



## **A Toronto condo gets a contemporary jolt**

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The husband and wife owned an elegant unit graced with antique furniture at the Prince Arthur condominiums on Avenue Road in Toronto.

The partners at IN8 Design Inc. specialize in spare, contemporary interiors without a hint of tradition.

At first it seemed the four were not destined to work together.

But as Michel Arcand and Don Parker sat down with the prospective clients over a flurry of images pulled from decor magazines and websites, it was the most austere white box that sparked the greatest reaction from the couple.

“The image that really took with them was a white cube environment with Victorian furniture,” says Mr. Arcand.

The designers felt even more in sync when the husband and wife said they admired the refined style of the Manhattan boutique hotel, the Andaz 5th Avenue.

“We looked at it and said, ‘if that’s what they want to achieve, we can do it,’” says Mr. Arcand.

“It just had a nice, modern feel,” added Mr. Parker.

The designers and their clients embarked on an overhaul so thorough that only the drains remained in place. The process was made more challenging by the fact that the owners live in Florida and only drop in to their Toronto pied à terre to visit family.

“This was new for both of us” said the husband during a recent tour of the recently completed suite. “But we saw the potential.”

Now that the renovation is complete and the couple is enjoying the transformation, all four agree that the tension between traditional and contemporary is what makes the design successful. The husband and wife had leaned to a time-honoured style of decorating in the past, but they were ready to experiment.

“It’s absolutely perfect,” says the wife, who admits to feeling some minor trepidation along the way.

The unit today has a new plan with more open spaces, better views of the terrace and a cultivated juxtaposition of old and new.

The designers had layer upon layer of plaster crown moulding removed.

"I always tell residential clients, we don't do mouldings. If you want cornice mouldings, we're not the right people," says Mr. Arcand.

To the IN8 designers, trim is just a way of covering up poor workmanship where the wall and ceiling join. They prefer the crispness of precision edges.

"It's all about new times, new tools – to see how far you can push the material," Mr. Arcand says of contemporary design. "I think it's all about how much you can simplify something. That's the challenge."

A cramped vestibule was made 50-per-cent larger and the nearby powder room 25 per cent smaller. The kitchen has more than doubled in size and now includes a large, marble-topped island.

"We shrunk some rooms to their minimum and expanded some rooms to their maximum."

A wall between the kitchen and living area contains a double-sided fireplace and a portion that slides away for openness or slides into place for privacy.

Double doors open to a large and verdant terrace where the couple loves to spend time outdoors.

In a corner of the living room, an awkward nook now holds a daybed that provides a decadent spot for lounging or extra sleeping space when family arrives.

One of the most dramatic changes took place in the master suite, where the bathroom wall was torn down and replaced with a wall of glass that allows daylight to flow through all the way to the walk-in shower at the rear. The tub now stands beside the glass and gives bathers a view through the bedroom to the outdoors.

It's an idea that's borrowed from boutique hotels, where the separation between bath and bed has largely been dispensed with, points out Mr. Arcand. But for a couple that's not used to living with modern design, it's a leap.

"We pushed the client to her limit," beams Mr. Arcand. "You get excited about the possibilities and you show it to them and they buy into it."

The notion of a glass wall is not new, he adds, but "perhaps a little newer in a condo – especially at the Prince Arthur." The designers did acquiesce to modesty by providing a gossamer curtain that can be pulled into place when the owners want more privacy and pulled back when they want light.

The best of the couple's antiques now stand out against the clear, uncluttered backdrop. Old pieces were moved to new places. A mahogany china cabinet purchased in Shakespeare, Ont., stands on a plinth.

"I knew the minute we went in there, the five antiques we were going to use," says Mr. Arcand.

Mr. Parker says many people now want to live with art and furniture that spans styles and decades. But when too many items are mixed haphazardly, no one piece stands out.

In a twist, the same Shakespeare antiques dealer approached the designers and asked them to insert a modern sensibility into the makeover of a jumbled shop. Now period furniture stands beside such contemporary indulgences as shower gels infused with organic lavender.

"Just selling antiques doesn't work anymore," says Mr. Arcand. "People want the eclectic mix."

The designers and clients shopped for new furniture and traded ideas by phone and e-mail. When the husband and wife drifted towards the conventional, the IN8 team tugged.

"I think we looked at over 100 dining room chairs," says Mr. Arcand of what turned out to be one of the tougher challenges. The men also talked the clients into a dining room table that consists of a marble slab on a custom-made base, but they figure that's their role as designers.

"They really wanted the space to be different from what they're used to," says Mr. Parker.

The wife points to the dining room light fixture – a silvery cascade of metal – as something the couple would never have chosen on their own. But they trusted the duo and now they love the elegance of the design.

The shape is reminiscent of a chandelier, explains Mr. Arcand, but it's not made of crystal. Another homage to tradition is the herringbone pattern in the floor, but the natural finish on the white oak feels fresh. The marble surrounding the fireplace is a classic material but the design is contemporary.

With comfortable sofas, luxurious carpets and a collection of family photographs, the finished design is more comfortable and less minimalist than the white cube.

"What we did wasn't as edgy," says Mr. Arcand. "The reality is, we weren't dealing with an art gallery, we were in a condo."

The condo is the couple's pied à terre but it's also an investment. The designers had to ensure that the changes would also enhance the unit's value if the couple ever decides to sell.

Mr. Parker notices that baby boomers and empty nesters are more and more willing to cast off their old preferences and try something new.

"They want contemporary design," he says. "It's like a rebirth. They challenge you."