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## A house that helps: Toronto semi blends accessibility and style

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One of the things that bugs my soon-to-be 82-year-old mother are people who talk to her in a slow and measured way, as if she were a child. While she might be a little slower on her feet, with eight decades of wisdom and experience under her belt, she can run intellectual circles around most.

And while I have no firsthand experience with this, I've known a few people in wheelchairs over the years, and, unfortunately, that extra visual layer makes normal interaction even more difficult.

Luckily, architecture can help: Walk into the redesigned 1911 house of Mick Griffin and Cathy Hunt and, save for a grab-bar or two, you'd never suspect that one of them has mobility issues. It's an open, airy, sophisticated reno by Solares Architecture, a firm that's usually associated with sustainability.

"That's the one thing that they really focused on," Ms. Hunt says. "We want to make this a beautiful design so that anybody would want to live here; it doesn't scream accessibility – and they totally pulled it off."

Enter into a generous, open foyer and the dining room spreads out to your left; reclaimed wooden brackets from a long-ago demolished church at Yonge Street and Belsize Drive add warmth and intimacy. A wide hallway passes what looks like a closet, then a gorgeous staircase with a wide landing punctuated by a big bay window. Past this, in the middle of the house, is the generous kitchen, followed by the living room. Beyond the sliding doors is a big deck over the long garage.

At first glance – and even second – one would never suspect the closet-like doors beside the stairs contain an elevator for Mr. Griffin, who was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 2006. Even harder to believe is that the rest of the design had to play second fiddle to this requirement. “It sort of became all about the elevator,” Mr. Griffin says, “because it’s ‘how do you put this rectangular box in this space?’”

Ripping out the original staircase, which ran lengthwise along the party wall of this narrow Roncesvalles-area semi (as is the case in many century homes) and relocating it to the middle of the home in a U-shaped configuration did the trick. Also, adds architect Christine Lolley of Solares, it made things more democratic: “What we really like about it is that if you’re going up the stairs or you’re going up the elevator, you land in the same place.”

Funnily enough, the elevator/stair combo was the “easy” part. With recent front landscaping and two sets of stairs to get to the front door, the design challenge, she says, was finding a way to get Mr. Griffin into the house he’d owned with his wife since 1986. Rather than rip up that landscaping to install lifts and ramps on the public face of the handsome brick house, Solares came up with the “insane” idea of adding a garage to the rear. Actually, this wasn’t so insane, as this was the only house on the block without a garage backing onto the alley; unlike other houses, however, with their detached garages, this would connect to the home to give Mr. Griffin an at-grade entry. “They went from no garage to the Garage Mahal,” Ms. Lolley says with a laugh.

To achieve this, the entire backyard was excavated (as was the original cramped basement). Now, Mr. Griffin travels past two houses, wheels in, then, after travelling the length of the garage, a motorized door welcomes him into a spacious, bright basement boasting nine-foot ceilings. There’s a huge mudroom, a big accessible bathroom, and then a man cave, which can double as an editing suite (Mr. Griffin is a partner in TV post house Rooster). “This level is all about Mick,” Ms. Lolley says.

With so much work going on, it was only logical that the rest of the home get a similar makeover, she says. “While we’re ripping up the house, let’s open up the spaces, let’s insulate, let’s put new windows, let’s modernize.” It was a challenge, she adds, that suited contractor Kurt Schmidt just fine since “he had the balls that were needed [as] this was a very complicated project.”

“That’s part of what makes it more interesting,” Mr. Schmidt says. “It’s not a box, it’s not as straightforward as new construction.”

In the second floor bathroom, for instance, the wide shower area would need a gentle slope for drainage, but raising the floor to accommodate this wouldn’t cut it, since thresholds and transition strips are a no-no when it comes to wheelchairs. Instead, Mr. Schmidt and his team at Spaces Construction and Renovation created a new subfloor between the century-old joists. More work, yes, but the seamless bathroom will be a boon when Ms. Hunt, an artist, faces her own mobility issues down the road.

Other things weren't so difficult to build, but have proven just as handy. In the kitchen, a low counter that Mr. Griffin wheels under to make coffee (he works from home a fair bit) with a second sink is also a great place to wash and prepare salads during dinner parties; a feature that wouldn't look out of place in any home.

And that's the thing: who wouldn't want wide hallways, pocket doors, big bathrooms and a variety of counter heights? Who wouldn't want to stay in their own home after a major life-change? Ms. Hunt and Mr. Griffin, like many couples who confront a similar diagnosis, immediately thought they'd have to move to a one-storey bungalow. But, even without an elevator, bungalows need full-on renovation work to work properly for those wheelchairs.

This home proves that with thoughtful architecture and a great builder, anything is possible.

"I never in my wildest dreams thought I'd ever live in a house like this," says Ms. Hunt, to which Mr. Griffin adds: "There's a whole level of relaxation now."