



Rewriting History

The historic facade of this former embassy in Rockcliffe belies the modern magic within

BY SARAH BROWN • PHOTOGRAPHY BY PHOTOLUXSTUDIO.COM - CHRISTIAN LALONDE

It takes both vision and optimism to discover a rundown mansion and declare without hesitation that it's The One. Hussain Rahal has both in spades. Driving through Rockcliffe Park on a spring day in 2016, he spotted construction fencing surrounding a stately house that, though once grand, now looked distinctly dilapidated and most definitely abandoned. Hussain drove slowly past, then stopped the car and turned around. He took another long look, then got on the phone to a real estate agent to find out how he could make it his own.

The house turned out to be a former embassy, and the government owners were undecided as to whether they would renovate or sell. But Hussain, a doctor and restaurateur, was given permission to photograph and measure inside the house so that he could picture what he might one day have to work with. Armed with that information, he and his wife, Karine, discussed how they would renovate if the house were to become theirs. Hussain waited and dreamed and sketched ideas and waited some more.





■ **THIS PAGE:** The decision to remove the ceiling in the entrance foyer results in a dazzling double-height space that opens to an equally impressive grand foyer. The two spaces boast matching chandeliers

■ **FACING PAGE:** The striking exterior façade was retained and restored, while the interior was modernized to match the lifestyle of a busy family of four





The couple looked through Pinterest for ideas, picturing where the kitchen would be situated, where their two young daughters would play, and how they'd entertain. On countless nights, Hussain sat down with his iPad, revising their ideas. "We'd spent so much time imagining what we'd do that by the time we got a call to say that the house was for sale if we were still interested, we had a very good idea of what we wanted," he says.

When that call came — a full 18 months after Hussain had first seen the house — the Rahals jumped on it, eager to make up for lost time. Hussain immediately got back in touch with Dylan O'Keefe and Haley Fiorenza. (The design duo behind O'Keefe Fiorenza Design Group had done the initial house measurements for the Rahals and had met with city heritage planners to understand the design guidelines for the historic property.) The designers took a deep breath and got down to work. "We knew it had amazing bones and the potential to be stunning, but this was definitely the scariest project we've ever

gotten onboard with," says Dylan with a laugh. "We had to wear hazmat suits just to measure it all those months ago!" If it had been any other client, he says, he would have thought twice. "But not only does Hussain have really good instincts, he's also flexible. I knew when problems came up, he'd see the potential."

The challenges were many. This modern facelift had two key facets: the striking exterior facade had to be retained and restored, but the interior needed to match the lifestyle of a busy family of four. Heritage had to harmonize with modernism; character had to make peace with a contemporary lifestyle.

The first step was to remove a 1980s addition to the back of the house, returning it to its original footprint and allowing the Rahals to replace the central portion of the back wall with a spectacular two-storey window. "We took away what was there to make the original structure come back to life," Dylan explains. Inside, the resulting grand foyer is a glowing double-height focal point, elegant seating arrayed beneath a modern coffered ceiling and an opulent chandelier.

■ **FACING PAGE:** The grand foyer is a glowing double-height focal point, elegant seating arrayed beneath a modern coffered ceiling and opulent chandelier. Karine says the space functions almost like a cockpit — from here, she can see the kitchen and front door and has clear views of the children if they're playing in the backyard or sunroom. It's also a beautiful spot in which to entertain

■ **ABOVE:** The bright and generous kitchen looks out over the open dining and living areas. Here, durable quartz counters and backsplashes mimic Carrara marble. The Hope suspension light by Luceplan provides a modern take on a traditional chandelier

Hussain project-managed the 10-month renovation, revelling in the opportunity to oversee the transformation on a day-to-day basis. The 100-year-old house had sound proportions, and he, Dylan, and Haley worked within its structural grid, removing some walls but maintaining the framework so that even as some rooms were opened up, those proportions were maintained. The front windows, with their distinctive grill pattern, also stayed true even as the newly conceived rooms behind the facade were transformed. The house was completely gutted but with the firm commitment never to lose sight of what made it beautiful in the first place.

Today, the finished house is a testament to Hussain and Karine’s foresight. Regal but never stuffy, the main floor is a dazzling family space with a bright and generous kitchen that looks out over open dining and living areas. That openness creates

beautiful spaces for entertaining, be it large family gatherings or office get-togethers. In summer, sliding doors off the kitchen allow the communal living areas to spill out onto a covered deck and into a gloriously private backyard surrounded by trees. Upstairs, the bridge overlooking the main floor creates two wings, separating the girls’ bedrooms from Hussain and Karine’s luxurious master bedroom and spa-like ensuite.

Just a few short years ago, this house sat almost forgotten until happenstance led Hussain past its doors. Where most would have seen an overwhelming task, its soon-to-be owner saw promise — a future family home that simply needed a vision to imbue it with new life. “Seeing what it could be was part of the fun,” says Hussain. “Karine and I saw the interior as an open palette — we imagined the possibilities, and Dylan and Haley guided us through.” The result is a house reborn, a unique family home filled with light and life.

■ **THIS PAGE:** A view from the kitchen across the grand foyer and to the dining room. The designers worked within the home’s structural grid, removing some walls but maintaining the framework so that even as these rooms were opened up, the proportions were maintained

■ **FACING PAGE, TOP LEFT:** The original wood fireplace was replaced with a gas insert and clad in a porcelain tile

■ **FACING PAGE, TOP RIGHT:** The comfortable family room is anchored by modular family-friendly couches from Cadieux Interiors

■ **FACING PAGE, BOTTOM LEFT:** Filled with light, the sunroom is a popular play spot for the couple’s young daughters

■ **FACING PAGE, BOTTOM RIGHT:** Two small rooms were combined to create Hussain’s home office. Custom bookshelves on three walls house his extensive collection







With subtle design choices interspersed with grand moments, the house is at once opulent and practical



1 In the kitchen, the quartz backsplash sourced from Blackstone provides a subtle backdrop for floating shelves in stained white oak; **2** This River Stone Coffee Table in a liquid silver finish makes a grand statement in the grand foyer. Inspired by nature, the table was sourced from US-based Phillips Collection; **3** Two matching Slamp Ceremony chandeliers, handcrafted in Italy, add opulence and femininity to the entrance foyer and the grand foyer; **4** The Viaggio Linear Suspension light by Chicago's Tech Lighting highlights an artistic cluster of smoky glass orbs that gently illuminate the dining room table below; **5** An iconic find from the 1970s, the bronze-coated "Heroic Sunburst" front door originates in California and was designed by David Gillespe and Billy Joe McCarroll; **6** One of two matching side tables in the grand foyer, the brass-topped Fitz Accent Table from Arteriors Home is topped with a cute Jeff Koons balloon dog lookalike from HomeSense.