

Design by ALLISON WILLSON  
Text by IRIS BENAROIA  
Photography by PATRICK BILLER

# NATURAL INSTINCTS



## What This Room Cost

Wallpaper (with installation): **\$7,842**  
Custom dining table: **\$3,500**  
Four vintage dining chairs, including reupholstering and fabric: **\$1,845**  
Vintage hutch (shown, page 45): **\$750**  
Vintage pendant: **\$1,250**  
Area rug: **\$1,950**  
Drapery fabric (shown, page 45): **\$479**  
Custom banquette, including upholstery fabric: **\$4,006**  
Pair of sconces: **\$1,845**  
Pair of white armchairs (shown, page 45), including upholstery fabric: **\$4,165**  
Black side table (shown, page 45): **\$485**  
Ottoman (shown, page 45): **\$895**  
Accessories: **\$1,000**

**Total: \$30,012**



Produced by Sally Armstrong/Photography courtesy of Allison Willson (Before images)

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A RENOVATION WITH A LIGHT TOUCH HAS DRAMATIC RESULTS, WITHOUT A SPECK OF PLASTER DUST.

**W**HEN IT COMES TO A RENOVATION, walls are usually the first to go. The easiest (and priciest) thing to do is to smash everything to smithereens, then start fresh. But designer Allison Willson did the very opposite: she radically revamped a home in Toronto's sought-after Moore Park neighbourhood without removing a single wall, and the results are extraordinary.

"We didn't do anything structural," says Allison, who runs her eponymous firm in Toronto, "but that's not to say this wasn't a big renovation. We removed built-ins and added new ones, created a custom kitchen and refinished floors." Her clients — busy professionals with two kids under the age of six — bought the five-bedroom home five years ago. Though stately, a pastiche of additions by previous owners had left the 4,000-square-foot house without a feeling of consistency or flow from a design perspective. "The spaces felt underutilized and not as functional as they needed to be," says Allison of the rooms she refreshed over four months. "The house didn't represent the owners' tastes, and they wanted to create a homework zone, a breakfast area, as well as add more storage."

**TOP:** In the foyer, wallpaper and mouldings create "a textural layer that you'll never tire of," says designer Allison Willson (pictured, opposite). **Wallpaper**, Kravet Canada.

**BOTTOM:** An inviting seating area in the living room is flooded with natural light from the bay window.

**Sofa**, white throw pillows, throw, Elte Mkt; **rug**, Rugs USA. **OPPOSITE:** In the dining room, durable vinyl on the cane-back dining chairs and banquette makes them kid-friendly. The pendant was fitted with frosted glass for a softer glow, and splayed sconces have a pleasing symmetry. **Wallpaper**, Designers Gallery; vintage **pendant**, Victorian Revival; **sconces**, Currey & Company; cane-back **dining chairs**, Guff; **banquette**, Gresham House Furniture.







Allison's instinct was to create a "fresh and edgy take on traditional." She retained the footprint (it already worked well) but rethought the function of some rooms and enhanced others. For example, instead of demolishing walls to carve out a closet and add storage in the entry, the designer placed two customized freestanding cabinets in the living room. The cabinets not only house the children's outerwear but they disguise an unsightly radiator with caning, which allows for ventilation. "They're beautiful pieces of contemporary furniture," says Allison, and the retro look creates an arresting mix of styles. "I like to strike a balance in design — new with vintage, traditional with contemporary, texture with solids."

Custom cabinets with handsome ridge detailing refreshed the kitchen. "We used Caesarstone for the counters and backsplashes," says the designer. "Though not a budget component, it's practical and you're not

**TOP RIGHT:** "You can kick your feet up and enjoy the dining room from this small seating area," says Allison. "The bouclé fabric is super cosy." **Armchairs**, Silva Custom Furniture; **ottoman**, RH; **armchair upholstery fabric**, Kravet Canada.

**BOTTOM RIGHT:** A faucet and filtered water tap in a gold finish are a splurge in the kitchen. **Backsplash, counters**, Caesarstone; **faucets**, Waterstone.







**TOP RIGHT:** The living room fireplace once had flanking built-ins. "I wanted it to be a stand-alone feature," says Allison. New panelling on the walls adds punch, and two radiators are fitted with custom metal consoles. Vintage **armchair**, Memo Showroom; ceramic **objet** (on mantel), Hollace Cluny; **art** (on mantel) by Gordon Stamper, Canvas Gallery. **BOTTOM LEFT:** Natural fibres, from the jute rug to the caning on the cabinet, bring texture to this corner of the living room. **Coffee table**, CB2; **floor lamp**, Decorum Decorative Finds. **OPPOSITE:** "Including a mix of new and vintage pieces, patinated accents, different textures, and playing with simple and ornate forms add to a more collected look," says Allison. An oil-rubbed bronze pendant anchors the living room's modern furniture. **Pendant**, Elte; **tub chairs**, **coffee table** (with custom vinyl top), CB2; **vinyl fabric** (on coffee table top), Kravet Canada; **art** (above sofa) by Christine Flynn.





**"I LIKE TO STRIKE A BALANCE IN DESIGN — NEW WITH VINTAGE, TRADITIONAL WITH CONTEMPORARY, TEXTURES WITH SOLIDS" — Allison Willson**

Grasscloth, a fabric headboard and layered bed linens are pretty choices in the principal bedroom. "When you're investing in wallpaper, sometimes it's good to go neutral," says Allison. "You can redecorate the room a few times without changing the walls."

**Grasscloth**, Kravet Canada; **nightstand**, Châtelet; vintage **table lamp**, Residential Lighting Studio; **vase** by Mud Australia, The Salt & Pepper Catering Co.; **bed linens**, Au Lit Fine Linens.



New white oak built-ins and olive green grasscloth ground the family room and add warmth. The oak floors were refinished to calm down the original red tones. **Black chairs**, Cocoon Furnishings; **vases**, Elte. **BOTTOM RIGHT:** The previously scrawny ceiling beams were reclad in fresh millwork. **Grasscloth**, **table lamp**, Kravet Canada; **sofas**, Silva Custom Furniture; **art** (above fireplace) by Richard Johnson, Richard Johnson Gallery.

paying the cost of marble slabs. And we didn't need to buy new appliances — that was a big save."

Off the kitchen, the now dreamy dining room is another ingenious example of how even one decorating decision can make a big impact. Soft grey wallpaper provides a pastoral backdrop in the space. "Of all the projects I've done, this room is my favourite!" says Allison. "The second I laid eyes on the wallpaper, it was a done deal for me. My clients agreed to it without hesitation — it was an exciting moment." Simple pieces that work in harmony pull the vignette together. A round white table recalls a jaunty inverted top hat, and vintage chairs and banquette seating replace a rarely used formal set. Behind it, shelves lined with black and white pottery are graphic and eye-catching.

When the morning light shines in, this nook is a sublime spot for lingering over breakfast — when the kids allow it. "The wallpaper invites you to sit and look around," says Allison. "Anywhere you look feels like being in a garden." Or an entirely different house. **H&H**

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