

# Living raw in Leslieville: Creation layered onto destruction

**DAVE LEBLANC** >

TORONTO

SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED OCTOBER 26, 2021

FOR SUBSCRIBERS



The Leslieville home of ceramics artist Catherine Thomas is a house of controlled chaos, of yin and yang.

NANNE SPRINGER/NANNE SPRINGER

Prepare yourself, for herein lies a story so raw, so unbridled and filled with conviction, many will wince at the words used to tell it. Some will want to shield their eyes from wanton images of copper, concrete, steel, and – gasp! – trowel marks. It is a gripping tale of succumbing to desire in one’s own house, with zero regard for resale.

Buckle up.

Our story begins innocently enough. Meet Catherine Thomas, a seemingly mild-mannered ceramicist living in a huge house overlooking Withrow Park in Toronto’s east end. So big was the home that, along with a few roomies, Ms. Thomas also rented a portion to tenants. Yet, in her own words, she was “barely making ends meet.”

Realizing she was sitting on (or rather in) a goldmine, Ms. Thomas began her downsizing quest for a hard loft two years ago. One, in particular, was almost a done deal until the condo board poured cold water on her plans to install a red-hot kiln. After searching high and low for a small warehouse, her agent suggested a plain old house that had just been listed.



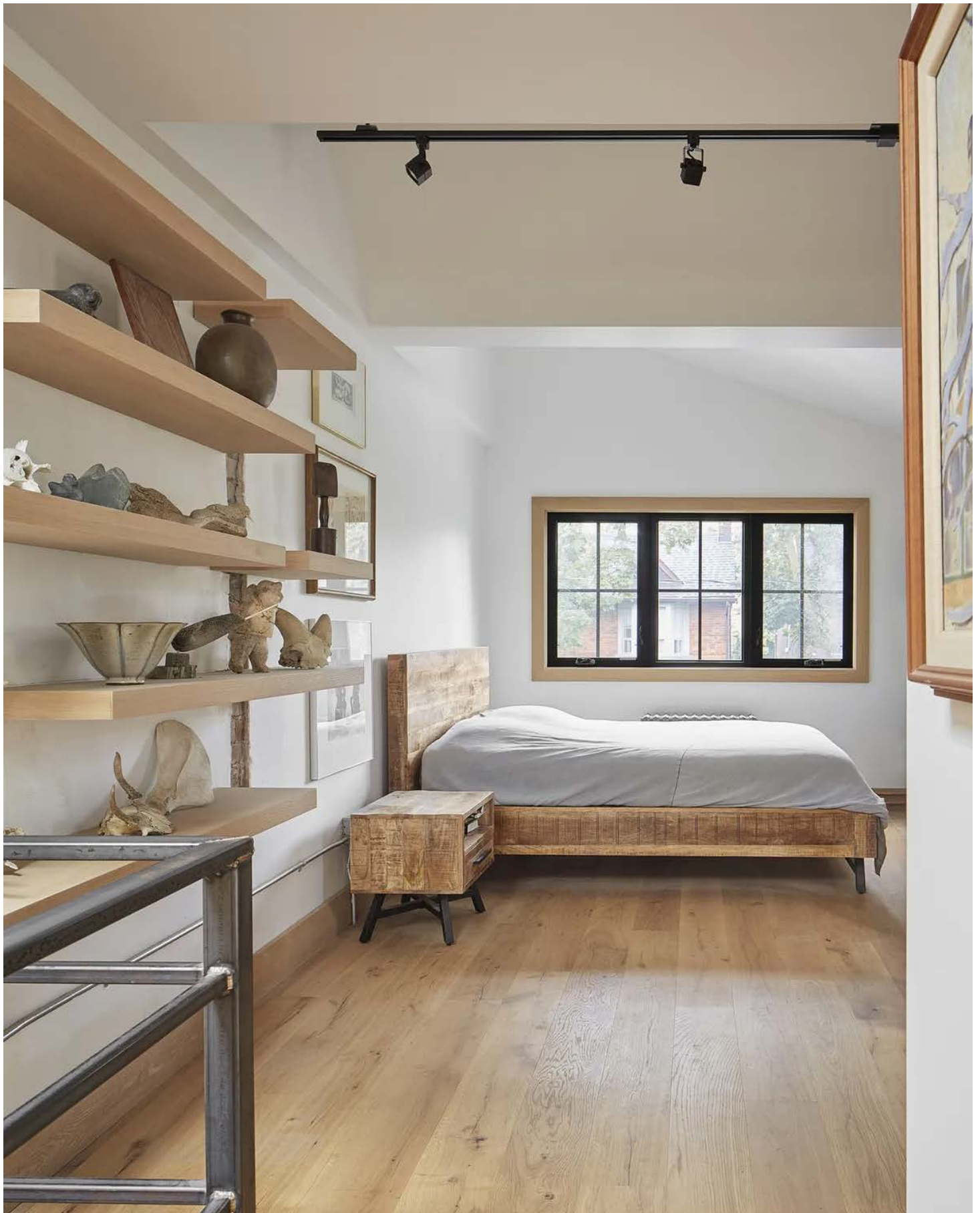
The little semi-detached is a stone's throw from Queen Street East.

NANNE SPRINGER/NANNE SPRINGER

“So I walked in here, and it was an open house, and [I] just went, ‘Yes, this is it,’ ” she remembers. After meeting neighbours across the street, who assured her that Leslieville was as hip and creative as Riverdale (if not more), she decided the little semi-detached a stone's throw from Queen Street East would do nicely. “And then the next thing I knew, it was mine.”

It was during the demolition – by her son Jake Williams of Maxwell Contracting and Development – that she had her next epiphany.

Her architect, Heather Asquith, picks up the story: “We had plans, we had permits,” the 1996 Waterloo grad begins with a smile. “Initially we were assuming we were strapping walls, insulating, drywalling, and then there was that moment of reckoning and most of the decisions happened with us standing around here trying to figure out what to do.”



Drywall is found in abundance in the dwelling's one big bedroom.

NANNE SPRINGER/NANNE SPRINGER

That moment of reckoning? Well, that's where this story gets unbridled. Ms. Thomas, you see, was smitten with the raw joists over her head, the rough brick walls and chipped plaster remnants of finishes past, and the possibilities of keeping – perhaps even enhancing and highlighting – all of that roughness.

“Even though Catherine is a ceramicist it was like working with a sculptor,” Ms. Asquith finishes as she looks over at her client. “You really pushed the vision.”

Yes, Ms. Thomas may have pushed the raw agenda, but Ms. Asquith and Mr. Williams pushed back just enough so that visitors don't feel as though they've entered a perpetual demolition site. Look closer and there is much that is clean, tailored and exquisite, such as Mr. Williams's display shelves, his kitchen millwork in white oak, the smartly trimmed windows, or the razor-straight industrial staircase. Yes, things get a little unhinged in the dining area, where Ms. Thomas allowed some old green paint with black trowel marks to steal the spotlight – “It's like a piece of abstract art to me,” she says – but, even there, control is maintained through the geometric-like composition of electrical conduit.



“It was really just a total collaboration, because the trades were left a lot to come up with their own contribution,” Ms. Thomas says.

“And they really took it on,” Ms. Asquith adds, “which was so cool to see, when you're given some liberty and you take ownership of it.” It's true: the copper plumbing in the kitchen is almost sculptural, and the decision to heat the home using refurbished vintage radiators (from Etobicoke's Ironworks Radiators) elevates the composition even further.

To keep all of that cozy heat inside – and allow the raw brick walls to remain unsealed – Ms. Asquith had the home insulated on the outside. Over the existing brick went two layers of foam and then a handsome coat of corrugated steel accented with rusty Corten. And not only was Ms. Thomas, a former mechanical engineer, interested in the “inside-out” process of insulation, so too were the tradespeople, since any method that can save precious interior inches in a small Toronto home is worth having in one's tool belt.

The bathroom brings things back to brick, copper pipe and porcelain floors that mimic concrete.

NANNE SPRINGER/NANNE SPRINGER



A view of the razor-straight industrial staircase.

NANNE SPRINGER/NANNE SPRINGER

Upstairs, drywall lovers will rejoice, as it is to be found in abundance in the dwelling's one big bedroom. The bathroom, however, brings things back to brick, copper pipe and porcelain floors that mimic concrete.

In the basement, digging down a little and shaving a few inches off newly sistered joists gained enough ceiling height to create the workshop-with-kiln and a small showroom/sales area for when Ms. Thomas reinstates studio tours and sales. Here, too, Mr. Williams has built wonderful shelving for his mother to display her work (much of it, like the house, is rough, textured and moody).



Architect Heather Asquith had the home insulated on the outside.

NANNE SPRINGER/NANNE SPRINGER

And for those still shielding their eyes, consider this: For every exposed weld, there is a clean millwork joint; for all of those exposed copper pipes, there are ornate radiators to act as visual anchors; for every rough brick or expanse of chipped plaster, there is a section of smooth panelling or an arrangement of interesting artwork. It's a house of controlled chaos, of yin and yang and, ultimately, of creation layered onto destruction. And it works.

"I thought it was a really interesting proposition because – not that I would've ever known that this was the end where we got to – the process started in a very interesting way," Ms. Asquith says. "For me, from an architectural point of view, like, no drywall, no pot lights, exposed brick, insulating from the outside ... awesome."

*Your house is your most valuable asset. We have a weekly [Real Estate newsletter](#) to help you stay on top of news on the housing market, mortgages, the latest closings and more. Sign up today.*