



## IT'S ALL IN THE DETAILS

The standard finishes left behind by the builder of a Toronto loft are obliterated in a wonderfully bespoke renovation by architect Wanda Ely, **Dave LeBlanc** writes ■ H6



Despite the towering height of his Tetris-block kitchen cabinets, the owner of this Toronto loft, Berj Bannayan, insists that only a few are inaccessible. PHOTOS BY SCOTT NORSWORTHY

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# The design power of teamwork

Toronto couple's loft gets a redo from an architect friend its owners say they couldn't have imagined



DAVE LeBLANC ARCHITOURIST

TORONTO

Pity poor architects forced to crank out suburban box stores and warehouses: Adjust the floor plan, add walls, doors, sprinklers, and stamp, stamp, stamp, out like doughnuts. Sure, they pay the bills, but like the doughnut-maker who's never allowed to shake a few rainbow sprinkles onto his or her creations, the repetition must surely cause a cartoon storm cloud to hover over their heads.

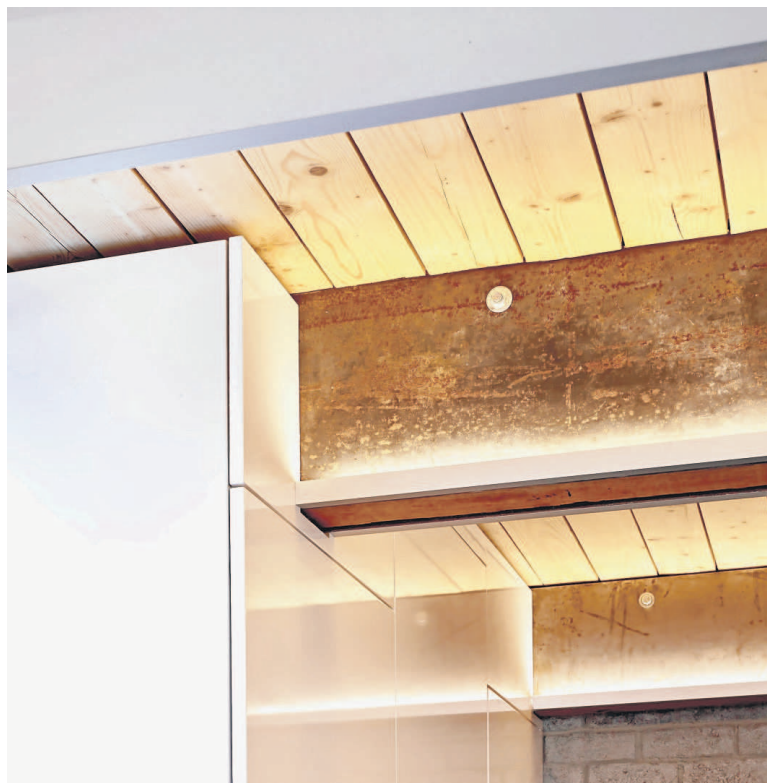
Toronto architect Wanda Ely, on the other hand, is rich in metaphorical sprinkles, because she tackles challenging projects for interesting clients. And, since there is nothing more challenging than reworking a small space filled with vintage quirks and crannies, Ms. Ely was happy when an old friend from the University of Waterloo, Berj Bannayan, looked her up a few years ago.

Mr. Bannayan had been living in his Bloorcourt Village loft for a number of years (first as a bachelor, then with his wife, Laura, an artist), but was getting increasingly frustrated since it was "not a very good use of space." Indeed, although there were 1,000 square feet to play with (700 on the main level and 300 above), there were two living rooms (one hardly used), a tiny galley kitchen, and only one small bathroom.

"It was designed by, I don't know, people who fell on their heads," quips Mr. Bannayan, a film visual-effects professional who is currently working on *Game of Thrones* and the new *X-Men* movie.

In 2013, the couple moved out so they could renovate. A friend did the design. Thinking "how hard can it be?" Mr. Bannayan took on the demolition himself, but owing to a number of factors, including a sick parent, the project was abandoned and "a lot of money wasted, a lot of effort, wasted," he remembers.

So, what to do? They liked the Liberty Village condo they'd purchased, so discussion of doing a "quick IKEA redo" of the Bloorcourt property was discussed. But the space's many, quirky attributes kept pulling them back: It's in a two-storey building, so no neighbours above or below; it's one of only 10 units in a former bakery built in the early 20th century; it's tucked into a low-rise, residential neighbourhood; it has a massive, private deck; and it's minutes to walk to Bloor Street shopping.



Berj and Laura Bannayan discussed nearly everything about the renovation to their Bloorcourt Village loft with architect Wanda Ely, including surface textures. That led to the mix of white and raw-metal kitchen cabinets, top; Douglas fir ceilings throughout, above left and below; and purple-grey exposed brick, above right and below. PHOTOS BY SCOTT NORSWORTHY



That's when Ms. Ely received a quick missive: "I think your e-mail was, 'I've got a dream project for you if you're up for it,' so we had lunch and caught up," she laughs, looking over at Mr. Bannayan as he tops up her glass with white wine.

The two decided that the only way to proceed was to start from scratch, removing all traces of the botched redo, plus the original renovation from felt factory (it's most recent incarnation) into condominium units in the early-1980s, which had been done with "builder standard" finishes. And before any sketches were drawn, Ms. Ely said: "Tell me about you guys, tell me how you

live, tell me what's important to you."

And a lot of things particular to the Bannayans were discussed, including Ms. Bannayan's love of baking and her double gas oven, bathroom lighting temperature, the Urban Cultivator (the size of a bar fridge, seedlings take root in a self-watering environment), a wall large enough for a beloved piece of art, or the series of folding doors that either open the master bedroom to the ground floor or form a pleasant wall while entertaining. Even items such as surface textures, door pull, and levels of gloss were discussed.

"There was a lot of minutiae in

this project that, I think, all of us quite enjoyed," the architect confirms.

Larger items of discussion involved the couple's need for a powder room in addition to the master bath, a wood-burning fireplace, and ample storage wherever it could be shoehorned in, whether via under stairs where bicycles can sleep, or custom millwork completely surrounding the bed — "I was thinking train car or airplane, that kind of cool, compact design," Ms. Ely offers — or as kitchen cabinets that climb, Tetris-like, all the way to the loft (Mr. Bannayan insists that only a few are inaccessible).

But that's not to say Ms. Ely

wasn't able to spread her design wings. She did, and the results are striking, even at the front door. Rather than revealing all secrets at once, the entry sequence has guests arriving in a low-ceilinged foyer with a view of a slat wall that offers a peek at the staircase. Turning to one's left, the kitchen island is spotted, along with the airy space above.

Walk in a little further and the eye will be drawn to the Tetris-cabinets, but not only for their height: While some are finished in white, others sport raw-metal surfaces with waterjet marks that resemble bookmatched wood (indeed, they had to be taken from one sheet). Backsplash tile is eye-catching grey geometric, which picks up on the new radiant-heated concrete floor and the purple-grey tinted exposed brick, formerly a standard Toronto orange-red.

Upstairs in the living room, visuals are softened by the Douglas fir ceiling, high-efficiency wood stove, and a television that tucks into cabinetry so it doesn't dominate during conversation. A few steps up, the glass wall opens to a deck-with-hot-tub so spacious and cottage-like, it's hard to believe it's near a subway line.

"I don't know that either of us would've known, just out of the blue, anything that's in here," Mr. Bannayan says, "because we wouldn't have known it was a thing; good lord, the metal-wrapped cabinets, which are some of my favourite [things] in here, I wouldn't have even imagined that we could do it. In my head, cabinets were wood."

"It came together in ways that I don't think we imagined when we started the process."

A pity more folks don't let architects sprinkle some sunshine into their lives.