

THE ARCHITOURIST

Respectful renovation brightens a 1938 home



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Toronto home of Leo and Marlene Jaegerman.

RILEY SNELLING PHOTOGRAPHY

In a city as development-happy as Toronto, it's often instructive – or at the very least entertaining – to imagine what some of the city's most prominent architects of a hundred years ago would think of what remains of their work.

Murray Brown (1884-1958), a Scotsman who arrived in the booming city in 1914, would see his career flourish in the 1920s and 30s when he began moving away from the beaux-arts style in favour of art deco. At Gerrard Street East and Woodbine Avenue or Spadina Avenue and Dundas Street West he'd easily pick out his stately, red brick Bank of Nova Scotia buildings relatively unchanged; so too at 103 Church St., where his wonderful, award-winning, five-storey art deco building for J. Frank Raw Ltd., manufacturer of drafting and surveying instruments, still stands proudly.

Things would get strange for Mr. Brown if he ventured out to 70 High Park Ave., where his Third Church of Christ Scientist has been reduced to a façade entombed behind thick pillars, or to Postal Station K at 2388 Yonge St. – the one with King Edward VIII's royal cipher – which now fronts a condo tower but, thankfully, can still be read as a complete building. He could easily calm himself with a trip to the Regent Theatre (Mr. Brown did a number of movie theatres) at 551 Mount Pleasant Rd. – its original name, "Belsize," still sits under the pediment – or to 3500 Lake Shore Blvd. W. to his Long Branch Public Library (with partner A.G. Elton).

But what about his private houses? And not the ones he built for others, but the two he built for himself? His first, built in 1927 at 224 Shel Drake Blvd., met the wrecker's ball around 2008, but his second, larger 1938 house, further north in the Teddington Park neighbourhood, remains.

Over the decades, it has changed considerably from its stripped down art deco form. A gabled, second floor addition has been added over the garage; an unnecessary roof 'nub' sits between the first and second floors; shutters have been added to the windows; and, perhaps most jarringly (to art deco anyway), are the pediment and columns around the front door.

Which, come to think of it, is probably the reason architect Timothy Mitani, on a cold November evening in 2022, pointed instead to a little patch of brick over the garage door. "We kind of picked it up from here," he said, "but we elevated it a little bit." It's just some subtle checkerboarding for shadow play, but, around back, where his firm,

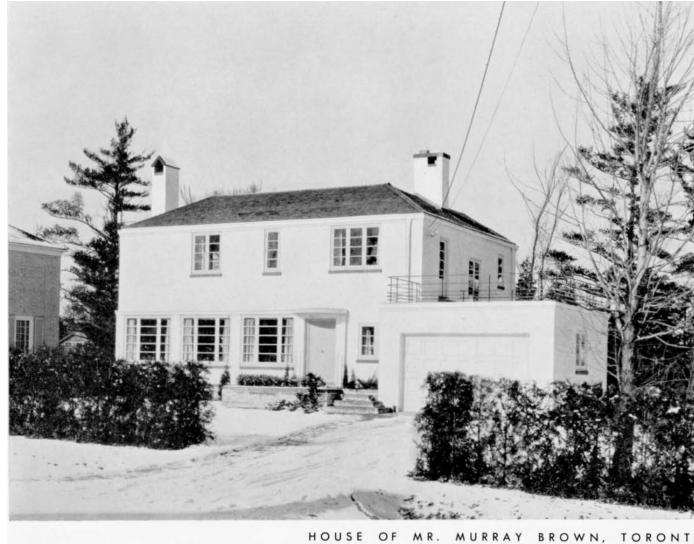
Creative Union Network, had to rebuild an entire wall to get some much needed light into the kitchen of Leo and Marlene Jaegerman's home, the undulating brick is a tribute to Mr. Brown's architectural restraint. And he'd probably love it.

Welcoming us inside, Ms. Jaegerman almost immediately took us to see her prized feature, the two long kitchen windows – one vertical, one horizontal – and how they connect her to the ravine: "I love to cook and I cook all the time but there was no view," she says. "This view is priceless."

It is, and the kitchen that surrounds it, as penned by the team at Creative Union, is quite lovely as well. Millwork by David O'Sullivan is so precise as to be almost seamless; lighting is mostly hidden; appliances are perfectly integrated; and the neutral colour palette allows the framed bits of nature to take centre stage. Just as architects of the 1930s embraced technology and cleanliness, so too have Mr. Mitanidis and his team. But, unlike the 1930s, this kitchen now opens to the dining area (and its original bay window) and has multiple circulation pathways. One new pathway, near the stove, connects to a mud room that was added in recent decades.

And speaking of past additions, that's all Creative Union worked with, as no new space was added to the house. "It would have been great to perhaps have a bigger kitchen or access outside from here," says Ms. Jaegerman, who bought the home nine years ago, "but because of the ravine it was going to be complicated [dealing with the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority]."

No matter. What Creative Union has done is to leave the good bits, such as curved walls, tall baseboards, and original oak floors, while deobfuscating the floor plan and materials palette along with carving out bigger openings for light. And not just with windows: there is now a large, wood-framed, sliding door from the living room to the back patio.



Front exterior photo of Murray Brown house, 1938.
ROYAL ARCHITECTURAL INSTITUTE OF CANADA

HOUSE OF MR. MURRAY BROWN, TORONTO

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Upstairs, the master bath, too, drinks in the ravine view with almost-floor-to-ceiling windows. And the artistic possibilities of Corian are evident in the gentle curves of the sink and countertop. Not only do curves mean no build up of dirt or hair, they echo the curves of nautical Art Deco buildings and the sexy locomotives of Raymond Loewy. One entire wall near the tub that transitions into the curved shower area is Corian: "And also there're no grout lines," says Mr. Mitanidis, "and it gives some opportunities to make really watertight niches."

In one of the children's bedrooms, a custom closet/shelf unit/desk calls to mind a tight ship's cabin, where every square inch needs to be maximized.

Overall, this is a respectful and elegant renovation of a grand old Toronto lady by creative architects for enlightened clients. Clients that were attracted to the work of Murray Brown before they'd even learned his name: "We put in an offer for a house in Lawrence Park on Dawlish [Ave.] before this one," Mr. Jaegerman says with a smile, "and it was designed by him."

Which means Mr. Brown, were he able to visit, would likely feel right at home.

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