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ARCHITECTURE

SEMI-DETACHED TOTALLY COOL



Architects Katja and Adam Thom rejig a Little Italy home with a typically narrow downtown footprint on a real world budget
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The renovation of this Manning Avenue house included bespoke elements like rusty red shaker cabinets by Gibson Greenwood and a pop-out addition that cradles an informal dining table. STEVEN EVANS

Small house reno - big impact

A Little Italy kitchen reno and addition involved some give and take between architects and a budget-conscious homeowner



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This would be a classic case of “he said, she said” if it weren’t for the fact that everyone involved is so darn happy.

The “he” is architect Adam Thom; he says this renovation and addition to a Manning Avenue house in Toronto’s Little Italy was modest. “She” is Mary Bredin, homeowner, busy single mom and harried television executive, who says a great deal of money was spent.

Of course, both are correct based on individual perspective.

The buying and selling of architecture can be a battleground. What clients ask architects to do and the budget they allot are often at odds; on the other hand, architects may push for costly things because they want their clients to have the very best, while clients worry that family and friends will question why so much was spent on items most people pick up at the big box store.

“Don’t forget, architects can save money, too,” says Mr. Thom, firing the first salvo. “Considering that you’re doing an addition and considering that you’re redoing a kitchen, they can be very progressive in coming up with clever ways to give you a great space that doesn’t need to cost too much.”

And this is one great kitchen.

Bespoke all the way, it’s a feast of colour – from its rusty red shaker cabinets by Gibson Greenwood to a big floating panel of Josef Frank wallpaper – as well as a tiny temple of light via the new pop-out that cradles an informal dining table.

There’s also a new powder room behind the kitchen so Ms. Bredin’s 83-year-old father doesn’t have to climb stairs when he visits, a window-bench in the formal dining room, and a new, large coat closet at the front of the house.

And all of these have been squeezed into a typically narrow downtown footprint without making things look the least bit crowded.

That’s a feat, and it’s worth a budget that went north of \$150,000. But this wouldn’t have been possible, says Ms. Bredin, without the odd “kick in the shins” to Mr. Thom to remind him of her “real world budget.”

“We’re people that eat macaroni and cheese,” she says.

But let’s dispense with the military imagery for peacekeeper Katja Thom – Adam’s wife and business partner: “I think what Mary is hitting on here is a client-architect relationship that is not passive – it really takes two people to bring the budget down.” Costs often escalate, she adds, when every box on the client’s wish list gets ticked without healthy debate. Not here, says Ms. Thom, as Ms. Bredin was “very diligent about saying ‘This is where I’m comfortable.’”

Much of Ms. Bredin’s comfort level was informed by renovation work she’d done since purchasing in September, 2005.

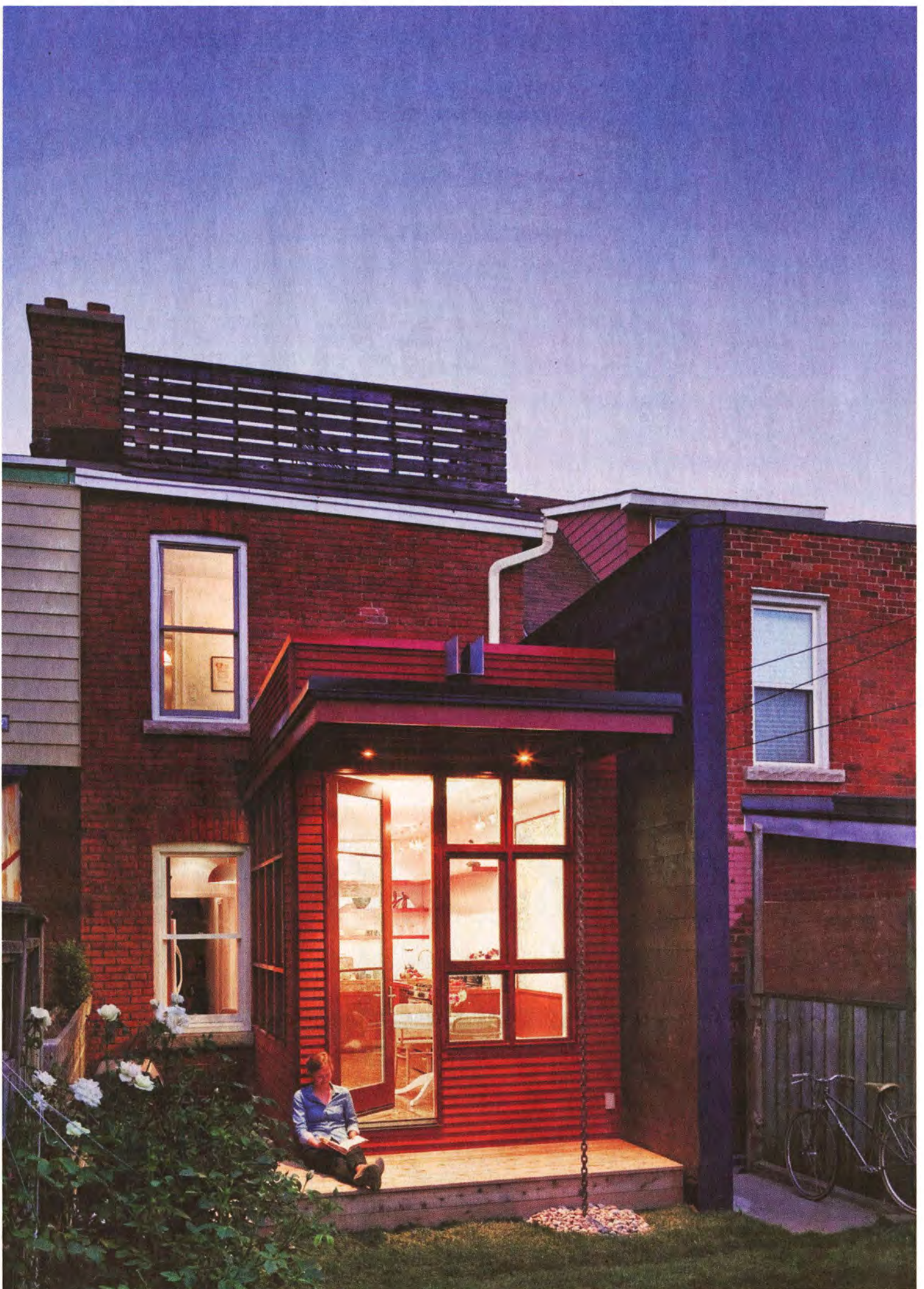
After a decade in London, and with a little gazumping money from selling a property there, her first priority was to whip the basement into an income-generator. While the Thoms’ firm, Agathom Co., didn’t project-manage or provide shop drawings, it did provide sketches and ideas.

A few years later, the Thoms stepped up their involvement to provide a master plan for the third floor, which was completed, and the second floor, which remains unrenovated. When the ground floor was under discussion in 2011, Mr. Thom told Ms. Bredin: “I’m not going to do an arm’s length version; I need to be involved fully.”

And so he was. But complicating matters was the fact that Agathom usually designs in the Modern style, and Ms. Bredin is “not into Modern.”

“– and I said ‘No troubles, we can do Not-Modern,’” says Mr. Thom, laughing.

And so it was. With Northern European-style open shelves to display colourful clutter, orange Caesarstone countertops, soft cork floors underfoot, a cubby-hole custom desk – “It used to be in kitchens you’d find a little nook for the phone,” says Mr. Thom, “and now it’s find a little nook for the laptop” – that lovely wallpaper and an addition



The rain chain (right) was added to ‘celebrate the water that licks off the roof in a more contemplative, playful way,’ says Adam Thom. STEVEN EVANS

with multiple mullions rather than the usual glass box, it feels like the perfect place for rainy-day musings.

Says Ms. Bredin: “I really wanted [traditional] windows and a warmth that would ... keep it consistent with the house.”

That’s not to say there weren’t minor skirmishes.

The Thoms fought hard to “celebrate” the intersection where “old meets new” with a skinny strip of glazing; it’s now something both parties boast about.

Similarly, a clerestory into the new powder room was questioned, but finally accepted. A small piece of the original exterior brick wall was permitted inside – Mr. Thom calls this “archeology” – to help define the addition, but a line was drawn in the sand at giving the same privilege to the massive “fin” wall outside. First proposed in brick, the Thoms wanted to bring the fin in to blur the boundary between inside and out, as all Modernists do.

Of course Ms. Bredin protested, feeling too many bricks would harsh her mellow: “To me, that’s when the coin dropped,” says Mr. Thom. “I understood.”

In a perfect world, that good architecture costs money would be understood, too. Understanding that economies of scale mean a tiny addition of 120 sq. ft. can be more expensive (per square foot) than a whole house gut-and-reno would be self-evident. And that some clients are okay with a \$70 faucet instead of a \$300 one should be a no-brainer, but it’s not.

Except, of course, to smart people like Ms. Bredin and the folks at Agathom.

