

Chewing away the interior

BY RHYS PHILLIPS, OTTAWA CITIZEN DECEMBER 7, 2012



Suzanne Belanger loves how much light there is in her renovated home, which is now “a very Zen place to be.”

Photograph by: JULIE OLIVER , OTTAWA CITIZEN

Suzanne Belanger is not one to hold a grudge.

When Paul Kariouk purchased her rented apartment in the venerable Mayfair Apartments on Metcalfe Street for his own use, there were no hard feelings. Instead, she took the plunge and purchased a Lowertown townhouse in the 17-unit Cobourg Court, a modernist complex built in 1982. The almost 2,000-square-foot unit boasted no less than six levels visually connected by both open-riser stairs and a modest-sized but soaring 20-foot-high shaft above the dining area.

“Despite the quaint charm of the Mayfair,” Belanger says, “my apartment had little natural light and I was immediately delighted by how much more daylight found its way into my new place.”

But by 2008 — eight years after she purchased — the complex was showing its age. Belanger recommended the New York born and educated Kariouk as the design person to undertake a complete external modernization. And when that work was completed, she was impressed by how he had increased access to light by replacing the opaque front and back terrace walls with glass and retained the complex’s architectural integrity while giving the exterior a cleaner, 21st-century look.

That led her to commission Kariouk to undertake a similar adaptation of her unit’s frenetic interior.

Despite its openness and presaging of free-flowing loft interiors, Kariouk explains as we tour the house, there were several design characteristics that fought against these very objectives. Immediately on entry, the open-riser flight of stairs leading up to the kitchen and dining room level directed attention down to the basement rather than upwards. The modest kitchen along the rear was detached from the dining room by a wall, while the multi-storey vertical volume above the dining room only partially succeeded in creating a perception of expansive space.

Heavy wooden balustrades, which stretched across openings overlooking the dining room from the third-level living room and fourth-level loft/family room, further diminished any real sense of visual interconnectedness and cohesiveness. Finally, the bulkheads carrying the unit’s mechanical services seemed to run off at multiple angles, producing a rather heavy, even chaotic, feel to the spaces.

One of Kariouk’s initial steps was to fill in the open front stairs to redirect first perceptions. Then he cut away excess detail and replaced where possible the opaque with the transparent. This entailed a modest reduction in floor space: By decreasing the size of the loft, the unit’s signature vertical space above the dining area is now significantly larger, while the removal of the kitchen wall drenches the unit’s central areas with cool northern light. “The dining area is no larger than it was before the renovation, but its perceived size is now much greater,” says the architect.

Another key step in what he calls “this chewing away of the interior” was replacing the wooden balustrades with sheets of tempered plate glass. There is even a frosted-glass corner window in the master bathroom shower opening onto the hallway.

Other steps reduce clutter and give the house a modern, minimalist aesthetic. Stippling was removed from the ceiling; hand-crafted floor-to-ceiling kitchen cupboards replaced the original over-the-counter units; and, most important, the multi-angled bulkheads were simplified to become large “frames” skirting the walls. To avoid floor lamps, multiple recessed pot lighting was installed.

“As the new design emerged,” Belanger laughs, “I began to rethink the clutter of objects I had acquired during years spent overseas and thus began a thorough editing of what was really needed around the house.” As a result, it is now both a “smart home” in which cleaning is far less time-consuming and, adds the yoga practitioner, “a very Zen place to be.” Little touches, like stitched leather handrails, add a delightful tactile surprise as one moves up and down the many stairs.

Two individual gestures, one in the kitchen, one in the living room, help animate the residence. A countertop of richly mottled colonial treasure marble separates the kitchen from the dining room and provides a robust contrast to the muted white walls and subtle tones of the maple floor. But it is in the living room that Kariouk has inserted the most distinctive gesture. The fireplace, a simple shaft rising 12 feet to the ceiling, is clad in glossy white porcelain tile into which an abstract pattern of reeds has been delicately cut. These perforations with coloured glass lit from behind make the fireplace an eye-catching totem.

It’s a great example of how Kariouk is one of a growing number of award-winning young design people who are creating spare, yet visually engaging modernist homes in Ottawa.