speaks to my Scottish heritage," she says. "We use a lot of blankets and throws in our design schemes, so this was a natural fit."

Gillian if she wanted to see photos of her favourite designs, but Gillian replied reassuringly, "Don't worry — I'll get your style by our second meeting!" Aly bravely handed over the reins, and without realizing it, immediately communicated a mixed message. "I said I wanted a classic New York or European brownstone feel, but I didn't know exactly how to describe my vision," says Aly. "Every time Gillian saw me, I was wearing black and white, so I guess I wasn't hard to read!"

Gillian also intuitively understood the house; it made her recall elegant old townhouses she admired in Edinburgh as a child. Originally from Scotland and later an interior designer in Edinburgh, Gillian has been well-versed in homes with good bones. "It was just beautiful," she says. "I loved the newel post and original stairs that gently turned at the bottom, the plaster crown mouldings and the deliciously high baseboards. So it was about taking what had been there for almost 100 years and really letting it shine whilst adding in modern touches."

Over a six-month period, Gillian deftly revamped the interiors. New French oak floors laid in a herringbone pattern bring old world elegance to rooms, and original plaster walls are wallpapered — with an ulterior motive. "It makes sense," says Alf. "Wallpaper hides a lot of plaster's imperfections." There were other practical





The existing kitchen cabinets were resprayed in warm white and dark grey. Granite counters with Bordeaux-hued veining add a dash of colour. **Pendants**, Currey & Company; **dark cabinet colour**, Charcoal Slate (HC-178), Benjamin Moore.

**OPPOSITE, BOTTOM RIGHT:** The dining area's dark-hued table and chairs are a striking contrast to pale walls and white roman blinds. **Pendant**, Currey & Company; **dining table**, Robert James Collection.







Aly worried the Graffiti wallpaper was too bold for a bedroom, but Gillian reassured her that it wouldn't feel too "bossy" when all the elements came together. "When something is right, your eye isn't automatically drawn to it because it just feels in harmony," says Gillian. **Wallpaper** by Kelly Wearstler, Kravet Canada; **table lamp**, Elle Mkt; **stool**, Snob.

**OPPOSITE, TOP LEFT AND BOTTOM LEFT:** Clad in natural quartz, the principal bathroom's counter and shower bench complement the geometric black and white floor tile and classic white tile on the walls. **Tile**, Saltillo Imports; **counter, shower bench cladding**, Cambria; **shower fixtures**, Kohler; **cabinet colour**, Black Beauty (2128-10), Benjamin Moore.

**OPPOSITE, TOP RIGHT:** Lighting is one of Gillian's design signatures: the hallway's three-tier wooden chandelier delivers understated drama. **Chandelier**, Currey & Company.

**OPPOSITE, BOTTOM RIGHT:** Alf asked for a space to put all his "stuff," so the designer built a small drawer into the radiator cover in the principal bedroom. **Bowl, sculpture**, Snob.









**ABOVE:** Aly and Alf's daughter, Lily, is away at university, so her room, papered in beautiful *Birds & Butterflies* wallpaper, is mostly used for out-of-town guests. **Wallpaper** by Schumacher, Bilbrough & Co.

**RIGHT:** The guest bathroom was left as is, except for fresh paint and a black-framed mirror. **Mirror**, Elte Mkt; **art** by Anthony Monaco, Willoughby Galleries.

solutions, too: Gillian loves playing with texture but so, too, do cats, and the couple has both a cat and a dog. With that in mind, the designer clad the backs of chairs with fabrics like velvet so claws wouldn't be able to hook into them. The living room sofa, a plum-coloured mohair sectional, is similarly difficult for the cat to scratch. "I never dreamed I'd have a large purple sofa," says Aly with a laugh, "but it's become a real hallmark of the house."

The overall effect is graceful and contemporary, a seamless dovetailing of the home's classic features with a modern aesthetic, all against a black and white palette punctuated by hits of rich colour. "I love a mix of pattern and texture, so there's not a time stamp for when rooms were designed," says Gillian.

And that design planning and process that Aly and Alf have grown accustomed to over years of moving from one city to another, creating bespoke homes along the way? With Alf's retirement nearing, the plan has now changed. "We're finally staying put," he says. "But Aly had so much fun during this project, she'd do it all again in a heartbeat." **PHOTO**





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"Gillian worked hard to find fabrics that would be cat-friendly," says Aly. As such, four leather swivel chairs serve as den furniture atop a hide rug. **Sconces**, Visual Comfort; **hide rug**, EHT Design; **millwork colour**, Charcoal Slate (HC-178), Benjamin Moore.