

THE ARCHITOURIST

# Reno in Toronto's Little Portugal softens all the angles



DAVE LEBLANC

TORONTO  
SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL  
PUBLISHED MAY 30, 2023  
UPDATED MAY 31, 2023  
FOR SUBSCRIBERS

This article was published more than 6 months ago. Some information may no longer be current.



Shelley Simmons stands on the porch of her renovated home in Toronto's Little Portugal neighbourhood.

CREATIVE UNION

COMMENTS

SHARE BOOKMARK

GIVE THIS  
ARTICLE

A few years after the Painters Eleven disbanded, Harold Town began his “Tyranny of the Corner” series of paintings. The artist addressed what he described as the “problem” of the canvas’ corners by painting those first, which deemphasized the traditional focus on the centre of the work. He worked on this for four years.

Architects, too, have often fought the tyranny of right angles by dissolving brick-and-mortar corners with glass or, in the extreme, designing round houses.

But one need not go that far. By adding a few non-right angles, a few curves in the drywall, and playing with how light penetrates a space, everything – even those tyrannical angles – can be softened to produce a soothing, womb-like space.

And that’s exactly what Shelley Simmons and her real estate broker husband, Paul Haley, achieved with a recent renovation of their Victorian bay-and-gable in Toronto’s Little Portugal neighbourhood.

“For me, I really focus in it ... it’s like a cone of silence,” Ms. Simmons, who works in the video game industry, says of a special spot on her third floor. It’s not actually a cone, but rather triangular, intimate and filled with floor-to-ceiling glass.

“I saw a guy kissing his dog [and] it’s enough of a distraction to add interesting places for my brain to go, but, still, I can bring it back.”

What Ms. Simmons is trying to articulate is that room shape, ceiling height, acoustics, light and a handful of other architectural intangibles all contribute to mood and focus. It’s why conversation flows better in some areas and quiet contemplation in others.

And there is a lot to contemplate about the couple’s extensive renovation. Ms. Simmons met architect Claudia Bader of Creative Union Network when Ms. Bader inquired about renting the couple’s laneway house for her German mother during an extended visit.

After a strong friendship developed, Ms. Simmons produced a bunch of sketches that were essentially a visual wish list of what she wanted her house to look like.

At the time, the house wasn't terrible, but it was pretty dark in the middle, as most Victorians are. And there were pokey bits, such as a raised, boxy, modern fireplace that jutted into the living space and made for awkward circulation patterns.

MORE STORIES BELOW ADVERTISEMENT

While the kitchen was nice, the island was too large for the narrow house, and there was an orphaned cabinet off to one side. That was just the main floor. There was talk, too, of that need for an adults-only floor with the principal bedroom and an indulgent ensuite.

But no one was in a hurry, at least not at first. "It ultimately ended up being a long gestation period," says architect Timothy Mitanidis, who is married to Ms. Bader. "Working through the ideas, discussing them, coming up with concepts, changing our minds, circumstances changing."

Shelley Simmons and Paul Haley's home in Toronto's Little Portugal neighbourhood.  
RILEY SNELLING PHOTOGRAPHY

1 of 20

Shelley Simmons and Paul Haley's home in Toronto's Little Portugal neighbourhood.

1 of 20

RILEY SNELLING PHOTOGRAPHY

The biggest circumstance to change was the couple's second child, who was born in 2019. Work began in earnest two years later.

Pandemic delays meant it took more than a year to get everything done, but the results are stunning. Open the front door and the eye travels along a herringbone floor all the way to the enormous glass door at the back, which looks onto the rental property Ms. Bader's mother spent a month in. This unimpeded eye travel is made possible by a much more linear and logical kitchen (with a smaller island), and a few wall curves that would make Harold Town smile.

And while it might seem counterproductive to wall up a formerly spindled staircase, the lack of visual clutter also helps with light and flow.

Handrails sport hidden lighting that illuminates both wall and treads. Light now comes from above, as well, via a perforated metal staircase. And what a staircase: looking light as a creampuff yet feeling sturdy as an oak, it's a design and engineering marvel.

"The big requirement was that you had to bring it in in pieces, right?" says Mr. Mitanidis. "Typically, you would do a bent metal stair as maybe one big piece which would be easy to fabricate ... so how to get that to work and keep a rhythm and quality to the stair?"

The solution, he says, was to come up with a "modular" approach while keeping fasteners and joinery points so rhythmic (to use Mr. Mitanidis's word) that they disappear into the composition. Some fasteners, he says, are unnecessary to hold it together but were needed for the overall look.

Speaking of bringing in light, the third floor achieves it with a meditative, triangular alcove under the building's prominent gable. Valuable floor space has been given to a tiny outdoor courtyard/balcony with fully glazed walls. "On these old, existing buildings, a lot of them are too close to the property line to introduce new windows," says Mr. Mitanidis, "so with that little inset, it allows us to increase to a larger percentage on that wall."

By moving the his-and-hers sinks and closets into the middle portion of the open-concept floor, the small bathroom can consist of a very large shower with a long bench, which can be seen through a triangular window. A freestanding fireplace beside a curve in the wall adds the perfect touch of indulgence.

Add the couple's colourful artwork and light fixtures throughout, Creative Union's custom-designed sofa (with built in toy storage) on the main floor, and cheerful wall graphics to the mix, and this is one artful project that typifies what it means to be collaborative – and not at all tyrannical.

"Creative Union, the name, from what I understand, is that it really is a unified process between the two different parties," says Ms. Simmons. "And collaborating is a big part of what I do, professionally ... that really makes sense to me."