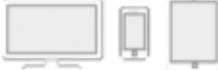


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Darcy Tobin and Donal Ward at their house renovated by architect Christine Lolley.

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## How to survive a 'fixer upper' home with a smile on your face

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What is a house? More than anything, it's a container for life.

And because of that, it takes a really concentrated vision to get it right, since we all live differently.

"Vision" is a word that gets used often when Darcy Tobin Farrell, her husband, Donal Ward-McCarthy, and architect Christine Lolley get together in the 1910 Bloordale home they renovated together, whether the topic is the interview process, "homework," room-by-room planning or the couple's annual "celebrate life and all things wonderful" brunch.

The young couple (he is 37, she is 30) had a vision from the start. In the final months of 2009, while living in a small condo, Ms. Farrell had purchased at the tender age of 21, they decided to find their first home. Proceeds from the condo sale, combined with funds Mr. Ward-McCarthy already had from selling his mother's place in Ireland (she died when he was younger), would give them a leg up, as would Mr. Ward-McCarthy's position as a sales representative at Right At Home Realty Inc.

While the home search was relatively easy – find a fixer-upper west of Yonge, south of St. Clair and near the subway – the real job was assembling a team that would understand their vision. That's why they conducted thorough interviews with architects and builders beforehand.

"I had one guy trash his wife in front of me," says Ms. Farrell, who still shakes her head at the memory. She also had an architect breeze through the space, proclaim it wasn't a very big job and then suggest they do it themselves. "We need to be smart, this is our home, this is our investment money," she counters. "It has to be right, it has to work for us, and we can't be stupid about it."

When they met architects Tom Knezic and Christine Lolley, who assigned them "homework," they knew they'd found the right people. Founders of Solares Architecture Inc., the husband-and-wife team always ask potential clients to describe a "perfect day" in their future home: "It's not talking about the architecture or 'I want a soaker tub' or whatever," explains Ms. Lolley. "It's defining who you are and what your top priorities are."

And while it may sound trite, the priority here was to celebrate life in an open, welcoming space where family and friends would immediately "kick off their shoes."

That's exactly what happened, too: "To see it all come together how we envisioned it was amazing," says Ms. Farrell. "The biggest moment that highlighted that was on New Year's Day when you came over ..."

"And there were just people everywhere," says Ms. Lolley, "and kids running around ..."

"... and there was food and there was music," adds Ms. Farrell.

"The homework was complete: A-plus," giggles Ms. Lolley.

When one considers Ms. Farrell, a nurse at the Hospital for Sick Children, had been diagnosed with breast cancer at age 26, and was recovering from a mastectomy when the house-hunt began, the vision is anything but trite. Consider, too, the two years of planning Ms. Farrell conducted while the couple lived in the Brock St. home as-is: a run-down rental property with the usual warren of small rooms, zero connection to the landscape, and so many leaks it cost a fortune to heat.

The extended time frame was necessary because they didn't want to run into budgeting surprises beyond what might be found once the plaster-and-lath walls came down, and because they wanted the best materials possible, such as solid walnut floors, since they'd decided that this, their first home, would also be their "forever home."

"There seems to be this shift," begins Ms. Lolley, who specializes in sustainable, green homes. "I think people are realizing a [previously] renovated house is not necessarily a better quality home." Rather than buy someone else's vision, which may have been done on the cheap, "young, dynamic couples" now see "value in investing in their real estate" and "take these broken-down homes and turn them into family homes, reclaiming the space."

Sometimes, they revel in the minutiae. During those two years, Ms. Farrell tallied up things they'd need for every room, hallway, and staircase, from the mundane, such as baseboards and switch plates, to decor items such as curtains or lamps, to big-ticket items, such construction costs, permits, and architect's fees. "So when it actually came to it," Ms. Farrell says, "I had it all ready to go."

Even the unplanned demolition of the old, unstable five-foot addition at the back (they added five more feet to the new one), to the discovery of charred beams and some dangerously weak joists that had been sawn through didn't spoil the mood. They chalk that up to good planning and the carefully assembled team: "It was very fun all along the way," says Ms. Farrell. "Our builder [Brad Pallister] kept saying 'You are easily the happiest person I've had do a renovation for' because we'd come in and we'd see a wall knocked down and say 'Yay!'"

Today, gathered at the big, butcher-block kitchen island with glasses of wine in hand, laughing at the story of how the vibrant "graffiti wall" was created (they have many friends who are artists), it's obvious

that happiness happens easily in this container for the good life.

## **RENOVATION COSTS AND RETURNS**

**House list price:** \$600,000

**Negotiated sale price:** \$420,000 (Mr. Ward-McCarthy negotiated a deal based on comparables and condition)

**Budget for renovation:** \$150,000

**Actual cost of renovation:** \$250,000; this includes the unplanned removal and rebuild of the rear addition, new walls, windows and insulation throughout, radiators, heat recovery ventilators, etc. to transform the home into an energy-efficient, "green" home.

*EnerGuide Rating before renovation was 42. Now, it's 73. The average EnerGuide Rating for a house of this type and age is 44 (the house now rates in the top 5 per cent for this group).*

*Air leakage before was 14.7 ACH@50Pa, now it's 5.49 ACH@50Pa, a 67 per cent reduction*

*Energy consumption before was 50,294 kWh/year. After, 23,126 kWh/year, a 54-per-cent reduction*

*By switching from electric to gas heating (high-efficiency boiler), cost was reduced by 90 per cent, going down from an average of \$6,159 a year (using Toronto Hydro's current time of use rates) to \$598 (using Enbridge's current rate).*

*Estimated greenhouse gas emissions went down by 23 tons per year (a 2012 automatic Honda Civic emits three tons per year)*

*Compiled with help from architect Christine Lolley, Solares Architecture Inc.*

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