

DESIGN

## Midtown Toronto home gets art-centric reinvention

Selecting art took priority when this detached home was gutted, extended and redesigned



The Toronto home of Jill Farber, designed by Audax Architecture.

Images courtesy of Shai Gil

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TORONTO  
SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL  
PUBLISHED MARCH 22, 2018

**M**ost people who purchase art for their homes will, at some point, find themselves pondering the problem of address: where, exactly, will that piece live, and how will it relate to the space, the light, other decorative works, room use and so on?

But when Jill Farber and her husband began designing their new home – a midtown Toronto detached they mostly gutted and extended – she decided to turn the vector of decision-making around. "It was the art that came first, before the living room space or the study space," explains Ms. Farber, who is executive director of Autism Speaks Canada.

She wanted to live with pieces that would "make me think and bring on certain emotions." That meant creating, with the help of Toronto-based Audax Architecture Inc., wide-open spaces with large white walls – a kind of canvas for the canvases (not to mention an eclectic collection of art objects and collectibles).

There's a captivating matrix of small portraits that transforms a transitional space between the front hall and the expansive family/dining room/kitchen area that makes up most of the back of the main floor. A room-sized nook next to the entrance is devoted to large sculptural pieces, while a recently acquired painting sits propped up against a wall in the living room, waiting for a place to hang.

Wide-open spaces with large white walls act as a kind of canvas for the canvases. The first of many pieces she bought was by the Canadian photographer Sarah Anne Johnson, a chilly Arctic landscape transformed by a colourful explosion of fireworks. "I am a winter person," Ms. Farber says, "and these pieces spoke to me."

While most homeowners rarely find themselves with a house full of tabula rasa walls, the process Ms. Farber undertook offers some important insights into the business of purchasing art, which can be daunting for those just embarking on these kinds of investments.

Art consultants say that the best choices are pieces that go beyond immediate aesthetic appeal and trigger reflection, conversation and debate. They also advise against purchasing art that has been selected in order to fit in, either with other décor, a particular space or next to other art. "You've got to love it, because you're living with it every day," adds Ms. Farber's adviser, Judy Schulich, who runs a Toronto art consultancy called blueprint: dna. "We've never said, '[you] need something for this wall.' "

Art consultants advise against purchasing art just to fill a particular space. 'You've got to love it,' says Farber's adviser, Judy Schulich.

Artwork should draw attention to themselves, which can mean occupying an entire wall, as is the case in some spaces in Ms. Farber's home, or being situated in a less conventional space, like a kitchen or even, in some cases, a bathroom, as is the case with one of Ms. Farber's, which contains a complex installation of stylized, beveled mirrors.

"Don't try to make it blend in to the surroundings," says Olivier Fuller, an art adviser. "People who just want to get something on the wall and not think about it [is] exactly the opposite of what I want to do."

That said, a handful of core principles apply:

**Light:** A location exposed to natural light will allow the colours and feel of a painting to evolve as the day progresses, adding a further layer of engagement, says curator and consultant Rui Mateus Amaral. "The work shifts, and that's really interesting."

With fine art photographs, however, sunlight is the enemy, because it can break down the chemicals in the print. Mr. Fuller also points out that galleries often use a mix of soft LED and fluorescent light to illuminate their spaces, and urges clients to do the same.

**Art objects:** "I always tell my clients, sculpture can be incorporated anywhere in a space," Mr. Fuller says, adding that buyers needn't identify special niches or other purpose-built spots, and shouldn't overlook the possibility of placing works outside.

In some homes, however, practical considerations arise, not least of which is the presence of small children. Ms. Farber's home contains numerous sculptural pieces, including a vivid blue illuminated cube at the end of an upstairs corridor near her daughters' bedrooms, as well as a stylized globe by Douglas Coupland. "You can touch and feel and learn from it," she says, adding that formal art works such as that share space with curiosities found in flea markets or garage sales.

**Context:** Mr. Amaral observes that some spaces in a home are obvious locations – above a fireplace or on a dining room wall, for example – but he encourages his clients to consider other spaces, especially if they're building a collection and may eventually need to rotate their works. In Ms. Farber's case, she actively curates the works in her home, combining them with curiosities she finds at flea markets, such as a set of vintage bowling pins.

"It's important to have some sense of flexibility." Many galleries sell works "on approval," which allows buyers to test them in different spaces in their homes over the course of a few days.

If the most rewarding approach to buying art is to not focus on where it will live in a home, the decision-making process, says Ms. Schulich, must be informed by considerations inherent in a work, such as the artists' intention and approach, as well as the impact a piece has on the owner.

For buyers, that means visiting galleries and art fairs, retaining art consultants and interior designers, and challenging themselves. "I try to push people," says Mr. Amaral. "The most important thing," adds Mr. Fuller, "is that artwork is steeped in the stories that the artist is trying to convey."

From her experience in creating spaces around the art she sought out with the help of Ms. Schulich, Ms. Farber's advice is to take the time to become educated about both what's available, but also the personal impact exerted by different forms and styles. As she puts it, "Make sure it evokes some emotion, and an emotion you want to feel every time you pass by it."



Sunlight can help the look of a painting evolve over the course of a day, but it can break down fine art photographs.