

A home that runs in the blood

Can taste in houses have a genetic link?

Alexandra MacDonald thinks it can.

The former Torontonionian, who now lives in Stratford, felt an immediate but illogical attraction to the huge, old, five-bedroom house she and her husband Tim now call home.

"As soon as I walked in I said, 'This is it,'" she recalls, even though the 1891 house, originally built for a church organist, had deep purple, wall-to-wall carpeting throughout and an overall dark, almost ecclesiastical, interior.

In contrast, her personal taste had always gravitated toward bright, cheerful spaces. "Strangely, of the 15 or so houses I looked at in Stratford, this was the only one I felt comfortable in," she says. "It was so surprising."

Ms. MacDonald (née Quimby) is an interior decorator and the owner of Quimby Chadwick Designs. Her mother, Catharine Quimby (who was born a Chadwick) has a natural flair for decorating and turned out to be an inspiration to her daughter in both career development and the choice of her business name.

Not long after moving into their Stratford house, Ms. MacDonald discovered the architect who designed it was a Toronto man named W.C. Vaux Chadwick. Connection or just coincidence, she wondered.

"I asked my mother, 'Does that name sound at all familiar to you?' and she said to me, 'Well, honey, that's your great-great uncle.' At that moment I knew for certain I'd made the right decision."

The Queen Anne-style house sits on a piece of property surrounded by enormous century-old maples, across from one of the city's most beautiful old churches. The property was originally the site of the county's first courthouse, back in 1853. In fact, some of the stone walls in the basement are original to the courthouse, which was poorly built and eventually torn down in 1887.

While Ms. MacDonald was thrilled with her "new" house, she knew there was lots of work to be done.

The three-storey, roughly 4,000-square-foot, five-bedroom, six-bathroom house had previously served as a bed and breakfast and wasn't suited to her taste — which, of course, was part of its appeal. "Considering the business I'm in, this house was a dream come true for me."

Out went the purple wall-to-wall carpeting and in went a whole new kitchen.

"The kitchen was pretty much unusable," she recalls. "Only one burner on the stove worked and the oven didn't work at all."

The MacDonalds bought new appliances, installed honed slate countertops, new wooden cupboards and shelves, and built an island in the centre of the room, which doubles as prep space and an informal dining surface.

Next, they added built-in bookshelves in the expansive 16- by 26-foot dining room, which is flooded in natural light thanks to its huge east window and several other large windows in the living room beside it. "The room was screaming for it and we had plenty of space to spare so it made sense. It worked out really nicely."

Both the living and dining rooms have 11-foot ceilings and are linked by a spectacular decorative archway. The MacDonalds also removed the old stained-glass panels from the upper portions of the living room windows — which darkened the rooms considerably — and replaced them with clear glass.

After they removed most of the overhead fixtures, preferring the ambience of lamp lights, the next priority was to redo the three fireplaces. The one in the spacious front hall they converted to gas, so arriving guests are now greeted with a cozy fire during the cooler months — with just the flick of a switch.

The fireplace in the living room and another in the master bedroom were both left as wood-burning units but refaced to modernize their looks. "We got rid of the red brick and black iron grates. I'm just not a fussy Victorian person at all," Ms. MacDonald explains unapologetically.

The main floor — in fact, much of the house — was repainted in assorted shades of rich beige that resemble "vanilla ice cream." The hardwood floors were refinished and given a darker stain.

One wall in the dining room is painted a pale greenish-blue and Ms. MacDonald commissioned matching curtains made of heavy woven linen in a pattern that's a fresh take on an old English chintz from the British design firm Osborne and Little.

The curtains are spectacular and a focal point in the room. (Much of the fabric in the house, including the curtains, came from one of her favourite Toronto suppliers, Primavera, which is open only to the trade.)

"The biggest decorating challenge was definitely the main floor," she says. "I really wanted to make it as attractive and livable as possible." Clearly she succeeded on both counts.

The two main rooms are warm and light-drenched, filled with a combination of comfortable contemporary furniture, inherited family antiques and beautiful accessories and fabrics that add splashes of colour and a bit of punch in just the right places. The rooms are both spectacular and inviting without being fussy or overly formal.

"This is a big house yet it's very liveable. It's just us here but it's perfect," Ms. MacDonald says. "After years of living in the city in small houses and apartments I just love having all this space."

Although the house has five bedrooms, they converted two into offices; one for each of them. They also have their own dressing rooms and their own bathrooms — "which, God knows, has probably saved our marriage," Ms. MacDonald jokes.

They added wainscoting to the second-floor hall and turned the dark master bedroom into a bright, cheerful space. The walls are a pale seashell colour and the curtains on both sets of windows are bright, lime green silk.

A commissioned painting of their Brittany spaniel, Ghillie, hangs over the bedroom fireplace; it was a gift from Ms. MacDonald to her husband Tim on his birthday. (Ghillie means "hunting and fishing guide" in Gaelic and is a testament to the couple's love of fly fishing.) The other two bedrooms have also been repainted and redecorated and are considered guest rooms for visiting friends and family.

Ms. MacDonald's affinity for "muted palettes," combined with her clean, fresh, comfortable decorating style has dramatically transformed the home's interior personality. The makeover has been a labour of love and while there's still some work to be done, the bulk of it is behind them.

As it happens, the two were never in the house at the same time until they actually took possession in 2005 — which was right after their honeymoon in Ireland. Their schedules had prevented them from viewing it together. Ms. MacDonald says her husband has given her *carte blanche* as far as decorating goes, leaving the choices up to her.

Mr. MacDonald, who's president and chief executive of Ideal Supply Co. Ltd., a wholesale distributor of automotive and electrical supplies, lived in an old converted school house in nearby Listowel before buying the Stratford house.

"When we got back from Ireland, we went to the house together for the first time — and I made him carry me over the threshold," Ms. MacDonald recalls.

"The house was totally empty and we sat on the window sill in the dining room, had a bottle of champagne and dreamed of what we wanted to do. It's one of those memories that I really cherish — and here we are now doing it."

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