LOFTY AMBITIONS

A renovation that modernizes a house changes and grows as homeowners see the possibilities

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WARM, COZY, CHARMING. That's how one of the homeowners describes this house before the renovation, and what's not to like about that? Well, how about the closed-in and small rooms, the narrow winding stairway, the limited light, the isolated kitchen, and an overall feeling of disconnection among the various parts of the house?

Despite its drawbacks, the place beckoned when Georgia Dahle and Brent Cuthbertson saw it. It's situated in Sunset Garden Estates, nestled into a treed slope at the end of a cul-de-sac. "It's like a tree house," says Georgia. "That was one of the obvious attractions when we considered purchasing it: its unique lot in the city, and the way that it was designed in both being quite private but also being quite convenient to all of the amenities in North Vancouver."

The couple decided to renovate the place before moving in. The initial plan was to renovate the kitchen and add a master suite. But "as we started working with our architect and our contractor, it became very clear that the project was going to increase dramatically," Georgia says.

Adds Brent, "If we were going to do that much and really modernize the house but not touch the remaining half, it made no sense. We went from there to the decision to do a complete gut and reno of the whole house to make sure that it all harmonized…That came to be when we started looking at all the windows to redo: do you to replace 70 or 80 per cent of them and leave a few in the bottom level we didn't need to replace? It was a case of 'Let's do it once and do it right,' and we made the decision to go much bigger in the scope of the work than we had originally anticipated."

Georgia, who likes to cook, appreciates how the open concept enables everyone to stay involved. "I feel a sense of energy and communication," she says. "When we have guests over and are entertaining, it feels like there's a sense of community."

But contractor Barrett Group Custom Builders could not start work on the house until a geotechnical survey of the grounds had been done. "There were severe structural issues," says Joel Barrett, president of the company. "We had to support the house and the bank, which were both failing." The job involved stabilizing the bank with a shotcrete system that used anchors some 20 feet longer than usual, and helical piles to support the house, which had begun to settle and was out of plumb. "The main floor was out of level four inches in one corner," says Barrett.

Once the ground was stabilized and the foundation levelled, building began. Because of the lot characteristics and zoning regulations, architect Ed Burwick produced a plan for a 2,800-square-foot home that expanded mostly up, not out. It called for an open-concept main floor and a dramatic staircase joining the three floors. The lower floor is below grade at the front but on grade at the back, with a walkout to a deck. The upper floor includes a new master suite, joined by a bridge to the loft on the opposite side of the soaring space over the kitchen-living-dining area. ☞

(Opposite) With the kitchen ceiling at a cozy height, the loft stops five feet short of the back wall, over the living-dining area. The wooden front door was painted at an automotive body shop for a high-gloss finish.

The house is surrounded by trees but is not dark, thanks to abundant windows and skylights. The pale floorboards are seven-inch engineered oak.

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Although these changes were dramatic in opening up the previously divided main floor, the biggest feat of interior engineering was perhaps the loft over what is now the kitchen and part of the living area. It's completely open on two of its four sides. Three corners abut walls; the fourth "floats" free above the space below, ingeniously hanging by an unobtrusive steel post from its free corner up to an I-beam in the ceiling. This floating aspect is a large part of how open and airy the place seems.

Berwick, Barrett, interior designer Denise Ashmore of Project 22 Design, and the homeowners were in frequent communication throughout the job, as decisions were made and amended to accommodate the increasing scope of the project. Because of the end of the lease where they had been living, Georgia, Brent and family moved in before the house was completely finished – a somewhat daunting situation (only one bathroom!) but offering its own advantages. Because of their collaboration with the architect and builder, the couple was able to tweak small aspects of the design and to decide on various finishings as they were needed. "We kind of experienced the kitchen as they were building it," Georgia says.

"We'd be making almost every day the decisions needed," Brent says. ☞

For example, "The tall skinny window in our master bedroom wasn't in the original plans. Standing at the other side of the space, we wanted the eye to [move] through the house and never get stopped at a hard surface…go right through the side and back into the forest again….

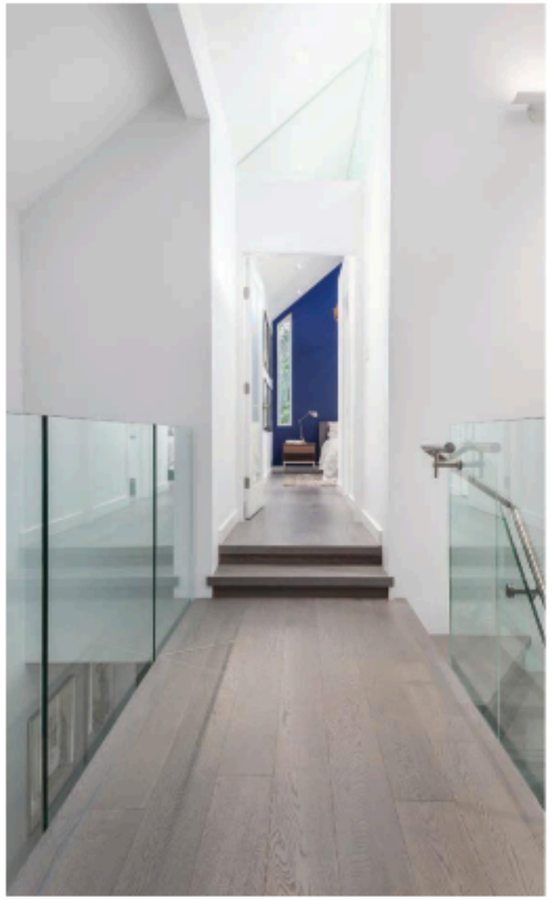
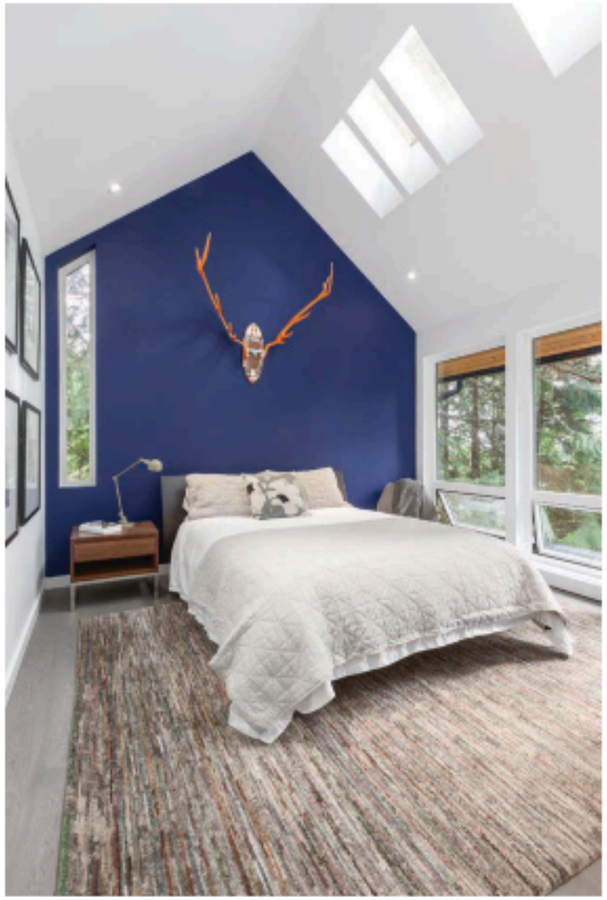
There's less of that 'Oh, I wish we had done that' at the end."

This approach has its drawbacks, but it can also produce exactly what the homeowners want. "As we got further and further into it, the owners were under the mindset 'We've gone this far, why not just do this, this, and this,'" Barrett says. "Some projects, we have more of a straightforward scope of work. This one was constantly changing as we were there, so that was trickier to handle than most of them. A lot of that is to do with the renovation aspect but a lot is to do with added wishes and wants from the clients. We never say no to anyone; we are the yes guys. It's just a matter of doing it in such a way where everyone's educated on the costs and the time implications of things. It creates a gorgeous house when all is said and done."

Georgia and Brent now have the modern open family home that they wanted. Georgia says that she loves "how we actually use the house. Our former house was the same square footage but it felt like we weren't using its space. It felt like a lot of the house was empty.

Here, the space feels like it's being fully utilized, and we're part of the house as opposed to kind of just visiting within it."

Brent loves "the space itself, how all the rooflines come together, when you go in the grand entrance and you look up and it's probably 35 feet to the top. We've got this unique skylight where all the rooflines came together and create a natural triangle. Your eye is constantly looking around. It's very interesting, and I haven't grown tired yet of just sitting back and having a coffee and looking at how interesting and open it feels."

The bridge from the loft leads to the master bedroom in the new part of the house. (Opposite) The slim steel post that supports the "floating" corner of the loft disappears into a cased I-beam.

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