

Text by REIKO MILLEY | Photography by MAXIME DESBIENS

# P E R F E C T

A thoughtful update makes a family's Montreal rowhouse sing, especially during the festive season.

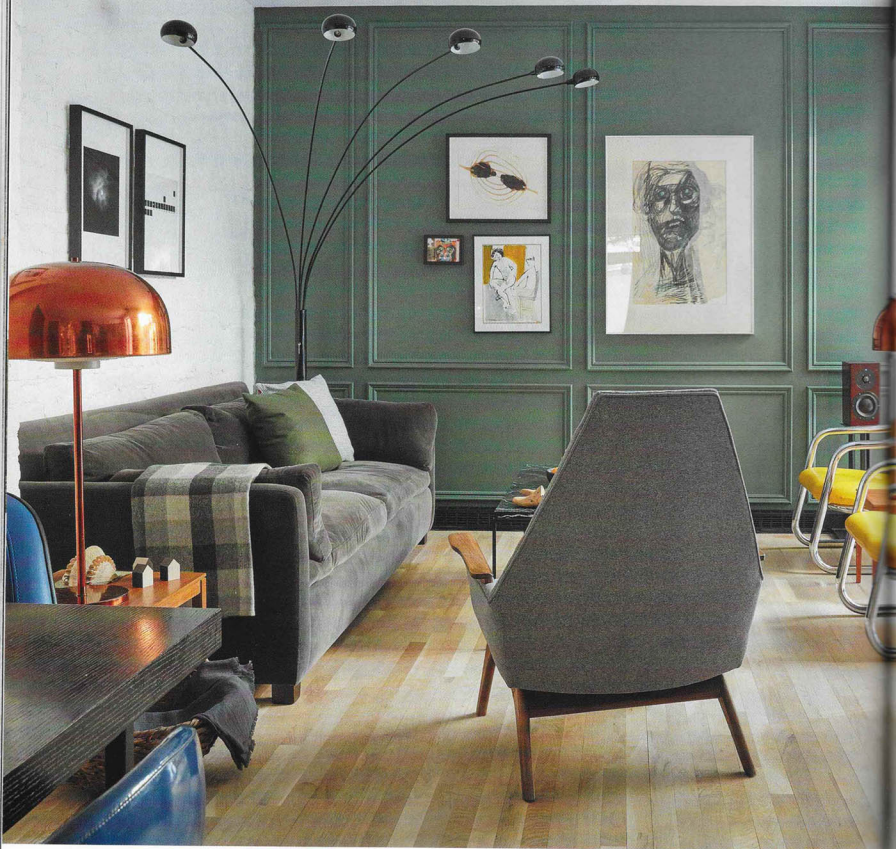
# H A R M O N Y

Maud, 16, takes miniature long-haired dachshund, Bowie, for a stroll in the alleyway behind her family's historical home.

Homeowner Sandra Smirle decorates with fresh, fuss-free greenery during the holidays. In the living area, round wreaths made of cedar, eucalyptus and olive branches are a graphic counterpoint to the rectangular windowpanes. **Table lamp, Guff; side table, Montréal Moderne.**

*TWIST ON TRADITION:  
An asymmetrical  
display of  
minimalist  
wreaths*

A deep shade of green draws the eye to the living space's traditional wall mouldings while a cast-iron woodstove by Norwegian company Jotul creates a cosy ambience. **Design, architecture, EM Architecture; contracting, Point Carré; woodstove, Foyer Universe; accent wall colour, Pine Mountain (N420-6), Behr; sofa, Montauk Sofa; throw pillows, plaid throw, EQ3; photographs (over sofa) by Sara A. Tremblay; largest artwork by Phyllis Smirle Roper; top left artwork by Antony Gormley; smallest artwork by Charlie J. Meyers; house figurines (on end table), Edition, Objets Choisis.** **OPPOSITE:** Sandra Smirle, Ken Dobell and their daughter, Maud, in a colourful neighbourhood alleyway. "The alleys in Montreal are real community spaces, and there's some graffiti back here that I really love," says Sandra.





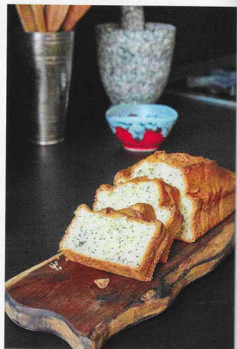
*TWIST ON TRADITION: A slim, Scandi fireplace to gather around*

**SOMETIMES IT'S TOUGH TO SEE** beyond the sparkle and spectacle of the holidays. Like a historical house that's been hastily gutted and "modernized," a sense of authenticity can be hard to find. That's why Sandra Smirle and Ken Dobell's renovated rowhouse in Montreal's artsy Mile End is so refreshing: not only does it smartly sidestep the usual Christmas trimmings but a floating glass staircase is nowhere in sight.

What you'll find, instead, are friends and family gathered under a vintage chandelier while a Scandi stove crackles nearby. You'll smell butter tart squares baking — made by Sandra and 16-year-old daughter Maud — in the hip, unfitted kitchen, and touches of evergreen tucked here and there. You'll hear carols streaming through the main floor from the beginning of the month and — if the mood strikes — some singing in the evenings. For this creative family, Christmas is pared down and heartfelt.

"For us, Christmas is about the gatherings, the food and spending time together," says Sandra, a visual artist. Her holiday decorating follows suit. Along with fresh wreaths and garlands, a few meaningful mementoes pepper the house: a set of velvet stockings, one inherited from Sandra's grandmother and three Sandra sewed herself, as well as a cherished collection of handmade and gifted ornaments.

It's a simple approach that invites the circa-1910 home to be the main attraction — something Sandra and Ken, a digital marketing consultant, appreciate after an almost year-long remodel that saw the 1,650-square-foot duplex turned into a single-family home. "Ken and I didn't want to do the usual contemporary recipe," says Sandra. Working with architect Emilie Bédard and designer Maria Rosa Di Ioia of EM Architecture, they refreshed the footprint with a new kitchen that's open to a cosy panelled living room and casual dining area.



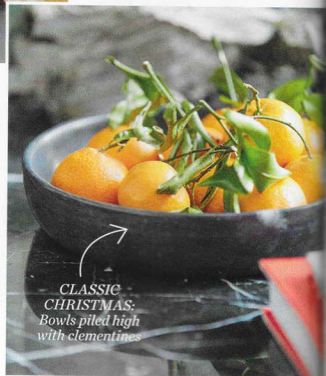
**LEFT:** “The kitchen was designed with lots of drawers to keep things out of sight,” says Ken of the hip yet hardworking space. **Coffee machine,** *Café Union*.

**OPPOSITE:** Exposing the ceiling beams brought instant character to the kitchen. Ken and Sandra love to get creative here, cooking unexpected Christmas dinners like Moroccan stew or brisket with root vegetable mash. **Kitchen contracting, vent hood,** *Ébénisterie Franck Ardaens;* **hardware,** *Schoolhouse Electric & Supply Co.;* **pendants,** *Luminaire Authentik;* **range, Wolf; **faucet,** *Baril Design;* **toaster, grey bowl** (with nuts), *napkins, Maison Pepin.***

Original ceiling beams and brick also make an appearance — “little winks and nods to the home’s history,” says Ken.

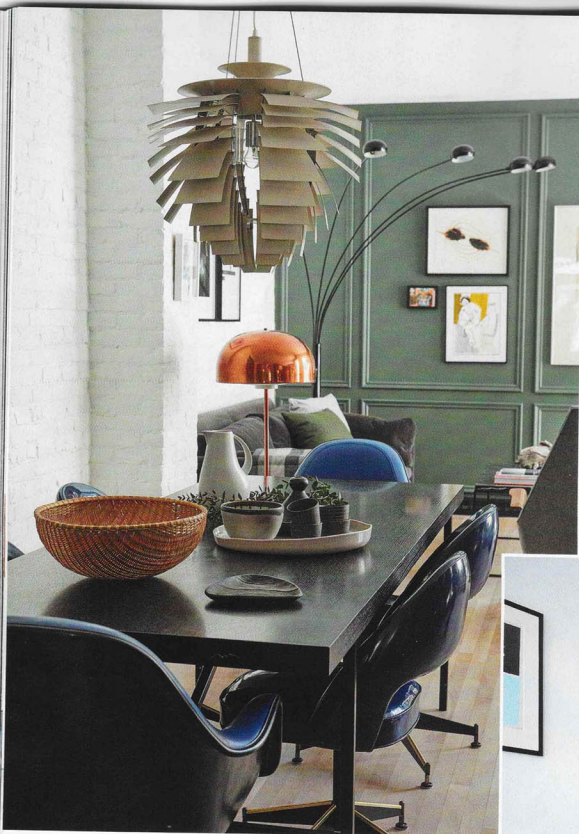
Speakers were installed throughout the main floor, a must for the music-loving family. Ken took a particular interest in hardwiring the system; he’s a member of Montreal’s popular Monday Night Choir and an avid music collector. His holiday stash ranges from world albums to choral arrangements to Sufjan Stevens’ *Songs for Christmas*. “He has a three-foot-wide drawer full of it, but I said it could only start in December!” Sandra says with a laugh.

It’s an ideal backdrop for celebrating the spirit of the season. “It’s a time to reflect on where we’ve come from and to set intentions for the new year — looking backward *and* forward,” says Sandra. “We approached the house in the same way: bringing it into the present, while making sure to nod to its past.” The trio finally moved into their rowhouse in late 2016, and relished in their first Christmas in the finished space. “It just felt really good to be home,” says Sandra. **H&H**



**CLASSIC CHRISTMAS:**  
Bowls piled high  
with clementines

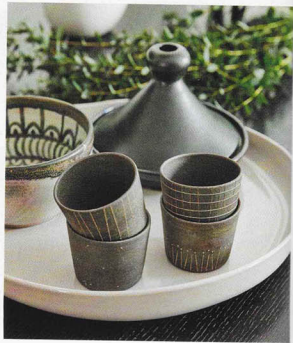




**ABOVE:** A sculptural PH Artichoke light, which Ken and Sandra snagged for just \$200 at a going-out-of-business sale, defines the dining area in the open-concept main floor. **Jug, Maison Pepin.**

**RIGHT:** Vintage treasures, travel mementoes and original artwork infuse personality throughout the house. By the stairway, an artwork from Paris leans casually on the floor — a reminder of the many years the family spent living in France. **Floor tile, Ramacieri Saligo; top right artwork by Sandra Smirle; top left artwork by Prina Gagnon.**

**BELOW:** Sandra and Ken picked up the matte grey etched teacups on a trip to Tokyo and the ceramic bowl at a Montreal street market. **Tray, Maison Pepin; tagine, 101 Artisans.**



*"Christmas is a time to reflect on where we've come from and to set intentions for the new year — looking backward and forward"*

— SANDRA SMIRLE, HOMEOWNER

Over Christmas, friends and out-of-town family members will gather for dinner. "We'll have a beautifully set table, but there's still a relaxed quality," says Sandra. The map in the dining area was a castoff from Maud's school that Sandra salvaged and repurposed as artwork. "The rivers aren't labelled so during dinner parties, we'll often drift into debates about rivers," says Ken. **Wall colour**, Oxford White (CC-30), Benjamin Moore; **open-back chairs**, Boutique Sputnik; **wall unit**, Montréal Moderne.

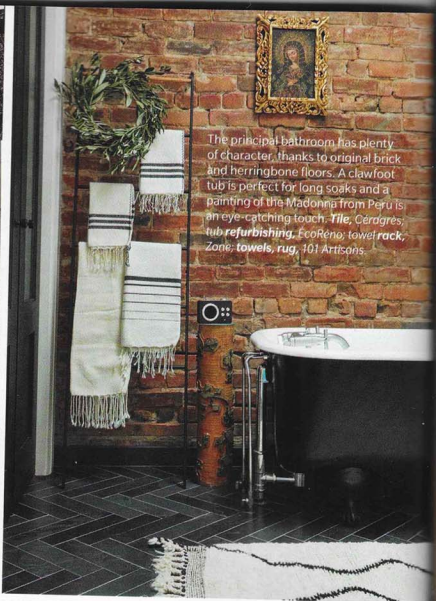




Sandra and Ken's second-floor bedroom, tucked at the back of the house, is a quiet retreat (Maud enjoys her own bit of privacy in her main-floor bedroom). A carving from India, set on the nightstand, and one of Sandra's own pieces, hung above the bed, accent the space. **Bed**, A L'Antiquité Curiosité; **linens**, accent pillow, Toile Showroom; **sconces**, CB2; **pendant**, Morba.



The principal bathroom has plenty of character, thanks to original brick and herringbone floors. A clawfoot tub is perfect for long soaks and a painting of the Madonna from Peru is an eye-catching touch. **Tile**, Céragres; **tub refurbishing**, EcoRéno; **towel rack**, Zane; **towels**, rug, 101 Artisans.



Ken's office is an orderly place to work from home. **Shelving**, Ebénisterie Franck Ardaens; **desk**, Montréal Moderne; **vases** (on desk shelf), **notebook**, **fish sculpture** (on 1 1/2 ft hanging shelf), Edition, Objets Choisis.



A black and white scheme unites an ornate mirror and deconstructed vanity. Sandra purchased the sketch from a market on a remote Gulf Island in B.C. **Vanity**, Ebénisterie Franck Ardaens; **sink**, EcoRéno; **faucet**, Nobili; **soap pump** by Brizo, Céragres-Les Bains; **towel**, **white bowl**, 101 Artisans.



**CLASSIC CHRISTMAS:**  
Cascading evergreen garlands

In the guest bedroom, a handsome armoire — a lucky find at a French flea market — offers ample storage space. Sandra found the vintage glass pendant on Etsy; all it needed was hardware. **Pendant hardware, Atlas Lighting; blanket, Toile Showroom; baskets, Ikea; wooden ornaments (painted with metallic accents), DeSerres.**