

## SEEING THINGS IN A NEW LIGHT

*Dark and poorly laid out house metamorphoses into modern home*

DESIGN

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**A MODERN HOUSE** bathed in light perches high above a forest canopy, soaking up a view of Lake Ontario over the treetops.

It sounds idyllic, but when Esther Cheong and Paul Fantauzzi purchased this property located atop the Scarborough Bluffs, it was something else altogether.

Cheong and Fantauzzi are partners in life and in the Toronto-based firm Z Axis Design, which specializes in architecture and design for modern residential buildings. To avoid zoning complications, they kept the footprint of the original structure. But their renovation was nothing short of a metamorphosis.

"It was a house with an odd layout, a very bizarre house spread over multiple levels with three kitchens!" Cheong says of the property, which is now on the market.

To usher the strange old place into the 21st century, Cheong and Fantauzzi pulled back the walls and created a modern three-bedroom house bathed in light and oriented toward those breathtaking views over Cudia Park forest. The whole back of the house is glazed with floor-to-ceiling windows and doors, and light seems to enter from all angles.

The designers envisioned the house as a series of tiers, the second storey smaller than the first and the first smaller than the basement. This allowed them to create multiple levels of large terraces rather than decks—off the bedrooms, the family room, dining room and even the ensuite bathroom—that seem to nestle right into the surrounding woodland. Each rests atop the room below it, eliminating those dark and awkward spaces that lurk below most decks. Even the basement gets plenty of natural light. **ESF**



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*The kitchen's Corian-wrapped island features an induction stovetop with a pop-up exhaust fan that is practically invisible when not in use, both by Bosch. Fridge and convection-microwave oven are by Jenn-Air from Appliance Canada. The custom walnut cabinetry, not only in the kitchen but throughout the house, was custom-made by Euronova Kitchens. The warm walnut flooring is from The Hardwood Flooring Stores.*

*“With the terraces, the quality of the light is exquisite throughout the house.”*

“Normally decks protrude out from a building and the rooms below feel dark and dungeon-like,” Cheong says. “But with the terraces, the quality of the light is exquisite throughout the house.”

Cheong says she and Fantauzzi are passionate enthusiasts of modern design (he’s a graduate of Carleton University’s architecture school and she has an interior design degree from the University of Manitoba) and she thinks light has a lot to do with it. “Modern

houses allow for great expanses of glass in a way that traditional houses cannot,” she says.

For the home’s interior design, Cheong chose natural walnut and repeated it in cabinetry and flooring throughout the house. Everywhere the walls are painted white. Carrara marble lines the floor of the foyer, and it also appears on the living room’s fireplace and the tiles in the bathrooms. The furniture, too, is chiefly white and grey with chrome and stainless steel accessories. This restricted palette of

colours, textures and finishes creates a cohesive, seamless design that flows naturally from room to room and floor to floor, Cheong says.

Nowhere is the walnut shown to better advantage than in the large open kitchen, where a solid, uninterrupted wall of custom-made floor-to-ceiling cabinets creates a plane of rich burnished wood and plenty of hidden storage space. An island wrapped in white Corian is positioned parallel to the window so that the cook can look up from time to time and take in the scenery. ☞

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*The master bedroom and bathroom are all about the view. In the bathroom, the vanity with a long double Westyle sink is all-white Corian – even the drawer fronts, which makes them water resistant. It’s the same Corian used on the kitchen counter, fabricated by ACF Surfaces. Shower walls and floor are clad in 12-by-36-inch Carrara marble tiles from Stone Tile International. The plumbing fixtures and faucets were chosen for their purity of form and are from Tapworks. (Opposite) A Spark linear gas fireplace from Woodbridge Fireplace anchors the living room. Carrara marble used on the floor of the nearby foyer continues onto the fireplace surround, fabricated by Marble and Granite Stonecraft. The walnut staircase, custom-made by Premium Stairs and Railings, features open risers to allow unimpeded views of the front garden. Its stair guard, fabricated by DI Welding, is stainless steel – appropriately neutral.*

Above the sink, Cheong and Fantauzzi forfeited upper cabinets and instead installed a window the full length of the wall to admit even more light, bathing the work surface below it in natural light.

Cheong says she thinks upper cabinets are over-rated. Most people, herself included, can’t reach what’s on those upper shelves, so the space is wasted. And upper cabinets scream “kitchen,” she says. In an open-concept design such as this one, the contemporary designer is after a clean, spare look.

Cheong has a knack for finding ingenious design solutions to the biggest headaches. For instance, in her ongoing quest to maximize the forest views, even from the bathroom, she shortened a wall and cantilevered the vanity out from it to broaden the view and open up the space by the window.

In another case, she installed large walnut platforms designed to look like boxes, which sit one on top of the other at the base of the stairs. This allowed her to avoid creating a standard landing. “I designed it to be more interesting

than the usual t-shape,” she says. “And it leaves the main run clean, while offering a place to sit.”

There’s a separate staircase, which connects the basement and the garage to the main floor of the house. It incorporates a large rectangular walnut block that houses closets accessible from three levels—two for hanging coats on the main level, another midway down the stairs for shoes and boots and a third in the basement for off-season clothing.

“It is really convenient and architecturally interesting,” Cheong says. ➤

