



The architect has reinforced the house's long, flat lines with facings of slate and the luminous Brazilian wood called jatoba. A new entrance canopy, connecting the house to the garage, breaks up the boxy look.



A fresh start

Preserving its strengths while correcting its flaws, Toronto architect Jillian Aimis updates a mid-century modernistic house

By John Bentley Mays
Photography by Tom Arban

The time is right to consider imaginative house renovation. With land prices in most North American cities high and going higher, it makes sound financial sense to enhance what you've got instead of seeking the perfect house in another neighbourhood. Staying put and redoing an existing home certainly makes wise environmental sense; and the importance of recycling every city's architectural resources will only grow in the years ahead. But perhaps the best motive for considering an overhaul is the interesting design talent that renovation puts within the financial grasp of many homeowners. While the architectural fees would be about the same for reconstruction or new building, the money saved by recycling existing fabric could be substantial.

For an example of solid, serviceable talent at work in practical circumstances, take the house

in the mid-century Toronto suburb of York Mills recently redone by architect Jillian Aimis. Some 50 years before it became the distinctive building it is today, this modernistic family home went up on its rather small lot on a quiet residential street. As represented in old photos, the first version of the house was a quite conventional grey, boxy affair that greeted the street with an architecturally blank face and turned its back firmly against the small rear garden. The interior arrangements were sunny but nondescript, yet comfortable enough back in 1992, when Jackie Maze and Ernie Heinemann – she has long been an executive with furniture company Keilhauer, he was an executive with Labatt until retirement – bought the house and moved their growing family into it. “We are both from western Canada,” Maze told me. “We wanted lots of light and a more modern house, for a more relaxed lifestyle.”

But with the passage of years, the shortcomings of the original house became more bothersome. The internal space did not flow gracefully from area to area. The house’s streetside facade was uninviting, and the back wall – with a window but no door – separated the interior from the patch of nature in the rear yard. “Being an environmentalist, I wanted the house to be modern but warm,” Maze says, reflecting on her decision to renovate. “I wanted to keep the light, but also to live in the total square footage of the house. I wanted a connection with the backyard, and to be connected on the main living area to the earth. We wanted the house to live and breathe.”

The new house created by Jillian Aimis for the Maze-Heinemann family preserves everything that was structurally and aesthetically sound about



Top right: A dramatic handwoven wire hanging by Charles O’Neil falls down the stairwell, which stands directly opposite the main entrance. Craftsman Dan Gallagher constructed the solid walnut dining-room table, which was designed by homeowner Jackie Maze.

Bottom right: Opposite the dining room is the light-filled living room. The Eames chair is from Herman Miller. The sectional sofa, coffee table and end tables are from Keilhauer.



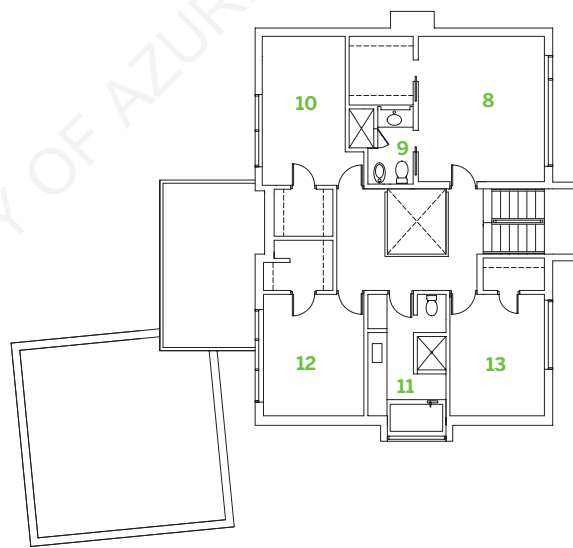
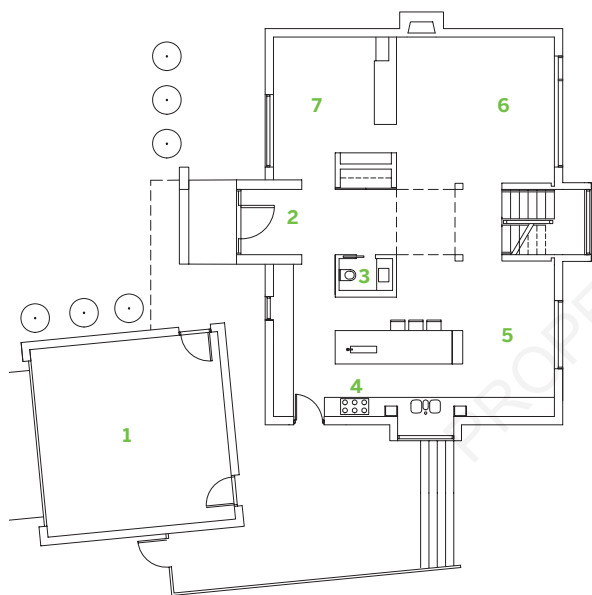


Above left: Muggs, a male American water spaniel, chills in the hallway between the kitchen and den. In the latter, a painting purchased at a student art fair hangs above a Keilhauer sofa.

Above right: The concrete countertop of the glass-tiled bar complements the kitchen's slate elements, including a connecting wall marking the transition from kitchen to dining room. Walnut cabinetry conceals the refrigerator and dishwasher. The silver print on the ledge is by William Klein.

First floor

Second floor



- 1 Existing garage
- 2 Entry
- 3 Powder room
- 4 Kitchen
- 5 Dining room
- 6 Living room
- 7 Den
- 8 Master bedroom
- 9 Ensuite
- 10 Guest bedroom
- 11 Bathroom
- 12 Bedroom
- 13 Study/office

the old house while sharply improving its modern atmosphere and amiability. Instead of contradicting the building's stolid, boxy geometry, Aimis has reinforced and enriched its long, flat lines with facings of slate and the luminous Brazilian wood called jatoba. The old front entry, an unremarkable opening in a flat wall, has been given fresh emphasis and charm by a custom-made jatoba door and an entrance canopy, and strongly outlined by stone and wood. The result is an entry with a heightened sense of welcome and a touch of ceremony. Around the back of the house, Aimis has created a more porous membrane between the interior and nature.

The interior has been considerably refigured, similarly opened and made more hospitable. Entering through the front door, visitors find themselves in a small, slate-lined vestibule from which the spaces of the house radiate. In one direction lies the vast new kitchen, with its wide window for the family's collection of orchids. Off in another direction is the bright living room and the cooler, north-facing den, separated by a fireplace. But the visitor's eye is led most quickly to the simple open-riser wood and steel staircase directly opposite the entrance, where a dramatic handwoven wire hanging by Ontario artist Charles O'Neil falls down the stairwell.

To unify the spaces of the house, and to unite the exterior and interior treatments, the architect has relied heavily on the natural beauty of wood and stone both inside and out. In the enlarged kitchen, for instance, walnut cabinetry conceals the refrigerator and dishwasher. The appearance of stainless steel has been avoided; to create visual harmony between metal and the warm wood finishes, kitchen hardware has been given an oil-rubbed bronze finish. The concrete countertop of the glass-tiled bar (with trough sink) complements the slate elements in the kitchen, including a connecting wall that gracefully marks the transition from kitchen to dining room.

To complete their redone modern house, the homeowners have decorated the walls with works by contemporary Canadian painters, photographers and sculptors, and its jatoba floors with sturdy, businesslike furniture by Keilhauer and Herman Miller. The furniture's clean, contemporary lines – counterpointed by the couple's collection of whimsical pieces, including a marvellous jewellery box by Canadian designer Gord Peteran – underscores the refreshed clarity and simplicity of this suburban house, to which sensitive architectural renovation has given a whole new lease on life. **AZ**



Right: The custom bed in the master bedroom is by Keilhauer and the art photograph by Guntar Kravis. The crown jewellery box was custom-made by Gord Peteran.

Below: The tub enclosure in the main bathroom features blue-grey glass tile and white porcelain tile with a striated pattern. Custom cabinetry is by Emanuele Furniture.

