



Balancing act

ARCHITECTURAL DESIGNER DRAWN TO FENG SHUI'S FLOW AND UTILITY

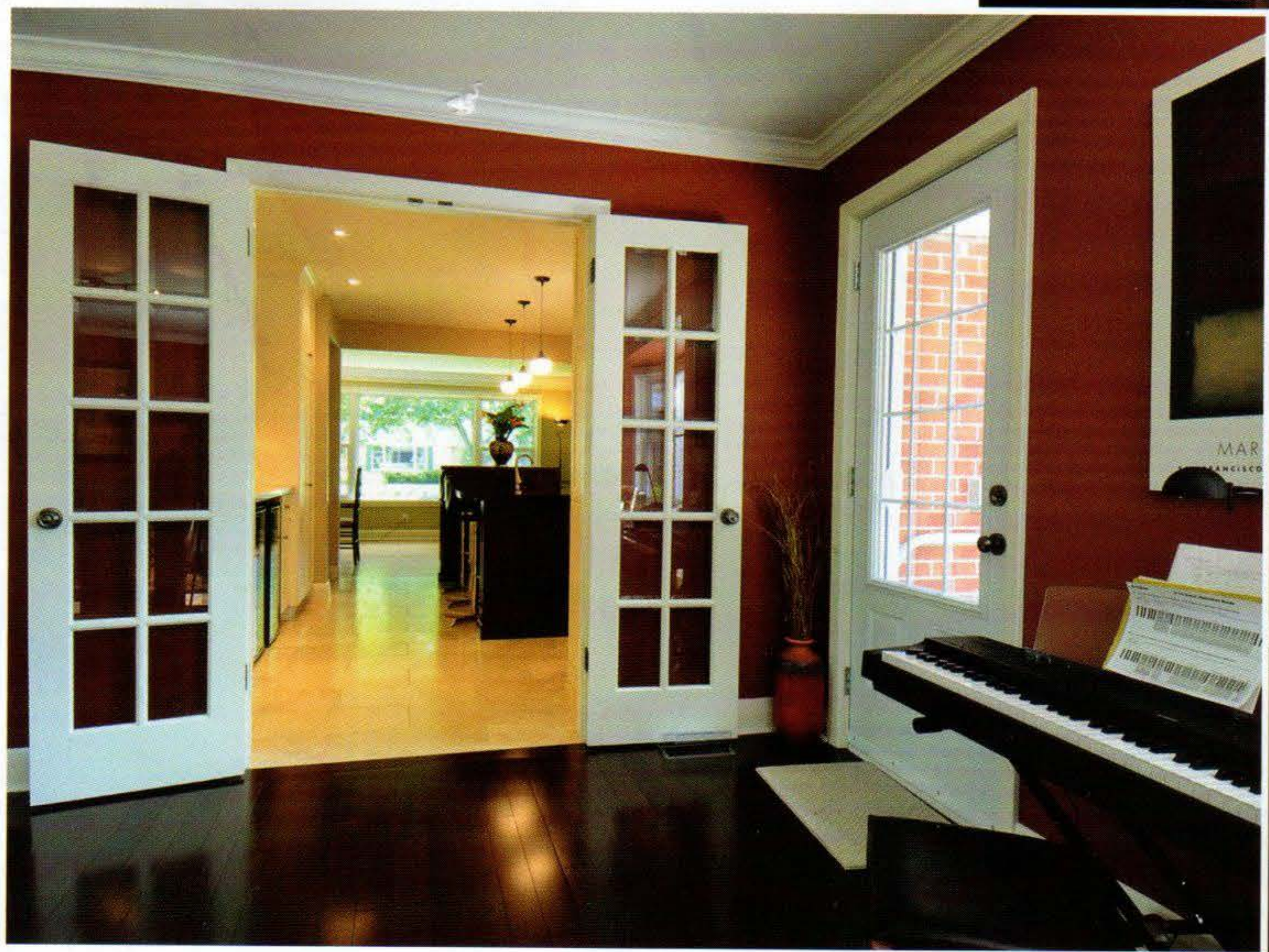
By Deborah Birkett

Photography • Mathew McCarthy

WATERLOO-BASED architectural designer Susan McDowell has always focused on helping people to make the best use of their space, often talking people out of unnecessary additions and showing them how better layouts and thoughtful renovations could improve the flow and utility of their homes. Now, as a certified feng shui consultant, she has developed an approach to designing space that blends east and west.

Originally from Toronto, McDowell earned a degree in architecture from the University of Waterloo and worked for several years before taking a long time off to have two children who are now teenagers. During that time, a friend introduced her to the concept of feng shui, the ancient Chinese practice of analyzing and influencing the relationships among people, objects, buildings and the natural environment to improve quality of life.

McDowell was captivated: "My primary interest architecturally is about flow, the way space flows, so when I discovered



Architectural designer Susan McDowell helped Ann and Tom MacMillan create an open-concept flow in the main living space of their Waterloo bungalow.

feng shui and about how energy flows within space, it just brought together what interests me most about the way people live in their homes and in their businesses — how our lives interact with the physical form that we're in. It's very exciting for me."

She decided to become certified in feng shui, studying locally for a year with Joy Ross of One Harmony. When McDowell returned to work in 2003, she incorporated feng shui consulting into her practice of architectural design, which is

focused on residential renovations and additions. Now her company, A Fine Balance, attracts a mix of clients, some seeking feng shui expertise and some who've never heard of it.

Clients Ann and Tom MacMillan of Waterloo discovered McDowell through a mutual friend and hired her for their big renovation project: turning their traditional Westmount bungalow into a modern, open-concept space. Although they'd never encountered feng shui concepts before engaging McDowell, they were open to



ON THE JOB

Designer Susan McDowell, shown in the office at her Waterloo home, is both an architectural designer and a feng shui consultant.

learning about it and were thrilled with her ideas.

The MacMillans were primarily concerned with improving the flow and functionality of the space they had. They weren't building any additional space so McDowell's skill in designing layouts and floor plans was crucial. She also incorporated feng shui principles into her designs.

"It flows so much better," Ann says. "Anyone who comes into our home just can't believe the work that has been done."

The MacMillans "kind of knew" what they

wanted, but were amazed by the number of good ideas and suggestions McDowell had. "Susan took everything we said (we wanted), which I thought was quite a bit, and we couldn't have been happier with what she came back with," Ann says.

Even the contractors, Schnarr Craftsmen, were impressed by McDowell's drawings. Now, a year after the renovation, MacMillan says they wouldn't change a thing.

David Tiviluk engaged McDowell for a more unusual project. He wanted an archi-

tect with feng shui expertise to help him design every aspect of his new Bikram yoga studio in Kitchener's Belmont Village. He describes his relationship as "highly collaborative."

Tiviluk asked McDowell to help him select the studio space, and wanted her approval and advice on everything from the building and the location to the lighting, tiles and placement of the juice bar.

This kind of end-to-end involvement is unusual for McDowell, who typically ►



► draws up plans and designs. She doesn't necessarily see the outcome, and rarely works on commercial spaces.

The project was exciting for her because Tiviluk was so committed to optimizing the feng shui of the space. He felt it was essential to support the subtle energetic nature of yoga and to ensure the success of his venture. If McDowell recommended against something, he dropped the idea.

"David wanted my opinions so I said, 'OK.' Well, I'm rarely short of an opinion. It just kept evolving so I got to do all kinds of stuff," McDowell says, including designing the distinctive red and yellow banner fluttering outside the building.

"Doing an exterior sign? I'd never designed a sign in my life. But I knew feng shui. I had a particular idea about how to attract energy to the space and incorporated that." She thought of a banner rather than a stationary sign so that the "moving red energy" would attract new opportunity.

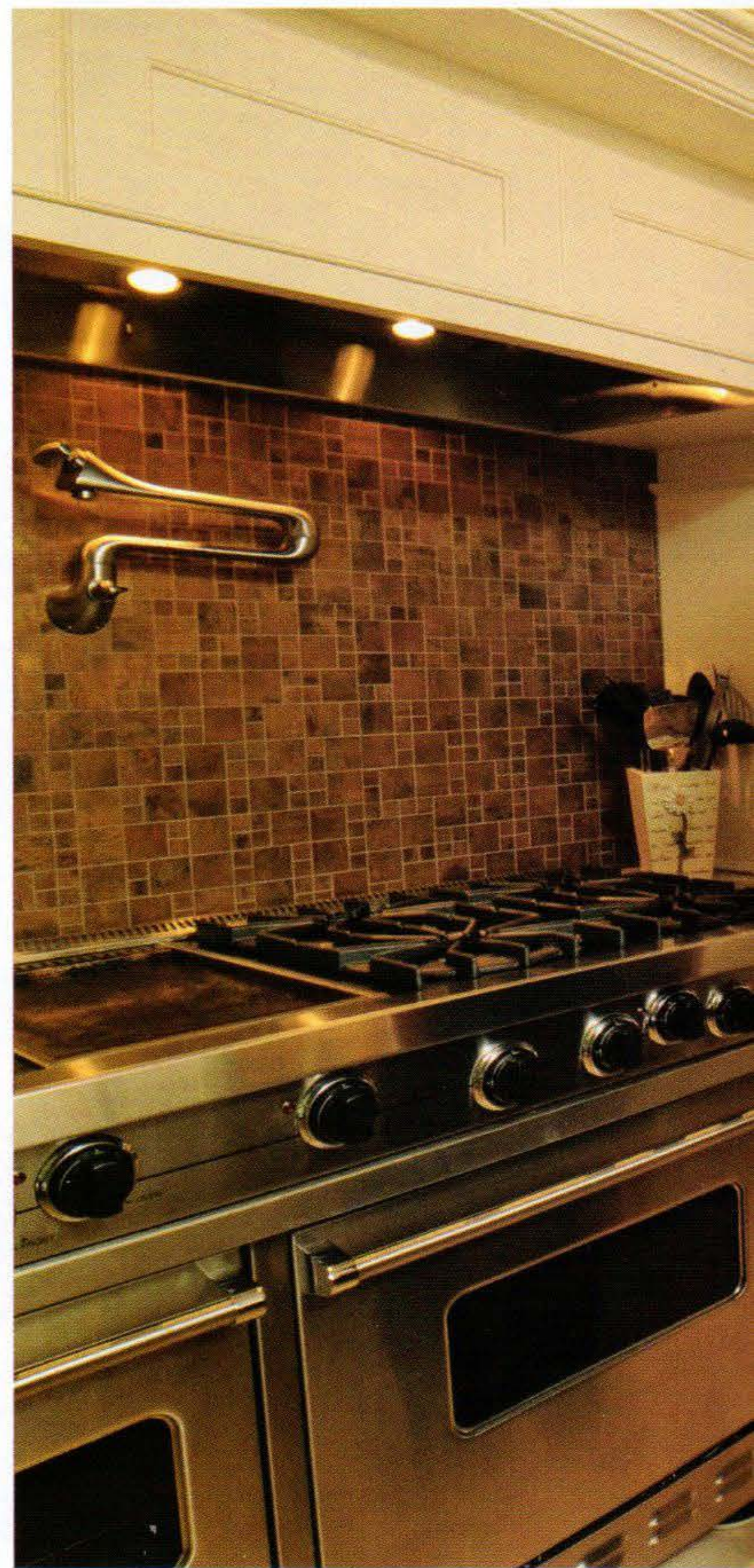
The one thing Tiviluk insisted on was the colour of the practice space. He wanted it stark white, McDowell preferred a warmer colour. They compromised on a pale, neutral colour.

At the other end of the spectrum from clients like Tiviluk are those who come to McDowell for a cure after they've renovated and even feng shui'd their homes by themselves, and something's gone awry.

In the summer of 2007, Kendra Norris and her husband gutted, renovated, and built an addition to their century house in Listowel. They expected to enjoy their new home, but found themselves embroiled in lawsuits over liens on the house placed by sub-contractors whom the Norrises expected the builder to pay.

Norris, an amateur feng shui practitioner, says, "I thought I must have an imbalance somewhere. I started second-guessing myself."

She found McDowell online and consulted her in February. McDowell told Norris she'd done a good job balancing the five elements: earth, fire, metal, water and wood. She also found the house had good energy flow, but, as she explained, the L-shaped house was missing two areas



known as "helpful people" and "wealth and prosperity."

The ideal in feng shui is for spaces to be as regularly shaped as possible so that every zone is present: squares and rectangles are best. Irregular shapes create "missing" zones and need to be "cured."

Cures, says McDowell, can include "all kinds of things: water features, lighting, gardens, heavy rocks, decks" — any of these can be used to "anchor" the missing corner and attract beneficial energy to the area. Inside a house, mirrors can be employed to include that area "metaphorically," she explains.

Norris implemented every suggestion, and says "it wasn't even three weeks when things started turning around." The legal wrangling continues and Norris has been warned it will be protracted, but things have consistently been going much more



Ann MacMillan (right) wasn't familiar with feng shui when she hired designer Susan McDowell (left), but the design principles fit her desire to improve her home's flow and functionality.

in their favour. Even Norris' husband, who was dubious about feng shui, says he doesn't know what McDowell did, but it's working.

McDowell's own husband was "enormously skeptical," she says, but he's come around, seeing that her feng shui efforts do seem to improve their lives.

McDowell, who now does speaking engagements about feng shui, addresses people's uncertainties: "Feng shui is part of a body of Eastern sciences including things like acupuncture. A lot of people are familiar with acupuncture and have gotten over the issue that it's Chinese hocus-pocus. They begin to understand there are energy patterns within the body, and once you've accepted that idea, you

can perhaps (acknowledge) there are energy patterns within space."

Will the feng shui practice take over her business? Seems like McDowell wouldn't mind. Her face lights up when she talks about her passion for it: "I love the interaction with clients. Architecture, for me, is kind of a lonely business, sitting in front of the computer, and I like to interact with people. I like to be in somebody's space and discussing things with them."

Whatever happens, she says she'll keep her practice small and selective: "My business name is very much my life philosophy: I have a fine balance between my work life and my home life. If I perceive a project is going to throw out my balance, I don't really need it." ►





The renovated kitchen in Ann and Tom MacMillan's Waterloo home is light and airy.


FUNDAMENTALS OF FENG SHUI

In Feng shui (pronounced “fung shway”), feng means wind, shui means water. Air and water are the two most essential elements of life.

- **Five elements:** traditional Chinese philosophy classifies natural phenomena into five elements: earth, fire, metal, water and wood.
- **Ba gua (“bah gwah”):** an octagonal template or map representing the relationship between spaces in a room, building or property and aspects of our lives, such as career or health. A key feng shui tool (may also be transliterated as pa kua).
- **Cure:** change or adjustment intended to correct feng shui problems.
- **Qi:** (“chee,” also translated as chi): energy, life force, breath. Energy can be positive or negative.
- **Yin/yang:** two opposing, yet mutually

correlated principles. Yin is associated with qualities like darkness, passivity, softness, cold and sobriety. Yang is associated with light, activity, hardness, heat and exuberance. The goal: to keep them in balance.

A space that respects the principles of feng shui can happen inadvertently. At the opposite end of the spectrum is space that not only follows the principles, but also features traditional Chinese cures such as bamboo flutes, Chinese coins, red ribbons and octagonal feng shui mirrors.

Susan McDowell's position is that there are many ways to correct feng shui problems without relying on such conspicuous items. Including things that don't suit a home's decor or the personal style of the owner would be sufficiently discomforting that it would offset whatever value the cure could have, she says. 

On the web: www.afinebalance.ca