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ARCHITECTURE

OLD ON THE OUTSIDE

MODERN ON THE INSIDE



A buttoned-down home in Forest Hill gets an interior facelift from architect Heather Dubbeldam. **Alex Bozиков** reports

Stairs from the wide-open living room lead to the loft at David Liang's Forest Hill home. PHOTOS BY TOM ARBAN



The leafy streets above Casa Loma aren't the place you'd expect to find a slick loft apartment. Instead of old warehouses and factories, they're lined with solid, conservative houses 80 years old or more.

But graphic designer David Liang's apartment there is just as sophisticated as anything down the hill. After a renovation by Dubbeldam Design Architects, it's an open, two-storey living space with crisp details in wood, steel and stone – and taking up just half of the old house.

The house was divided into three apartments long before Mr. Liang took it over in 2004. "My mother had lived here for many years," recalls Mr. Liang, sitting at his glass dining room table in a classic modernist chair, but the interior "was all closed and dark."

He decided to move into the upper apartment, and "knew the skeleton" of what he wanted. "I wanted it to be open," he says, which meant using the existing second floor and carving open the attic to turn it into livable space.

Architect Heather Dubbeldam – a young designer who was a friend of a friend – took on the job of designing a cool bachelor pad for Mr. Liang. » SEE 'FACELIFT' PAGE 3

DEVELOPMENT

A new logic for lean times

Builders struggling because of slow sales are turning to a range of incentives to move their product, writes **Carolyn Ireland**

At his new Riverside batch of houses in Ajax, Ont., Craig Marshall is grateful for nature-loving dogs.

"We've had quite a few dogs come out with their owners," says the president of Marshall Homes. "Then they go for a walk afterwards."

The verdant land near a river will accommodate houses with a ravine on one side and a golf course on the other.

"It's one of the nicest sites we've ever had," says Mr. Marshall. "You walk out your door and see a ravine – walk out the front door and see a golf course."

Despite the rare setting, however, sales have been slug-

gish compared with seasons past. Mr. Marshall had hoped to have the installation of sewers and roads under way by now, but he needs to sell about twice as many units.

At a recent preview, prospective buyers were given the chance to put down a deposit before the sales centre opens to the public. About 20 per cent of the units sold at preview. A year ago, Mr. Marshall would have expected to sell 50 per cent.

To spur sales, he has cut the premium for a ravine-side location by 50 per cent. But still, some nervous purchasers cancelled their agreements during the 10-day cooling-off

period that allows buyers to reconsider.

"We had a few more people backing out in the cooling-off period than we would have liked."

At other building sites, Mr. Marshall has cleared out some inventory by listing newly-built houses on the multiple listing service for the first time. The company has sold about five houses this way "since Lehman Brothers" says Mr. Marshall, referring to Sept. 15th when the famed Wall Street investment bank filed for bankruptcy protection in what was the biggest bankruptcy in U.S. history.

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Lehman Brothers is pretty much the day the real estate market stalled.

Craig Marshall, president of Marshall Homes

CONDO MARKET

Hot high-rise Suites snapped up as one new tower bucks the trend Page 2

Resale Homes



FROM PAGE 1 » FACELIFT



The suite is largely open. In the kitchen, above, an L-shaped arrangement of cabinetry and appliances frames an area with artwork. Left, the bathroom off the bedroom. PHOTOS BY TOM ARBAN

'Our intention was to knock out walls wherever possible'

Starting in 2005, the two spent many hours discussing the possibilities, using a series of scale models. "In our practice, we tend to spend a lot of time with clients getting to know them and their lifestyle," Ms. Dubbeldam explains.

In this case, Ms. Dubbeldam decided to draw on Mr. Liang's work in graphic design – translating two-dimensional images into views and architectural forms. "As you move through the space, often you're getting a two-dimensional view into another space," she says. "And there are a lot of L-shaped elements that are like little framing devices."

Those two ideas pop up throughout the apartment, which was finished last summer. The first place is at the top of the stairs at the front entrance. As you climb, you look up to what seems to be a solid wall: There's a gnarly piece of driftwood against its

white backdrop.

But once you come up into the living room, you can see this isn't really a wall – it's just an L-shaped room divider, designed to frame an exhibit, such as driftwood from Mr. Liang's collection, which also includes his own artwork. At the same time, it blocks off views of the hallway behind it, which goes to the back of the house and the bedroom.

There's another example of the framing device in the open kitchen. The cabinets themselves form an L, stretching across the room and then up, leaving a clean wall behind them for three pieces of art. The horizontal part of the L includes custom storage and a gas range. The vertical band has display shelves in front; in behind, it hides an oven, and behind that the fridge. The appliances are invisible, but this kitchen is both beautiful and entirely functional – which suits Mr. Liang. "I cook, but,

okay, not all the time."

These L's, and a few others, also serve very practical purposes. In fact, Ms. Dubbeldam's design doesn't have a lot of frills, and in broad strokes, the apartment plan is simple: Largely, it's all open.

"The ceilings were only eight feet, so our intention was to knock out walls wherever possible," she says. In the end, the 2,200-square-foot place has the one bedroom, a bathroom, the kitchen, and a living/dining room on the second floor. On the third floor, where the gables of the house create low sloping ceilings, there's an office, a den and a small library with built-in bookcases.

"It's a wide-open space, and as you go upstairs, it kind of closes up," Mr. Liang says. "That's what I like about the design: It changes depending on where you go. My bedroom, I find very calm. And when I'm in the kitchen, I feel like I can see everything."

Indeed, every detail – of the space planning, the materials, even the views in and out of the windows – was carefully thought out. That's a point of pride for Ms. Dubbeldam, whose six-year-old architectural practice has won a series of prestigious awards since it was launched in 2002. And, in part, the project shows the influence of Kuvabara Payne McKenna Blumberg, perhaps the city's most distinguished architectural firm, where she worked for six years.

"They study everything," Ms. Dubbeldam says of KPMB's process. "There isn't a corner that isn't important to them." And though the young architect's work doesn't look quite like KPMB's, her spare yet warm modernism definitely comes from the same contemporary Toronto school.

"It has a lot to do with ... the relationship between materials and the way materials come together and intersect," she

explains. For one thing, "there's a play of smooth planes and textured surfaces in contrast to one another. Everything's really pared down so you can really read the richness of wood, for instance, and the cleanness of the slate."

In Mr. Liang's place, this is clear in the living room, a two-storey space that reaches up to the top of the gabled roof. The showpiece here is a two-sided fireplace: The mantel is a crisp block of shiny limestone, and the fireplace sits on top of it like a monolith of rough grey plaster. It's simple but artful.

Despite this level of quality, the entire project cost about \$150,000. What's more, the renovation had only a modest impact on the well-aged character of the street. Other than the house's new, larger windows, there's no real trace that this place has been radically remade. Both Mr. Liang and Ms. Dubbeldam are proud of that.

"We're preservationists where it's appropriate," she says of her design firm, "but at the same time, we're modernists. We made larger windows in keeping with the facade, and modernized the inside."

Ms. Dubbeldam, who is also the head of the Toronto Society of Architecture, has her eye on the big picture: There's lots of potential, she says, for houses in the city to go through similar transformations.

"We have a housing shortage in Toronto, and here's a big old house that's been divided into three family units – and each family gets a really decent amount of space," she says. (The main-floor and basement apartments are rented out.) "You can turn these houses into good multifamily buildings."

In other words, it's a showcase of what good architecture can do for the city as a whole. That, and the coolest apartment on the block.