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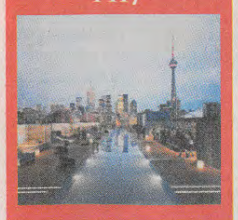

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Lighting and best tools for the garden.
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PH15

BOB GUNDU

Beautiful yet unobtrusive, the Bulthaup kitchen ensures the focus is on the garden in the couple's Annex home.

LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL

Sometimes scrapping the original plan is the best plan

By Lauren Ferranti-Ballem

No matter how hard you've struggled to get there, sometimes that (ostensibly) great idea needs nixing. The reason for doing so only makes sense once you end up with something more beautiful than the original — the Marcs (not their real name) experienced this with their kitchen reno.

It was the spring of 2007. Construction plans were drawn and the crew was poised to begin. But then they called everything off; the plans didn't reflect what they'd wanted, after all.

The couple's home is classic Toronto Annex: a big old Victorian, semi-detached, stacked with antiques, blocks from busy Bloor Street, yet buffered by a private garden. Inside, the main floor is long and wider than most, with a staircase meeting the front entrance, and, pre-reno, a dark hallway connecting the trio of living room, dining room, and a too-small kitchen.

While their frequent dinner parties showcased Ann Marc's "French-ish" dishes, they also underscored the kitchen's shortcomings. "Everyone would end up in there — it's hard to work with people underfoot," Ms. Marc says. "I always liked the idea of having cozy, comfy places to sit in the kitchen." So they set out to do just that.

The original design called for an extension off the back of the house; a room the kitchen could spill into, with ample seating, a fireplace, and a view of their beloved — but now substantially smaller — garden. "We had a contractor and an architect, and the plans went so far. We were losing the garden, but we were gaining space to enjoy it from inside," she says. With the extension settled, focus shifted to the kitchen, which they wanted done by Bulthaup, the German company (with a Toronto outpost on King Street East) known for its architectural approach.

But with one look at the reno drawings, Antje Bulthaup, granddaughter of the founder and an architect herself, drew an X through the plans. "I didn't understand why they wanted to essentially build a second living room that blocked the view and destroyed the garden," she says. "I'm not usually this outspoken, but I thought it would be a crime." Her critique rang true with Ms. Marc, who cried — partly from stress, partly from relief — at the realization. "Why were we doing this?" she asked, right before canning the extension plans.

After a few months of washing dishes in the upstairs bathtub, a room switcheroo (the living for the dining room), the loss of some interior walls and

LIGHT continued on PH10

Restrained design gets big results

LIGHT

Continued from PH1

the acquisition of exposed brick and a dainty powder room, the kitchen was complete. And it is gorgeous. Where a dim dining room once stood, a cozy seating area is now delineated with a warm Persian rug, the plushest plum-coloured sectional, an armchair, and a grand built-in bookcase. Just beyond this, bar seating at the Bulthaup island allows for an immediate, uninterrupted view of the serene sliver of garden through an anterior wall of sliding glass.

No extension, just wide open space full of air and light. There is a sense, even during this end to winter, that the kitchen is outside, or that the garden has come in. And it's no coincidence: using the new kitchen as inspiration, the backyard was re-landscaped with many of the same mix of materials to create seamlessness between the two spaces. "I love the simplicity of it," Ms. Marc says. "The way the light just washes through." It's the mix of materials and textures — glass, laminate, wood, concrete and aluminum — in a neutral palette that keeps the look subtle and easy. "The old kitchen was painted bright pink-orange and the dining room was red," she says. "Our friends were shocked we went so neutral, but we love the minimal look."

To one side of the island, the wall is banked by all-white counter and cabinetry: the sink is set into a reconstituted stone top, cabinets are laminate kaolin, while the backsplash is back-painted glass. On the other side stands a towering wall unit that hides all appliances and a fistful of brooms behind panels of dark aluminum. These cabinets can be a bright silvery-grey or nearly black as night, depending on the light.

In a Bulthaup kitchen, everything is hidden. Save for a cookbook stand holding a tome of South African recipes (from whence Ms. Marc hails) and a vase of flowers, surfaces here are slick, bare expanses, with extras tucked out of sight. The appliance garage is one such nifty accomplice to this end: Its aluminum door rolls up to reveal the toaster, coffee maker, bean grinder and a collection of teas. When the door slides down, power to the cove is cut, to comply with code. Under-sink recycling bins, pull-out drawers for spices, pantry supplies and pots and pans keep the kitchen streamlined and spare on the outside, supremely organized inside. Ms. Marc has never enjoyed cooking quite as much, she says.

"This is design that holds itself back," Ms. Bulthaup says. "It doesn't distract or compete with other elements. It's not just about plonking cabinets into a space — we have to remember that clients had a life before their new kitchen."

And while her teas are tucked away behind an aluminum door, Ms. Marc's life lives in colour in this ultra-modern, über-efficient kitchen — through the warm, exposed brick, the purple couch, the artwork and the library, and the organic, shushing grasses in the garden beyond.

As it turns out, plan B — the simplified reno, the pared-down kitchen — was the best, most beautiful answer.

National Post

BOB GUNDU

In a Bulthaup kitchen, almost everything is blessedly hidden.