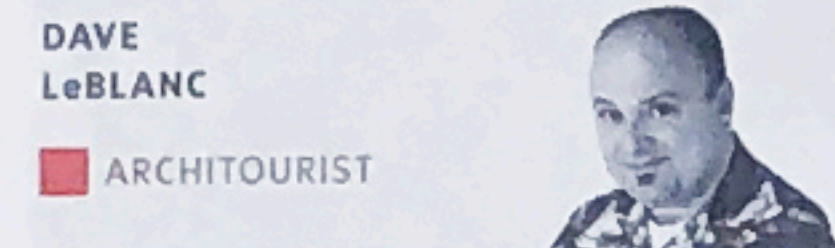


Beauty on a budget

A skillful, thoughtful renovation completely changes the character of one small home



DAVE LeBLANC ARCHITECTURIST

It's not like it's a specialty; one does not need to be the equivalent of a pediatric surgeon, but for architecture. No, if one understands spatial relationships, light penetration and how to use materials to improve both, a good architect can conjure up the same magic in a Rosedale mansion or East York bungalow.

"It doesn't really matter the size of the building," agrees Brian O'Brian, who was born in Montana and is a very good architect indeed. "I'm always looking for these points where you can cut the house, where there are sectional conditions ... to draw in little bits of light, particularly when you can get them to go from roof to first floor. And it doesn't have to cost enormous amounts of money to make holes."

The holes Mr. O'Brian made for Joe and Keira Park, for instance, are quite tasteful. Allowing old, gnarly rafters to travel across the ones where light rains down into the formerly dark middle of their cute-as-a-button East York detached makes for a nice contrast with the smooth, creamy-white drywall, and the enormous hole he made on their rear wall has now been plugged up by a cantilevered addition that houses two similarly cute, small bedrooms for the couple's two young children.

But more on all of that in a minute. The first thing Mr. O'Brian designed for the Parks was even smaller: a backyard scooter shed. It was at the Parks' 2010 housewarming party that Mr. O'Brian, new to Canada at that point, was allowing his car to be bent by Mr. Park on how tough it was to house his vintage Vespas (it should be noted here that Mr. O'Brian and his Canadian wife had met the Parks when they took over their Leslieville rental).

"I remember the discussion very well because I was lamenting that everything available at Home Depot just didn't cut it," says Mr. Park, smiling as he looks over at Mr. O'Brian. "And then you got your architect's vision about it."

And that vision was to design a wide shed with a drop-down front wall that Mr. Park could build himself. The wall-on-a-winch would, with a few cranks, become a work-surface where Mr. Park could restore and tinker with his classic Italian beauties. Not only was this little shed Mr. O'Brian's first commission in Canada, it made the pages of Canadian Architect magazine for its inventiveness.

Anyhow, with a solid relationship now established, when the Park family expanded to four a few years after that, they called the Works Office of Brian O'Brian to ask that age-old question: "Do we need to move, or is there a way to wrestle space out of this old place?"

Many friendly chats ensued. Listings in their price range looked like they'd need a renovation. So, they were between a rock and a hard place. If they did renovate, they'd not want to spend more than \$200,000. Was that realistic?

"We had no idea what we should expect - we'd never had a reno [done] before," Ms. Park says.

With a clever plan that avoided excessive foundation work, a good engineer (Kieffer Structural Engineering) and a local, family-run contractor (Tarazhi's Restoration), and some economical choices with regards to finishes, Mr. O'Brian assured them it could be done. There might even be room for a little pizzazz, too.

Two years later, and with a whole lot of time spent housebound owing to the pandemic, it's clear all parties are overjoyed with the results.

Whereas before, one would climb the stairs to be confronted by three doors in semi-darkness - their daughter's tiny room hovered over the stairwell - one is now deposited into a light-filled transition space where plants thrive and little dry-wall slots allow light to cascade down.

Their daughter's former bedroom is now an open and airy, cedar-clad, reading nook (it was here that virtual school was held, Ms. Park notes).

Past the now-renovated bathroom, a little hallway leads to two ship's-cabin-like bedrooms, equal in size, where floor-to-ceiling windows reflect light onto warm wood panelling that mimics the size of each window-wall.

Downstairs, although little has changed to the front rooms - they received new white-oak flooring, paint and sexy black door hardware - the staircase was re-worked with new treads and a wall rather than the "visual activity" of handrails and pickets, and the kitchen got a complete overhaul using IKEA cabinetry.

Viewing the new addition from the backyard, one is struck by how much visual interest a cantilever can create (and sheltered private space), and how a few simple design moves can transform what - in an amateur's hands - would have been a plain wall into something with depth, shadow and complexity.

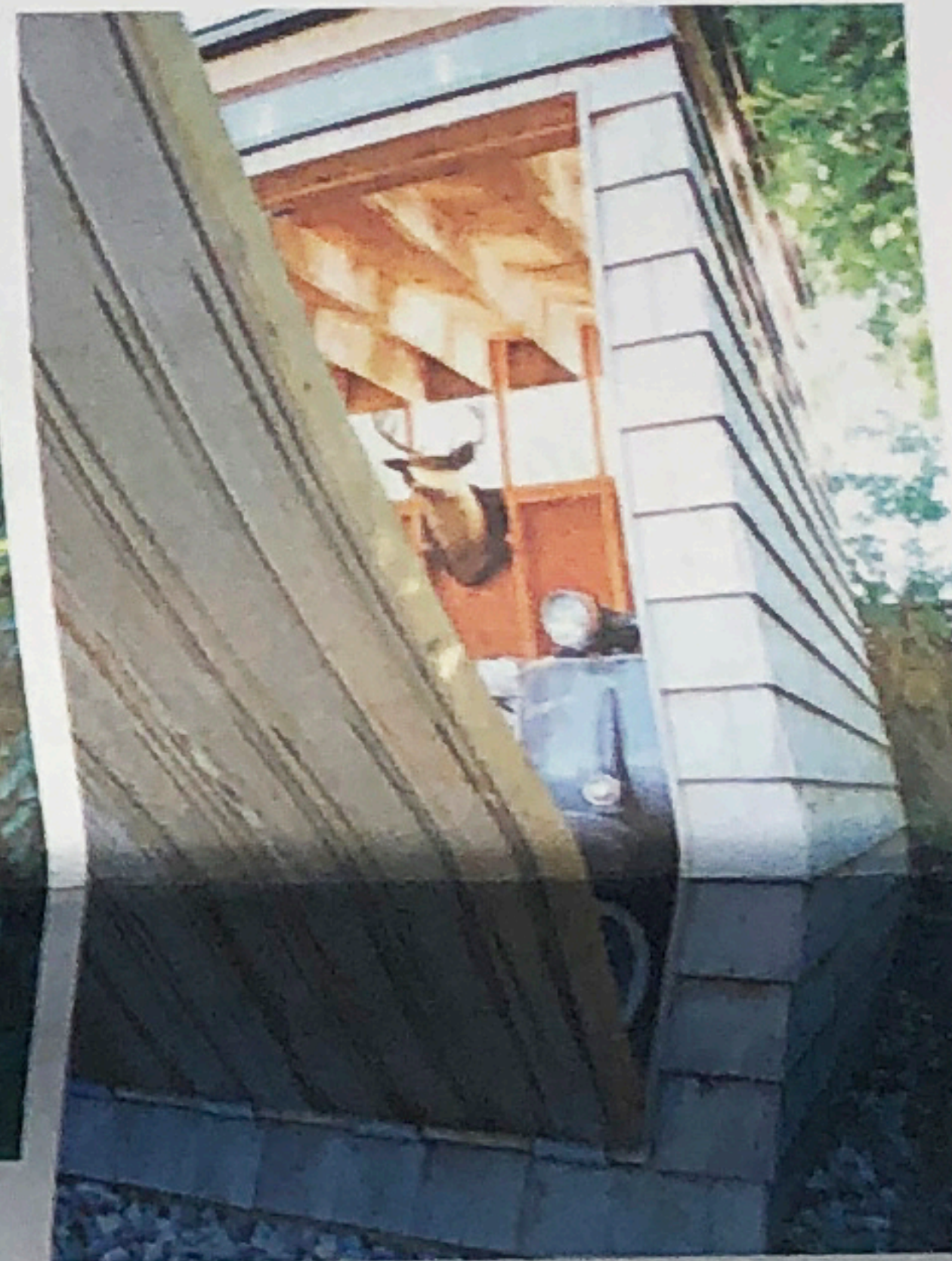
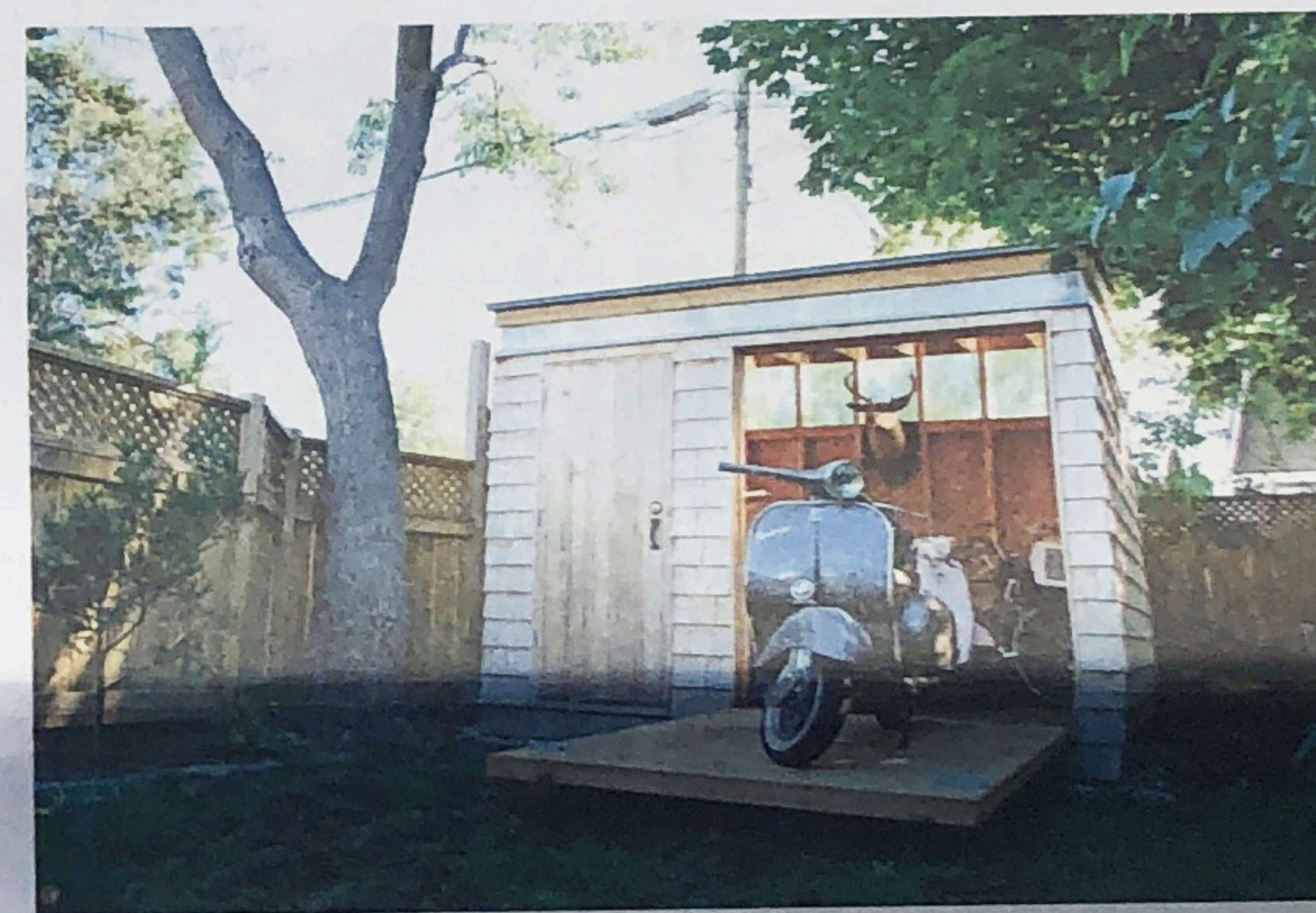
"You take the single volume and then read other volumes within that, or shapes within that," Mr. O'Brian explains. "So things seem to pop in and out."

Over all, it's a skillful, thoughtful renovation that has completely changed the character of one small East York home. And, since it came in under budget, it's something more folks should consider ... especially if they want more architectural beauty in their life, says Mr. O'Brian.

"I really was happy to do this," he says. "I don't really care so much about the budget or the scale; it's really just about, are the people interested in doing something? If not, then it's not worth the time that goes into it. But as soon as they're interested in rethinking how the space might work, how light works primarily, then I think it gets far more beautiful."



To meet the needs of their growing family, Joe and Keira Park hired architect Brian O'Brian, who created a second-floor addition at the rear of the house. PHOTOS BY SCOTT NORSEWORTHY



Mr. O'Brian had previously designed a backyard scooter shed for the Parks that sported a drop-down front wall. The innovative design was featured in Canadian Architect. BRIAN O'BRIAN (SCOOTER SHED); SCOTT NORSEWORTHY (HOUSE)

