

Globe Real Estate

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The meticulous attention to detail is evident in the area where kitchen segues into stairway, gallery and lounge. The owners' treasured artwork was specially accommodated in wall cutouts to the right. SHAI GIL PHOTOGRAPHY

RENOVATION

DETAIL DRIVEN

Architect Cindy Rendely reworks a Summerhill home with an eye to getting things right – big and little. John Bentley Mays takes a tour. **PAGE 2**

THE MARKET

February sales numbers sow doubt of a spring surge



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Toronto's real estate market has been faltering since May of last year – with a few sputters before that. Currently, mad bidding wars in some pockets contrast with stagnation in others. So far in 2013, some buyers have been bargain-hunting with the notion that they would jump in before sales take off again in a spring run-up. Others are holding out in the hope of a better deal in the months to come.

Numbers from the Toronto Real Estate Board this week surely quashed a lot of the optimism that this spring will bring another run-up to new highs. The spring market gets started in February and last month's sales in the Greater Toronto Area fell 15 per cent from February of last year. That the TREB feels the need to point out that 2012 was a leap year and therefore February had one extra day makes it seem worse, somehow. The last month we saw sales increase on a year-over-year basis was May, 2012.

To get March off to a lively start, Bank of Montreal cut its lowest mortgage rate to 2.99 per cent. That eye-catching number juiced sales when banks offered it in 2012.

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Thoughtful touches move a renovation from good enough to notable

Small details add a big impact in architect Cindy Rendely's reconstruction of a century-old house in the Summerhill neighbourhood



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One day recently, I stepped out of the wintry weather into the living room of a century-old house in Toronto's Summerhill neighbourhood and was stopped dead in my tracks by the owners' art.

The two large lithographs weren't by anybody famous or even notorious. Nor were they the sort of high-art things you see every day in the print galleries of respectable museums.

No, these flamboyant advertisements for Carter the Great, "the World's Weird, Wonderful Wizard," interested me because of what they invoked. It was the almost vanished world of celebrity stage magicians, sweaty variety theatres, and, of course, exotic female assistants. (Carter the Great, whose heyday was in the years between the world wars, was accompanied by a glamorous mind-reader billed as "the modern Priestess of Delphi - Your mind is an open book to her.")

But there was something else about the posters - something other than their content, I mean - that caught my attention. It was their presentation. Each of the two prints occupied a shallow niche in the wall, cut so that the poster, and only it, would fit.

This may seem to some readers like an architectural detail too small to highlight. Most of us, after all, think we've honoured our artworks quite well enough if we hang them in conspicuous places and light them nicely.

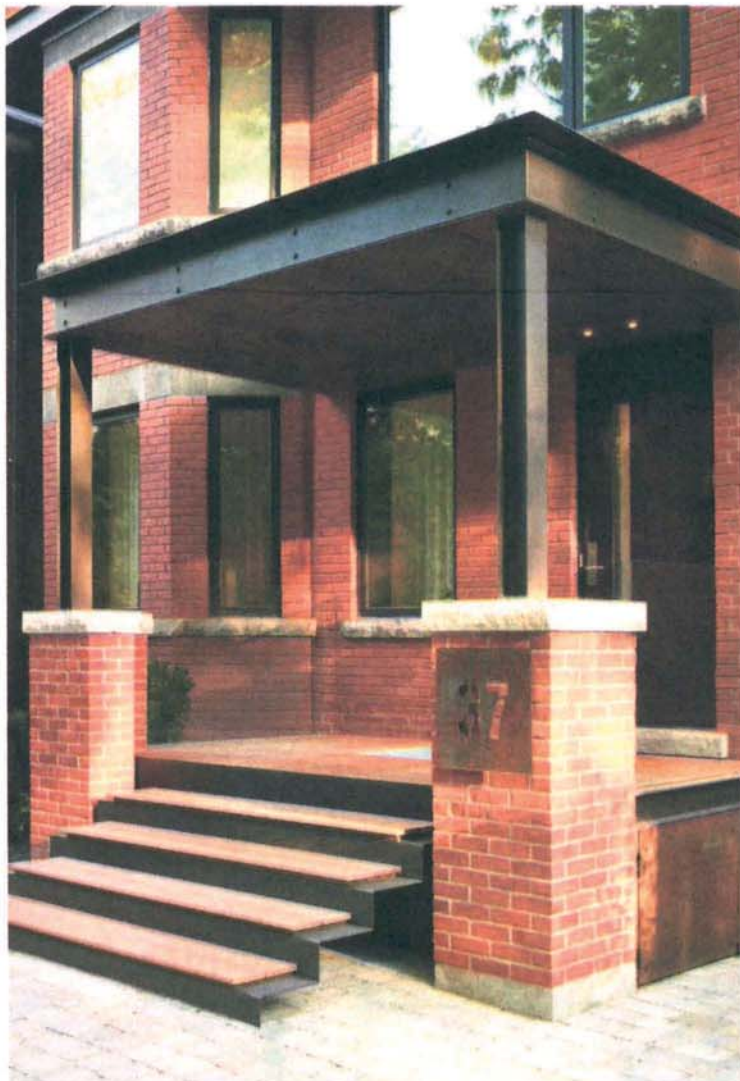
But in planning the sweeping renovation of this three-storey house, architect Cindy Rendely recognized the affection of her clients for their fine old treasures of showbiz culture and decided to give the prints special homes of their own. A tiny touch, too insignificant to mention? I don't think so. Such thoughtful little gestures, when they're added up, make all the difference between an overhaul that's notable (like this one) and the kind that's just good enough.

For another example of something small that means a lot, take Ms. Rendely's treatment of the stairwell connecting the three levels of the house. Here, as one often finds in Toronto's other old family dwellings, vertical circulation was handled by the original builders as a sort of unpleasant necessity (like the toilets), to be left as understated and ignorable as possible.

While not expanding the stairwell laterally, Ms. Rendely did moves that make going up and down the steps as pleasant as passing through any other space within the dwelling. Tall slots were opened in the exterior wall and the risers eliminated to let daylight in, and each floating tread was furnished with a leather pad to damp down noise. Without altering the basic



The materials in the house range from dense white Caesarstone to warm, rich walnut found in the floor and window frames. SHAI GIL PHOTOGRAPHY



Changes at the front include a weathering steel porch and flight of steps. They nicely match the red brick fabric of the structure.



configuration of the stairwell, the architect managed to transform it from a cramped afterthought into an attractive vertical axis.

Yet another instance of Ms. Rendely's minimal approach: the deliberately limited palette employed throughout. The simple fireplace in the living room and the countertops in the kitchen have been crafted from starkly white Caesarstone, a high-performance compound of crushed quartz and polymer resins. The dense whiteness of unpatterned, untextured Caesarstone (carried through in the white lacquered fronts of the kitchen cabinetry) is one end of the material spectrum here.

The other end is the warm, rich walnut to be found in the floor planks, millwork, the treads of the staircase, window frames and elsewhere. There is not much in this interior that, in terms of colour and texture, falls somewhere between blank white and walnut. But the crisp, carefully sustained contrast is effective, and the inside of the house sings a clean, very contemporary tune.

Turning to the exterior, one finds a similarly mindful and restrained aesthetic at work. When its present owners acquired it, the house was in an advanced state of dilapidation that required the thoroughgoing revision of the interior. But they appreciated its stolid, sturdily comfortable external appearance. Accordingly, Ms. Rendely executed only quiet changes on the front façade: the installation of a weathering steel porch and flight of steps, both of which nicely match the red brick fabric of the structure.

It is said that Carter the Great could make a live elephant disappear. Without any kind of gimmickry - with only the skills and talent of an architect - Cindy Rendely made the laborious work of her structural and artistic reconstruction of this house disappear. The subtle result, as I saw it on that winter's afternoon, might tempt an observer to think that architecture can be easy. A renovation as effortlessly graceful as this one, however, is anything but.