

In the front hall, limestone flooring was installed for practicality. It contrasts the dark-stained pine floors that define the rest of the house. The bookcase, which doubles as a place to drop a purse or keys, is actually an Art Deco bar. Light fixture (reflected in mirror), Roberto Navarro Gallery; bookcase, 507 Antiques; chair upholstery fabric, Primavera Interior Furnishings; mirror, Casey Design Group.

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Passion Play

INSTILLING A GRAND BUT TIRED OLD HOME WITH SOUL AND PERSONALITY BECOMES A COUPLE'S SPIRITED MISSION.

*Text by Michelle Wamen
Photography by Ted Yawood*

“To us, our house... had a heart and soul. It was of us, and we were in its confidence and lived in its grace and in the peace of its benediction”
— Mark Twain

This quote is fastened, among a collection of snapshots and postcards, to the kitchen wall in Theresa Casey and Robert Gray's 1930s Toronto home. Its relevance is unmistakable the moment you pass through the heavy front door, fall into the home's embrace and begin exploring. And explore is exactly what you do. Not because, at 2,500 square feet, the house is sprawling, but because it is designed and filled with such care and detail that everything, from light fixtures to hardware to closet doors, presents an opportunity to learn and delight in unexpected pleasures. It's as though every object, every piece of furniture, every fabric has a story to tell.

The story of how Theresa, a designer and artist,

Portrait by Brendan Meadows/Hair and makeup by Alex Borovoy, Plutino Group



Artist and designer Theresa Casey in her dining room, where one of her paintings is on display.



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as all its contents, so that they could start anew. Before wielding the sledgehammer, however, the couple “camped out” in the new house for almost a year, getting to know its every nuance, from how the light fell to the flow (or lack thereof) of the rooms, all the while developing insight into how they would function in the space. It was a year of planning, experimentation and more planning as the vision took shape.

“We were both really interested in the details, so it wasn’t easy,” admits Theresa. But, as is obvious from the well-placed passion the couple exude when speaking of their efforts, they revelled in the process (even if it meant living with limited furniture). The reinvention of the house was very much a collaborative effort, with Robert, who has a background in architecture and designs books, obsessing over sightlines and maximizing space. “I enjoy trying to fit things in — it’s like a puzzle for me,” he says.

Save for the placement of a handful of windows and the front door, nothing stayed the same. On

RIGHT: In the second-floor landing, a clear window replaced glass brick in order to showcase a neighbouring apple tree and allow light to infuse the space. The landing was opened up and treated like a room unto itself, adorned with art, vibrant silk curtains and elegant furnishings. Large painting by Theresa Casey; small painting by Sophie Jodoin. **BELOW:** The dining room’s navy velvet banquette was inspired by one in a Parisian café and is perfect for hosting dinner parties or lounging with the Sunday paper. Built-ins provide ample storage and decorative brass-grilled doors hide radiators and the trappings of modern technology, namely unsightly wires and cables. Painting (left) by Theresa Casey; fabric above banquette, Bilbrough & Co.; decanter, Cynthia Findlay Antiques.



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ABOVE: Built-ins house the couple’s vast collection of books, which contribute to the living room’s intimate ambience. Every surface, from windowsills to coffee table, provides an opportunity to display treasures. Tassels on the silk roman blinds add another layer of interest. Contractor, Yoshida Works; sofa fabric, Télio. **LEFT:** Art is everywhere and in everything. Here, a collection of vintage mirrors creates a focal point in the narrow staircase and plays with reflections of the overhead light. Its spherical shade, made of Lucite, casts wild shadows on the walls.

and Robert, a graphic designer, revived this house begins on a snowy February night nearly four years ago. “I said, ‘That’s our house’ — I knew it before I even walked in,” Theresa recalls of the moment she saw the perfect brick rectangle of a building, nestled on a quiet midtown street. It’s a good thing the ivy-covered exterior was so charming, because inside it turned out to be, in their eyes, in need of a complete gut job. Overbearing archways and an awkward layout with a warren of tiny rooms hardly fit the couple’s vision of a home balancing functionality and aesthetics. However, they saw potential. “It was an opportunity to create a different style of home,” says Theresa. “We wanted it to reflect our lives and be really user-friendly for two people.” In a refreshing twist, they weren’t thinking resale value, they were asking: how can we make this space our own? So inspired were they at the thought of delving into the house’s Art Deco roots, they immediately sold their Victorian in the city’s Queen West neighbourhood, as well

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The upstairs lounge is a decadent refuge and does double duty as a guest room with the help of a unique daybed, which has storage for bedding. The pillows and curtains made of an array of new and vintage fabrics add drama and complement the rich red walls. The radiator was painted red for a seamless look. Toss pillows, drapery, Casey Design Group.

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LEFT: The black and white collection — a mixture of beloved family portraits, vintage photographs and antique prints and etchings — is striking against the lounge's deep red walls. A fun vintage globe, a gift, reflects the homeowners' love of travel. Each room in the house is wired for sound, with speakers hidden in the walls. **OPPOSITE, TOP LEFT:** Calling on her talent for crafting art from found objects, Theresa turned a sheet of buttons, a collection of marble pieces (including an old doll's leg) and a painting by Montreal artist Sophie Jodoin into an intriguing vignette.

the main floor, the central wall came down, and a support beam went up, opening the suffocating living and dining rooms into a free-flowing square with french doors overlooking a cosy urban garden. Rich colour and ambient lighting foster a nurturing space, perfect for gathering family and friends during the holiday season.

Windows were narrowed and elongated to create more elegant lines that better suited the home's architecture, and built-in shelving was erected almost to the full height of the room.

While the ceilings are nine feet, they feel much higher, and the rooms more spacious, because door frames and the tops of features, including the fireplace and bookshelves, were designed to hover close to, but not quite touch, the ceiling. A pocket door that leads to the kitchen keeps things flowing.

True to Robert's attention to sightlines, the kitchen was moved from the northeast to the southeast corner of the main floor, so that, when one is standing at the garden doors in the dining-living area, there's a clear view through the

kitchen and out its window into the front garden. As for the kitchen itself, the narrow galley is a study in efficient design. "There's a lot of functionality compacted into a tight space," says Robert, adding that the streamlined effort works far better than their old kitchen, which was four times the size.

Throughout the home, architectural elements and interior design take their cue from the Art Deco era, when form and function were celebrated equally. "I'm really into the details of that period," says Theresa, who scoured shops both here and abroad for authentic pieces, from furnishings to cabinetry hardware. "We're not people who like to compromise; that's probably why there are so many satisfying details," she says.

Some of their greatest finds, however, aren't from out-of-the-way boutiques, but unexpected places like the muddy field near Venice they discovered on a trip to Italy. This "lighting graveyard," as they call it, was peppered with renovation castoffs and period pieces so unbelievable they found themselves literally digging

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Dramatic floor-to-ceiling vintage drapery, rather than doors, fronts the large closet off the upstairs hallway. An antique cabinet is topped with an eclectic mix: a turn-of-the-century brass lamp, childhood photos in ivory frames and a framed cover of a Cuban exhibition catalogue by French artist Louise Bourgeois. The wall sconce is one of a pair found during a trip to Venice. Cabinet, 507 Antiques; sconce, Casey Design Group.

ABOVE: Sumptuous elements — textured velvet wallpaper, a butterscotch silk headboard, fringed curtains and a Chinese silk brocade spread — transform the intimate bedroom into an embracing haven. The bowed legs of the mirror-topped bedside table provide visual breathing space. Table, 507 Antiques.

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