

HOME OF THE WEEK

### Renovation on a leash

A contractor's home in the Beaches shows artistry and restraint

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### Good looks sell

Strategic staging helps a Davisville home get multiple offers and a sale price over asking

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SECTION G

# Globe Real Estate

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The redesign worked within the basic structural package of volumes and voids created by original architect Harry B. Kohl in 1955. TOM ARBAN PHOTOGRAPHY

THE MARKET

## A spring to please no one

Buyers lack for choice, sellers are hounded by bargain hunters. An unhappy season unfolds

CAROLYN IRELAND

For anyone involved in Toronto's real estate market, this spring seems particularly vexing. "It's so frustrating," is a refrain heard repeatedly - from sellers, prospective buyers and real estate agents - if for different reasons.

I heard it this week from one house hunter who is searching for a typical, unpretentious bungalow in Long Branch, but can seldom find an open house - even as the spring market is supposed to be gearing up. Many sellers of desirable condominiums can't get their asking price - even though buyers are willing to make an offer within 24 hours of the listing arriving on the market.

One very pristine-looking, two-bedroom condo unit listed on realtor.ca has an asking price of \$465,000. The description says offer presentations will be at 7 p.m. on Oct. 16. Imagine how exasperated that seller must feel.

And agents say they are spending lots of time ushering around clients. But the properties they all flock to are the rarest of finds.

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RENOVATION

# RISEN, NOT RAZED

An architect couple buy a Forest Hill home sold as a tear-down, but opt instead to revitalize PAGE 2

TRIO AT ATRIA

GRAND OPENING

TRIDEL BUILT FOR LIFE

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The plain, elegant, black and white scheme of the living and dining room areas provide just the right dramatic backdrop for abstract paintings and classic modernist furnishings. PHOTOS BY TOM ARBAN

## Retooled for a new generation

Modernist house in Forest Hill gets freshening-up and renewal of its architectural promise



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Wandering through the parts of Forest Hill built out in the 1940s and 1950s, a tourist from Mars would never guess that this affluent Toronto neighbourhood came together during the mid-century high noon of popular modernist housing.

Lining the streets are stiffly genteel Georgian family homes and poker-faced Tudors, French Provincial mini-chateaux and many residences lamely pastiched from some defunct historical manner or other.

But even in a district whose builders (and their clients) were so firmly wedded to revival styles, one occasionally finds a house designed with 20th-century values in mind. Last week, I visited a two-storey, four-bedroom Forest Hill place of this kind. It's a 1955 work by Harry B. Kohl, a modernist architect and man about town who flourished in Toronto between 1949 and 1973, the year of his death.

Unlike many other creators of modern residences — time has not been kind to their handiwork — Mr. Kohl can rest easy in his grave, since the Forest Hill house he made has fallen into the hands of people who respect what he did and the design inspirations of his era.

The involvement of these people — architects Christopher Tweel and Brenda Webster —



began in 2005, when the couple discovered that the house had been put on the market as a tear-down.

Most house-hunters able to buy a property in Forest Hill would have done exactly that: bought the building and demolished it. The appliances and out-fittings had never been

renovated or even updated. The parquet floor of the living and dining areas was bleached and stained. The typically modern expanses of glass were large, but each opening was a busy grid of small panes and transoms.

The wall-coverings were tired and faded, and the exterior had been clad in homely

metal siding.

However, though it had quietly slid into obsolescence, the house possessed (as architects say, probably too often, about dilapidated buildings they like) "good bones."

Hot water pumped through copper tubing in the concrete foundation slab provided warmth. The windows and doors, for the most part, were in the right places, and they were attractively spacious. What the house needed, Mr. Tweel and Ms. Webster realized, was not a complete overhaul, but rather a thorough freshening-up, and a renewal of its architectural promise to be an optimistic, cheerful home for modern people. So it was that the couple decided they and the house were a match, bought it, moved themselves and their twin sons into it and went to work.

Eight years on, their labour is finished — if the task of reviving an old house is ever really done. The little garden, which overlooks the Kay Gardner Beltline Trail, has been brought back to what it was when the distinguished Toronto landscape architect Lois Lister laid it out some 60 years ago. The street-side façade, a simple, unshowy composition of brown brick, again faces the city as Harry Kohl intended it to.

But, in general, especially inside, the result is not an antiquarian restoration to the age of Liberace. The parquet flooring, for example, is gone. In its stead, Mr. Tweel and Ms. Webster have laid down black slate, and they have fashioned the fireplace from the same material. Ponderous planters in the foyer and living room, fixtures of inte-

rior decoration that were all the rage in the 1950s and 1960s, have been removed. The crowded, grid-like glazing of the opening between the living room and the rear garden has been replaced by large sheets of glass that can be rolled aside in good weather.

Mr. Kohl's basic structural package of volumes and voids, in other words, was good to begin with and it has been retained. In fact, it's been improved by the changes the present owners have made. The plain, elegant black and white scheme of the living and dining room areas, for example, provides just the right dramatic backdrop for the couple's abstract paintings and the classic modernist furnishings they have collected.

Among the latter items are a steel and glass dining table, based on the famous 1928 original by Le Corbusier, dining-room chairs and cutlery by Arne Jacobsen and a handsome sideboard by post-war Danish master Ib Kofod-Larsen. The sleek, stylish Cold-War period attitude established by such pieces is carried into the living room by the sofa set, crafted in the studio of Klaus Nienkämper, the well-known Toronto manufacturer and importer of modern furniture.

I don't want to leave the impression that Mr. Kohl's house is a modernist masterpiece. It's not. But it is a sound example of post-war vernacular modernism that deserved to be saved. It has indeed been saved, and enhanced, by two thoughtful architects who fortunately knew "good bones" when they saw them.

it's not where you're at.  
it's where you are.

