



Classical Cuisine: The piano is the centre piece of her renovated kitchen

Jack Kohane

National Post

Saturday, March 10, 2007

PATTI LOACH

Patti Loach's recently reconfigured home revolves around her piano. It's the centrepiece of her kitchen, kitty-corner from the food preparation area. Stove and Steinway are juxtaposed in a floor plan that took scads of hitech CAD models to create.

"My grand piano was the driving force behind the kitchen design when we decided to do the renovation," says the Toronto musician of her two-storey Beach abode located on a hilltop overlooking Glen Manor ravine. "You should see me making dinner here -- stir a little, chop a little, play a little. I can't tell you how many times I've burned cookies because I got working on a difficult passage in a Brahms ballad."

Hubby John Loach, a mechanical engineer by profession, can interpret intricate design drawings but acknowledges it was a daunting task coming up with a practical proposal to integrate a space that serves both as a soundproof in-home recording studio and a space in which to serve his favourite osso buco.

"The challenge -- and believe me, it was a big one -- was to create an area where we could do what we love: make music, make good food, share meals with family and friends, and record our music as well as that of other musicians, while honouring the many family heirlooms and antique pieces we own," Mr. Loach says.

Teaming with Aurora contractors and architects Randall Brothers, who drew up the initial sketches for remodelling the two-storey, 1,800-square-foot Edwardian-style structure (it was built in 1928 and the original blueprints in pen on linen paper are framed on the second-floor landing), the Loaches also used 3-D machine drafting software to move things around on paper, and to visualize how best to merge kitchen, living and dining rooms and a state-of-the-art recording centre.

"The contractors were eager to make this project happen," Ms. Loach says. "In addition to being skilled at what they do, they did a lot of research before each element of the reno was decided on. They listened as we described our vision, and they took copious notes. Listening to the client is most important. It's critical for musicians, actors, engineers and for builders."

Many computer-generated drafts later, it was determined one full wall could be removed to expand the kitchen/dining room area of 200 sq. ft., to an L-shaped 630-sq.-ft. open concept. "That's a good size to allow guests plenty of elbow room, and with the intervening wall gone, it also makes for an unhindered flow from the kitchen to the walk-out on our glass-railed cedar deck," Mr. Loach says. "It's perfect for parties or for an ensemble of musicians to play their instruments, and intimate for family gatherings."

Cleverly crafted to mix seamlessly with kitchen cupboards are custom cabinets that conceal tripod music stands, mutes for trumpets and trombones, rollaway shelves for catalogued sheet music, and the new studio's nerve centre of pre-amps, analog- to-digital audio converters, a tower of hi-fi components and a slide-away sound board, all networked to a PC hub encased in a soundproof box. A false wall has been installed behind the equipment for ease of access whenever repairs and maintenance are required on computers.

Wires connecting this mass of machinery to electrical outlets for microphones and booms have been laid down, forever out of sight, beneath the oak hardwood floors. Even the fridge has a hidden on/off switch to hush its hum when a recording is in session.

"In a studio, everything is about sound quality," says Ms. Loach. "To reduce sound waves bouncing around the room, we've used a special kind of wallpaper made of a textured plastic that looks like regular wallcovering -- but beware-- it's very difficult to put up, and I highly recommend hiring an expert paperhanger to do this. For added noise insulation, the ceiling has been double drywalled and suspended, so the sound is less 'live.' When we're recording, portable baffles are placed around the room for greater sound control."

To listen to the nuance of every note, five audio speakers are strategically sited around the room's perimeter, while the woofer is built at floor level into the central kitchen island.

Powell & Bonnell designed the finer points. They blended existing antiques with modern pieces, chose the colour palette and generally were "the aesthetic glue that pulled the whole renovation together," Ms. Loach says.

Was it all a sound investment? Audiences can judge as Ms. Loach partners with Canadian mezzo soprano Jean Stilwell for *Carmen Un Zipped*, a cabaret with a spin on Bizet's opera (a signature role for Stilwell), featuring a medley of songs from musical theatre, opera and jazz classics, March 30 to April 1 at Ernest Balmer Studio at Tapestry New Opera Works (The Cannery) in the Distillery District.

"We've had fun putting this production together and rehearsing the show in my home," Ms. Loach says with a smile.

Returning to her piano to practise *Non Mi Dir*, from Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, she remarks, "I wouldn't exactly call this space the great room, but it's certainly a grand place to make music."

CLOSE WINDOW

Copyright © 2007 CanWest Interactive, a division of CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc. All rights reserved.