

RENOVATION OF A THREE - STOREY PENTHOUSE AT THE MORGAN



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Based in Toronto for six glorious years, we've watched, often amazed, as the condominium market continues to flourish. Boasting suite styles and scale to suit most demographics, the appetite for apartment living is apparently unquenchable. With the passing of every month, another statement block breaks ground as creative developers vie to build the tallest, most luxurious building, each structure, apparently, more exciting than its predecessor.

Within the landscape of new builds, however, there are many wonderful — albeit slightly older — structures, some of which contain gems of significant architectural merit. One such building is The Morgan, built some eight years past and located in the Fashion District at the junction of Richmond St. and Spadina.



Upon entering the lobby, a sweeping stairway curves and flows, its dramatic shape piercing the large, airy space. Designed to create “first impression” impact, its sinuous corkscrew form grabs our attention and we hover, momentarily, before calling the elevator that will transport us directly into the penthouse, an outsized home envisioned by Peter Berton, partner in charge of the Toronto offices of +VG Architects, in association with his colleague, project architect David Ecclestone.

A graduate of Carleton University, Berton’s pedigree spans educational and leisure facilities, private residence and historical restoration assignments, and it’s this comprehensive and varied catalogue that positions him as a prolific Canadian architect with an unstinting reputation for client relevant work.

Invited to cast our eye over his pet project, we know we’ll be viewing a massive 5,000 square feet space (created from the shell of three apartments) but nothing prepares us for the majesty that awaits us. As the elevator doors slide quietly open, Berton greets us and we walk into the breathtaking apartment, a voluminous space arranged across three floors.

The long, welcoming hallway is meticulously wrapped in creamy travertine and its irregular veining sets a luxurious tone. The last time we witnessed travertine of this quality and in this quantity (in single application, certainly) was several years





past when filming in High Sunderland, the mid-century home of acclaimed Serbian textile producer Bernat Klein. Designed by British architect — and Frank Lloyd Wright aficionado — Peter Womersley, High Sunderland is carved into an undulating Scottish hillside and boasts quarry loads of the textured finish.

In Berton's vision we espy the same magic we did back then; travertine is wonderfully atmospheric and its mottled surface provides visual depth that whispers luxury from every weighty slab. From the double-height, double-stack window reception area, the space yields visually through glass balustrades to the floor below, a secondary level that accommodates a well-equipped gymnasium and a comfortably sized double bedroom, actually one of four within the sprawling residence.

Wandering this floor we cast ambitious eyes over treadmills and weights while making a mental note to pump our fitness levels back where they once were. For now though, fortified by property porn, we have sufficient energy to let our tour continue without rest. Ascending the travertine staircase, our hands glide across walnut topped banisters, and, passing a pair of original oils by Quebec artist Johanne Corno, we remark upon their dramatic nature. Like the walls upon which they hang, they're outsized and marvellous and provide a welcome shot of colour in an otherwise muted esthetic.

Arriving, again, on the main level we try — try — not to look green while casting envious eyes across the terrace. Being the penthouse, and with exterior walls set back from the buildings main elevation by some fifteen feet in places, the space is huge; easily big enough for a hundred or so guests to

revel and enjoy the urban landscape in an almost 360-degree panorama. Dragging ourselves from the vista (our pallor pitched somewhere between Kermit the Frog and the Green Lady) we're similarly impressed by the open nature of the apartment's top floor.

From the dining room — with adequate proportions for a dozen or so guests — clear passage navigates a path toward the striking chef's kitchen. First inspection of the hand-built cabinetry suggests it's of solid timber construction, although closer appraisal reveals a different story; fashioned from acid washed steel, a process that creates a dark textured patina, it feels colder than timber but has a nonetheless exciting quality. Balanced with solid lumber cupboards at base level (all of which are fitted with ingenuous compartments and inspired shelving solutions), the resultant mix is compelling and tailor made for the stylish couple who reside here.

So, Berton's clients? Busy professionals who left their architect in no doubt as to their perceived final vision. "I was commissioned to undertake an architectural fit-out as well as an interior design service, so I effectively worked with them across every square inch for the duration of the project." Pausing for a moment, as if to savour the joys of successful scheme, Berton continues: "While they had certain ambitions for the space they were also amenable to suggestion.

Backward and forward meetings and regular dialogue ensured I hit the mark and the final realization fuses form and function with ergonomics and lifestyle. But of course it's much more about my clients than it is me. They're the ones, after all,



who live here. They tell me they feel immediately relaxed when they come home after work and I'm proud my endeavours can achieve this." It has to be said we really admire Berton's attitude; his ego plays a refreshing second fiddle to the needs of his paymasters in an industry where the opposite so often applies.

His masterpiece at The Morgan speaks volumes, his skill set imbuing it with warmth where sterility might have been easily birthed in the wrong hands. The living area, for example, particularly as it boasts such a large footprint, is surprisingly comfy and dressed with soft upholstery in warm, autumnal tones. Not for Berton's clients the temptation to dress their slightly Bauhausian home with endemic and predictable layers such as Corbusier sofas or the shiny austerity of Eileen Grey side tables.

That's what we like about this scheme; it doesn't slavishly follow decorative expectation — in Berton's hands it chases "client relevant" comfort at every opportunity.

Furnishings aside, it's the flow and sheer scale that mesmerize; the kind of dimensions typically witnessed in older condo blocks like Palace Pier, where proportions of several thousand feet are common. But it's in relation to square footage, however, that any comparisons to the Etobicoke towers are arrested. Palace Pier condos (the ones we've viewed, certainly) expound lashings of the English vernacular with palisades, deep set

cornices and crown moulding setting an altogether different tone. It's an interesting point and one we extrapolate with Berton. "The penthouse, while composed several years ago, definitely stands the test of time. In fact it transcends time."

This achievement, it should be reported, is no mean feat in a city where condos are the fashion catwalks of the architectural landscape, each showcasing the latest collection of stylish must haves. So what, precisely, in an increasingly design literate marketplace, can a typical Berton client expect? "These days they aspire to a distinctly European esthetic, with shadow gaps, seamless floors, inlays and stone finishes." We wonder, cognizant of this city's stylish leanings, if he thinks these ambitions are a typically Torontonian consideration? "Absolutely not.

If you look at what's working on a global platform you'll see similar lines prevailing everywhere. Whether in New York, London or Sydney there's an appetite for simple, uncluttered architecture and it's gathering momentum." We have to agree; you may remember that, some time ago, we talked of helping a British friend search for a second home in Toronto.

Wandering urban and suburban model suites we espied a proliferation of this pared back, yet comfortable style. Taste, therefore, is undoubtedly changing; even last week, when viewing a new build townhome as envisioned by an independent



London contractor, we were struck by the inherent architectural merit, akin to Berton's, which underpinned the project. As we stroll languidly towards the other end of the apartment, Berton picks up the gauntlet; "My clients expect a high standard and I think the same now applies to the wider home buyer.

Relentlessly trend conscious, they expect modern inclusions such as state-of-the-art German or Italian kitchens, concealed sound systems, specialist lighting and stone detailing. And of course the quest for the perfect bathroom seems ever more potent." As he says this, Berton gestures toward the master suite and we swarm into another hive of pared back elegance, arranged semi open concept to the hallway.

Here, poured concrete marries effortlessly with more of Berton's signature travertine, a combined neutral foil to the pop of colour that comes via his clients' linen selection. From the bedroom, a large portal leads to the bathroom, another generous space where natural light is harnessed by flowing glass transoms and liberal expanses of glass stretched around a huge shower stall.

Atmosphere pours from a back-lit mirror that appears to float against raw face grey scale concrete and, below this, a cantilevered double vanity provides a wickedly stylish washing theatre. To describe this bathroom as larger than many condo bedrooms would be an understatement and, suggesting this while preparing to leave, Berton delivers his manifesto: "My biggest ambition, as an architect, is to marry best use of space with overall design integrity.

My clients have enjoyed this home for the last few years but, due to work commitments, they're on the move. Looks like it's time to hand over the reigns of ownership." Hmm. As we glide back down to the bustling street below, we're already doing the

math and it's not pretty; pitched at \$5.25 million, we'll have our work cut out for us just to raise the deposit. Somebody else, however, is about to step into a wonderful new life. And we can't help feel just a little bit envious.

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