

THE STAR

How a kitchen island became the star of a Toronto home reno



When you come upon a jade green door as spectacular as Jennifer and Tom Cumming's, you have to assume there's something special behind it.

The stately family home in Playter Estates, in the Broadview and Danforth Aves.-area., doesn't disappoint.

A modern interior design is softened by warm wood accents and a show-stopping 15-foot, inky-black quartzite island in the centre of the open, main-floor space. The island anchors the kitchen and is as multifunctional a piece of furniture as you can have.

Although Tom is a builder and owner of [SevernWoods Fine Homes](#), it was Jennifer, who runs the office and the household, who had the vision for the island.

“Everyone thought I was crazy. Even the architects thought I was nuts,” said Jennifer. “I envisioned an eating area on one end and lots of prep space. Our last two kitchens had been tiny, and I’ve always wanted a big workspace with no walls.”

She got her wish. Today, kids Sydney, 13, and Travis, 12, can peacefully prepare their lunches on either side of the island as Tom enjoys breakfast at the other end. That’s the kind of family harmony it’s tough to put a price on.



It was a long journey to get there, though. Drawn by the traditional beauty of the 100-year-old house, the Cummings bought it in 2009 and planned to renovate right away. The third-floor master suite was swiftly transformed into two bedrooms and a shared bath for the kids. In 2014, they revamped the basement to accommodate both family space and SevernWoods’ headquarters.

In the spring of 2018, they called in interior designer Sacha Nizami, of [Sacha Nizami Design](#), with whom they'd collaborated on SevernWoods projects and on their basement, to start the \$800,000 main- and second-floor transformations.

The first step was function. “Before this renovation, we weren’t using most of the main-floor space. It had a formal living room and a formal dining room and a kitchen in the back corner with a small seating area. We essentially lived in that back third of the house,” said Jennifer.

“We used the living and dining rooms at Christmas — and that’s it.”



They removed the main-floor walls to create one long room that delineates different functional areas with lighting and warm wood finishings. The couple depended on Nizami’s expertise to blend their desire for modern with the cosiness of a family home. “We knew we wanted to go modern but, on some level it, scared me because it seems cold,” said Jennifer.

“This is where colours and choices of material come in to bring warmth back into a streamlined design,” said Nizami. “Our goal from the start was

the create a space that felt dynamic and modern, yet purposeful.”

A naturally finished white oak floor, in a herringbone pattern, sets the stage for other wood details like the hand-turned newel post at the base of the main staircase in the foyer, and a large walnut pantry at the end of the kitchen.



When it came to sourcing the material for the island, they originally assumed they'd use a grey stone, but when the Cummings and Nizami came upon the black quartzite, they all gasped in unison. “The natural stone is Piombo with variations of black undertones and various depths. It's very unique and special,” said Nizami.

They chose to keep the piece sleek and monochrome by staining white oak black for the base that runs the length of the island and offers a surprising amount of storage.

Custom cabinetry in white offsets the dramatic black island. With finger-pull functionality and features like an appliance garage where they not just but also use small appliances like the coffee maker and toaster, it's a sleek design that cuts clutter. The walnut pantry at the edge of the kitchen is also knob-free, allowing the natural wood to be the focal point.

“It’s the idea of your eye not stopping on any small elements so you can appreciate the craftsmanship of the cabinetry,” said Nizami.

In addition to providing ample storage, the pantry, that looks like a piece of furniture in its own right, conceals a powder room and a small study area for the kids that opens from the living area at the back.



Throughout the main floor, lighting was critical to keep the eye moving, but to also provide interest and warmth. A long, wire-suspended strip light runs the length of the island and seems to disappear into the design. “Some people notice it and some people don’t see it at all,” said Jennifer.

Other subtle lighting choices include recessed LED lights on the staircase and a built-in strip light that runs the entire perimeter for the back wall. A handmade porcelain chandelier from [AM Studio](#) over the 10-seat dining room table provides an organic, earthy feel.

“What drove the lighting design was my dislike of a billion pot lights. We have a few of them to light certain elements, but we also used surface mount can lighting and ceiling fixtures for a different look,” said Tom.

Everything is dimmable and connected to a [Control4 Automation System](#)

that allows the family to create settings for daytime, dinnertime, “apres dinner” and even party mode. “We can control the lighting for any occasion with just one button, which is pretty cool,” said Tom.

While the Cummings their reno was just right for their family, but they also considered their SevernWoods clients. “I bring a lot of people through the house to show them features like traditional windows vs. European, lighting options and other functional design elements. This kind of challenged us to consider interesting choices,” said Tom.



Nizami says they layered the modern aesthetic with iconic, classic design pieces to provide the final, warming touches. “We chose beautiful architectural pieces like wood and leather dining chairs and custom soft furnishings. The emphasis is on well-made pieces designed to last a lifetime.”

Today, the home can easily entertain 80 people “without blinking an eye” and provides exactly the combination of cool modern and warm liveability that the Cummings wanted.



THE NUMBERS

\$1.2 million: Price of house in 2009

\$800,000: Total cost of renovation, including adding 300 sq. ft. to second floor with custom laundry room, library, guest room and master suite

\$140,000: Cost of kitchen renovation



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