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RENOVATION

## AN UNCONVENTIONAL HOUSE



Seeking to bring a sense of space to a narrow Edwardian home, architect Heather Dubbeldam breaks the mould to open up rooms



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For the project they call the Beach House, the renovation team dealt with a cramped space by creating forms that do double duty: the main staircase, wrapped in polycarbonate panels, divides the living room and dining room. And while there's no room for corridors on the main floor, the efficient design means 'you're always walking through the sides of rooms,' Dubbeldam says.

PHOTOS BY SHAI GIL



**When the sun gets high,  
the stair is like a lantern.**

Heather Dubbeldam

When you're raising a family in an old Toronto house, life can get a little bit narrow – literally.

Long, thin lots mean long, tall houses without much room to manoeuvre. It's a classic challenge for designers to reshape such houses for contemporary living.

For a renovation project in the Beach, Dubbeldam Design Architects came up with a way to bring in light and a sense of space: Open the house up to the sky.

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# ONCE BEAT-UP AND DARK, NOW LIGHT AND ROOMY

Renovating an Edwardian semi for a family of four, architect Heather Dubbeldam and her team placed a cascading staircase at dead centre, capped it with a huge skylight and wrapped it in translucent, glinting polycarbonate. "When the sun gets high, the stair is like a lantern," Dubbeldam says.

The result: The owners are much more excited about their staircase than you'd think. "The stair is now the heart of the house," says Kate Halpenny, who lives here with her husband, Sean Smith, and their two kids. "We love it because it defines the space without limiting the light."

Built out of carefully detailed cherry wood, the stair works like a piece of furniture; it separates the front hall from the back dining room, letting light but not views pass through. And as you look up, it's a spiral of timbers dancing upward three storeys toward the sky.

This is resourceful design that carves poetry out of the prosaic. And that was the only kind of poetry that was possible within the limits of the project. Smith, a banker, and Halpenny, who works in fundraising in the non-profit sector, had a modest budget for the renovation, and the building is only 13 feet wide at its widest point.

In response, Dubbeldam and the design team created a series of spaces and forms, such as the staircase, that serve more than one purpose. There's a simple, subtle logic at work in the shape of the rooms. "There wasn't room for separate corridors," Dubbeldam explains. "We arranged it so that you're always walking through the sides of rooms." The tiny front living room, the compact dining room and the kitchen provide a continuous path from the front door to the back door: you can stroll right through from the front hall to the back staircase without anything getting in your way. In a building that is narrower than most condo units, this is a neat trick.



**In the kitchen – where most of the storage cabinets are packed onto a side wall – homeowners Sean Smith and Kate Halpenny can cook while keeping an eye on the rest of the house; in the third-floor master suite, a Douglas fir step contrasts with smooth green glass, and a skylight brings sun into the bedroom and down the stairs.**

PHOTOS BY SHAI GIL

At the back, the kitchen has no cabinets overhead, just a whole wall of them to one side. This lets Halpenny and Smith cook while keeping an eye on the rest of the house. Plus there's a showpiece: An antique sign that reads "BEACH HOUSE" hangs on an exposed-brick wall, providing a bit of patina.

To make each room feel like a separate space, Dubbeldam says, "one idea was to use transitional elements as room dividers: the kitchen counter, the screens on the stair, a built-in bench."

That bench, in the living room, is a particularly clever example of doubling up. It's next to the front hall, topped with a wall of polycarbonate panels like the ones on the stair. Made of cherry, topped with pillows by designer Bev Hisey, it looks like a separate piece of furniture. But actually it hides some storage for the adjacent front hall; little doors

there slide open and collect shoes, pushing them down under the couch and out of the way.

Head up the stairs and you'll find more inventive use of space and a judicious use of materials. On the second floor is a surprise: a family room facing the street, big enough to hold a grand piano (handed down from Halpenny's ninety-something grandma) and comfy enough for a big couch and shag rug. "This is the room where we all hang out," Halpenny says.

It's a rare luxury in an urban house like this, which is only 1,850 square feet. The kids, six-year-old Kieran and four-year-old Charlotte, have their rooms at the back; both rooms have clerestory windows above the doors, to bring light into the hall. The rooms aren't large, but they're big enough, and Kieran even has a playroom: a former sun porch at the back is now a five-foot-

wide playroom, stocked with his Lego and an orange Eames rocker.

Up on the third floor is where Halpenny and Smith rest: a master bedroom, with built-in cabinets (there's no room for a full closet) and a spacious bathroom. This room is full of sophisticated details: a gorgeous floating vanity of cherry and vanilla marble, a shower and partitions of green glass, and a rough chunk of Douglas fir that steps up to a back deck.

The house shows how much you can do with a carefully designed renovation. Halpenny says that when she and Smith bought the house, it was a serious fixer: divided into apartments, beat-up, dark. "My mother came to see it with us," she recalls, "and when I told her we were buying it, she actually cried." (The couple initially moved into the lower half of the house; Dubbeldam did the first stage of renova-

tion, including the kitchen, while the upstairs was still a separate apartment.)

At the same time, the house demonstrates how tricky seemingly simple things can be. On one side of the house, there's a south-facing wall, a tall expanse of brick with just a single, tiny window. Halpenny and Smith saw potential here: It seemed like a perfect opportunity to create windows and bring in views from the side. "In our office, we were really excited about that," Dubbeldam recalls. But as it turned out, they couldn't get around Toronto's zoning rules, which usually forbid windows near a property line. As a result, "this is basically a row house," Dubbeldam says. So, that blank brick wall enjoys the sun, and inside the house the light pours in from above. Halpenny says the family wouldn't change a thing. Even her mom. "Now, she's very proud of us."

