THOUGHTFULNESS AND MAGIC

Homeowner Kareem Sethi says he wanted 'a Modern feel but … keeping
with the neighbourhood.' Architect Cindy Rendely delivered ▪ H4

The back of this Toronto house was given the same visual interest as the front, with seating and eating areas,
a gas-fed fire pit and a vine-covered screen that mimics the house's interior staircase. NANNE SPRINGER

A home designed from the outside in

Modernist-style house applies touches of Victoriana to blend in with its century-old neighbourhood

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Drive along almost any residential street in Toronto and there is activity. Builders are building, homeowners are DIYing and architects are building. Some build traditional, with cheap stick-on Styrofoam keystones, some choose boxy-utilitarian modern, while others build true Modernism, with a capital 'M.' To the untrained eye, those last two can sometimes seem interchangeable.

But they couldn't be more different.

"Kareem's thing was he wanted to blend in with the streetscape," says architect Cindy Rendely, who sports a smile so high-wattage it could power this Yonge-Summerhill area cul-de-sac.

"We didn't want it to be offensive on the street, we wanted to have a Modern feel but ... keeping with the neighbourhood," confirms Kareem Sethi, who adds he was looking for a "high-end architect" when he found Ms. Rendely in early 2012.

This, both explain, means the house was designed from the outside-in just as much as the other way 'round; often, with builder's homes, the outside is dictated completely by what goes on inside.

Ms. Rendely, who enjoyed the mentorship of now-90-year-old Modernist Jerome Markson when she life-changed from jeweller/goldsmith to architect back in the early 2000s, says that one thing she learned from Mr. Markson was that Modernism "doesn't mean you have to have a flat roof." So, to help blend into a street full of 110- and 120-year-olds, there were plenty of "nods" to Victoriana. The home is made of brick, for starters, and, sprouting from the somewhat flat roof – Ms. Rendely smiles at this – there rises a "child's line drawing of a peaked roof."

"It's a two-storey, Modern, flat roof box, but then has this third thing popping up from the inside like a jack-in-the-box," Ms. Rendely says. "So what we did was we pulled it back from the front face, we pulled it back from the rear face, and we created two decks." The peaked portion – clad in Laminam porcelain sheet tiles configured in an interesting asymmetrical pattern – reads like the many dormer windows of its neighbours, just as the inlaid wooden panels beside each window refer to old-timey shutters. The "tug-and-pull" of the façade was achieved by projecting the garage face out and crowning it with a planter-box.
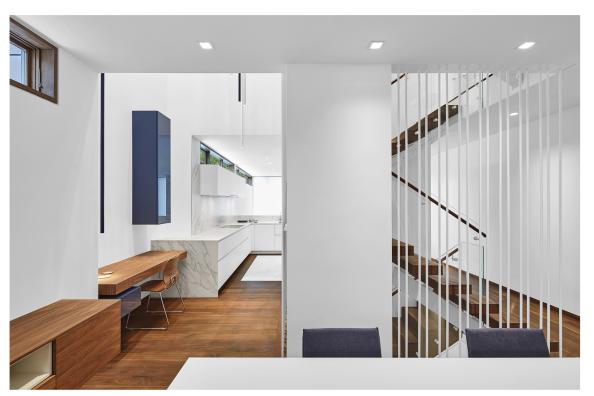
Around back, there is much of the same visual interest, with the addition of zoned seating and eating areas, a gas-fed fire pit and a vine-covered screen with a pattern that mimics Ms. Rendely's indoor staircase balusters.

In the foyer, more thoughtful things one won't get with Big Box Modernism: Look straight ahead, and one's gaze is rewarded with a view of that backyard; look to the left, and a truly cantilevered bench awaits shoe-removal; look down and notice that the planks of the walnut floor – all wood in this home is walnut because Ms. Rendely "likes the continuity"– align with the front-rear axis rather than with room configurations. Subtle yet effective.

A little further in, and a glorious powder room of veined marble, circular sink and hidden strip-lighting will knock one's socks clean off: "This is my favourite powder room I've ever done in my career," Ms. Rendely agrees. "Kareem made me do 'hotel' and I'm, like, 'I don't do hotel' ... and he pushed me a bit."

Should a visitor walk to the formal dining room next, she might question Mr. Sethi and Eva Tajuelo's decision to give such square footage to the adjacent staircase. Yes, it, too, is glorious, and highly sculptural, but why not place it to the side? A great deal of discussion was given to location, Mr. Sethi says, and the final decision allows for visual separation of the kitchen and dining area as well as full-width bedrooms at the front and rear of the second floor.

Also hotly debated was the location of the kitchen's informal dining table. When the right-of-sink/beside-the-axis position was finally chosen, the table was also rigged to a hydraulic motor so it can rise to become a buffet/serving table/bar during dinner parties.

Since Mr. Sethi wanted his backyard exit at grade, Ms. Rendely handled the slightly sloping lot with a two-step stair from the kitchen to the fireplaced family room. It's clad in the same printed tile from Neolith as the fireplace, kitchen backsplash and pony wall, and wide enough to "be a stoop" when lots of people are over: "They can hang out here and have a glass of wine with the group," offers the architect. Again, just another example of thoughtfulness that turns something utilitarian into an architectural moment.

Both upstairs and in the home's nine-foot-ceilinged basement, Ms. Rendely has planned future teenage rooms for the couple's very young daughters (with an ingenious, corridor-based Jack-and-Jill bathroom that can be sectioned off so each feels as if they have a full-sized private bathroom), a possible home office in another area, and in the basement, what can become a fully contained suite should Mr. Sethi's autistic sister move in.

"I think there needs to be more of this in the city," Ms. Rendely says. "[This home] does a lot of things a lot of projects should try to attempt to do more of, like the multigenerational [and] the clever space-planning ... one of the ways to get density, to me, is thinking in broader strokes, just not a family of four or whatever.

"We did something magical, I think."

Then again, magic comes standard when one hires an architect.

Searching for a 'high-end architect,' Kareem Sethi ultimately hired Cindy Rendely Architexture to design his home in Toronto's Yonge-Summerhill area. PHOTOS BY NANNE SPRINGER