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ROOM TO GROW

Brilliant renovations take three old homes to new heights



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INSIDE the city's best design sources p.79

LEFT The staircase (built by LaFabrika) spans three storeys and features open white oak treads on concealed brackets. Neue Floors' white oak planks run throughout. **CENTRE** Red Forbo Marmoleum flooring is used in high-traffic areas, like the entry. The custom Douglas fir bench was built by Derek Nicholson. Windows and doors by Marvin. **RIGHT** A rectangular opening above the custom kitchen (by BL Woodworking & Design) allows light to pour through the house via the open risers of the stairs. Pendants from Progress Lighting.



THE MAGIC TOUCH

How architect Brian O'Brian put a beguiling twist on a minimalist Scandi-styled reno

BY SIMON LEWSEN

PHOTOS BY SCOTT NORSWORTHY AND ARASH MOALLEMI



photo of kitchen by ARASH MOALLEMI





but people today crave airiness, volume and light. So architects must somehow find ways to open these spaces up. None of the obvious solutions work. You can't add width to a narrow property. Nor can you put windows on a party wall.

Brian O'Brian, who runs the firm Works Office of Brian O'Brian Architect, was recently hired to renovate a century-old Leslieville semi – two floors and three bedrooms – for a family of five. The couple bought the home back in 2007, before prices went skyward. They had no desire to sell, but they wanted better-quality space and an additional bedroom.

At first blush, O'Brian's redesign resembles your typical minimalist Scandi-inspired reno, with white walls and white oak floors and finishes. On closer inspection, though, you'll notice unconventional features and optical illusions, which give the interiors a sense of expansiveness they wouldn't otherwise have.

The architect briefly considered elongating the house, but decided against it. "The extra length between the front and back windows would only darken the space," he explains. Instead, he kept the original 190-square-metre footprint and built upward, adding a stucco box with aluminum flashing behind the tiny third-floor attic dormer, where the master suite now resides. He also added a skylight above the open-tread stairwell, which snakes as it climbs throughout the house in three directions.

The second level, which includes three children's bedrooms, is the busiest and most complex. The narrow hallway could've easily felt claustrophobic were it not for the



LEFT On the second floor, home to three bedrooms and the laundry, O'Brian inserted laminated float glass interior windows to circulate light in the core of the home.

CENTRE/RIGHT Another look at the stairs that appear to float between the second and third storeys. A skylight at the top sends sunshine down to the first floor.



TOP A clerestory between the new roof and the original third-storey dormer helps illuminate the master ensuite, while on either side of the soaker (from Taps), inset drawers provide storage. **BOTTOM** A view from the back shows how the second-storey addition cantilevers over the deck and wraps the house to the south. Up top is a cedar pergola-covered green roof. **RIGHT** The kitchen millwork extends a long the south wall and into the dining area. The table and chairs are Craigslist scores; the wall hanging is a framed 1970s textile.



floor-to-ceiling glass at the back, which makes the passage feel as if it extends into infinity. The bedroom at the back cantilevers above the yard, snatching four square metres of extra space from the sky. And the middle bedroom hangs slightly over the alley on the south side of the property, creating just enough room for a vertical west-facing window. These deft workarounds give the home a unique ambience. It feels cozy, roomy and a little bit trippy, too.

As an architect, O'Brian argues, it's his job to find clever responses to real constraints. "We spend 90 per cent of our lives in buildings," he says. "The idea that we would inhabit a space that isn't deliberately interesting or beautiful just seems like a waste." It's not about what you have. What matters is how you use it. WORKSOFFICE.COM

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