



# LIVABLE LUXURY



A well-travelled couple designs a unique family home that evokes their European and Chinese heritage while celebrating their love for Scandinavian design

**by Sarah Brown**  
Photography by [Photoluxstudio.com](http://Photoluxstudio.com)  
— Christian Lalonde



The couple met in Beijing but lived in Europe for a number of years before settling in Ottawa. The impetus for their decision to settle in Rockcliffe Park and renovate was the arrival, three years ago, of their twin sons

**Daniel Thunberg grew up in Sweden, Zhu Dan in China.** After they met in Beijing in 2006, Daniel's job in the automotive technology sector led the globe-trotting couple to move to Rotterdam, then back to Beijing, and then to London before they finally settled in Ottawa in 2015. Their varied backgrounds and travels have given them a wide-ranging perspective on design — and the savvy to mix and meld these many influences into one elegant expression. Theirs is a truly cohesive home, seamlessly incorporating a decidedly Scandinavian sensibility with Asian flourishes to produce that hard-to-quantify quality known in Danish culture as *hygge*.

The impetus for their decision to settle in Rockcliffe Park and renovate was the arrival, three years ago, of their twin sons. As they began combing the city for a permanent home, both Daniel and Dan had a list of neighbourhood attributes they were searching for. Daniel was looking for easy access to nature. "Growing up in Sweden, I had a forest right behind my parents' house. I was always outside playing and wanted the same for my sons," he says. Dan, too, was looking for green space — she had fallen in love with the old buildings, royal parks, and gardens of London — but was also clear that their home must be filled with light. A Rockcliffe house built in 2001 checked all the boxes. Located in one of the city's leafiest neighbourhoods, it had originally been built by an architect for his family. The main floor boasted a pleasing open flow and lots of windows — all it needed was a serious refresh.

The kitchen is modern and whimsical. A backsplash features triangular tiles flowing down toward cabinetry imported from Kvanum, a Swedish company. The faucets are by Denmark's Arne Jacobsen, while the pendant lights over the counter are by Denmark's Louis Poulsen. "We gravitated toward Danish and Dutch style throughout the house," explains Dan



Daniel and Dan's design collaboration with Dylan O'Keefe and Haley Fiorenza was pure serendipity. Daniel had seen O'Keefe's work in an old issue of *Ottawa Magazine* and liked his style but wasn't sure where O'Keefe was working or how to contact him (the duo had not yet launched a company website). Everything came together when the couple's real estate agent suggested that he knew just the designers to work with Daniel and Dan on their renovation — when he handed over a business card for O'Keefe Fiorenza Design Group, Daniel couldn't believe his luck. The rest, as they say, is history.

The designers and the homeowners immediately hit it off. "They have such a good eye for design," O'Keefe enthuses. "Every piece they own is a collector's item." Just as important as that design compatibility, however, was the couple's super-organized approach. They immediately presented O'Keefe and Fiorenza with a spreadsheet that listed the measurements of all their favourite furniture and paintings. Even before they set to work, stripping the main-floor walls down to the studs, the designers could picture where key pieces of furniture would fit, how they would look with the built-ins they were designing, and where there were still gaps to fill.



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## livable luxury

In a house filled with beauty, the kitchen stands out. Unmistakably modern, it is also whimsical: a “cascading” backsplash sketched by Fiorenza takes centre stage, the triangular tiles flowing down toward the custom cabinetry imported from Kvanum, a Swedish company. Daniel and Dan remember hanging out in the kitchen space before the layout was finalized, pretending to cook a dinner so that they could see exactly how the flow would work. Daniel then measured all the couple’s small appliances to make sure there was space for every one. “Usually we design the cabinets and the homeowners adapt their possessions to fit,” explains Fiorenza. “This was done in the reverse way.” The finished product is the result of meticulous planning and hours on the phone with their Swedish counterparts. “We often had Google Translate open as we talked, to make sure we were on the same page.”

The countertops, from Ceragres, are super-thin Lapitec, a sintered stone surface that is popular in Europe but has yet to catch on in Canada, says Daniel, while the faucets are an iconic design by Denmark’s Arne Jacobsen. Daniel sourced all these kitchen



**Top right and above:** The couple found this dining room set when they lived in London, while the living room features pieces from their Beijing apartment

**Above and facing page, top:** The former sunroom was renovated to be a dining space on the first floor and a home office on the second



elements, as well as the pendant lights, originally designed in the 1950s by Louis Poulsen for the Royal Danish Naval Academy. “We gravitated toward Danish and Dutch style throughout the house,” explains Dan. “Even when we lived in Beijing, our apartment had that feeling.”

But while the kitchen is completely new, other rooms are tied closely to previous homes and countries the couple have lived in. The dining room, for example, is built around a sophisticated Poliform marble-topped table discovered in London. “We didn’t have room for it when we lived in London, but we hoped that one day we would have the space to buy it,” says Daniel

The living room, meanwhile, pays homage to their shared time in Beijing. All the furniture in this room, including the iconic Corbusier LC2 armchairs, comes directly from their Beijing apartment. A painting on one wall by up-and-coming artist Li Yongfei emphasizes those ties. Dan commissioned the piece after meeting the artist at an exhibition in Beijing. She loves fish, which symbolize good fortune, so the artist incorporated them into a dreamy waterscape.

On the way up the stairs to the bedrooms, a long horizontal niche displays dozens of Delft Blue miniature pottery houses collected by Daniel. Since the 1950s, Dutch airline KLM has been presenting the houses to its business travellers. A frequent flyer, Daniel has amassed a worthy collection of the pieces, which are modelled after real Amsterdam buildings. “Every time we moved, I’d be transporting all of them in boxes — I finally found a way to do something with them,” says Daniel. Like every aspect of the house, the niche exemplifies what can happen when style and attention to detail merge. The white oak that the tiny houses are perched on is a recurring theme throughout the house, showing up as accent details on everything from custom kitchen cabinetry to living room built-ins and as a topper for the handrails on the stairs.

This is a home that encourages a sense of well-being. Daniel says that at its core, it’s a practical house designed for a family with kids. And yet it’s obviously much more. Daniel and Dan thought deeply about every detail in this renovation — in the process, creating spaces that celebrate their roots and travels while also looking resolutely to the future. This is a house designed to make this family of four very happy for many years to come.



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# FINE FORTUNE

**Beijing artist Li Yongfei is known for his traditional ink brush painting, which he often uses to depict contemporary themes.**

Zhu Dan commissioned this painting a few years ago for the living room of their new Beijing apartment after meeting the up-and-coming artist at an exhibition in that city. "I really liked his style," Dan says, adding that the two spoke that day about commissioning a piece. She measured the space, determined the size of the painting, then met with Li to talk about colours and themes. Dan loves fish, which symbolize good fortune, so the artist incorporated them into a dreamy waterscape. "I wanted the painting to feel like a story so you could picture yourself looking into the water and it flowing around you."

Li often uses traditional ink brush painting, but his themes reference more contemporary aesthetics and fashion. He is seen as part of a new wave of Chinese artists whose work reflects a more globalized age influenced by both East and West. A few years ago, some of his pieces appeared in *Secret Love*, a travelling exhibition that explored the rapid change taking place in Chinese society. Identity, norms, and sexuality were key motifs. ■



## RESOURCES

**ARCHITECT**  
O'Keefe Fiorenza  
Design Group  
[ofd.ca](http://ofd.ca)

**KITCHEN  
COUNTERTOPS**  
Ceragres  
[ceragres.ca](http://ceragres.ca)

**CABINETS**  
Clear Ridge Designs +  
Custom Cabinetry  
[clearridgedesigns.ca](http://clearridgedesigns.ca)

**BACKSPLASH TILE**  
Euro Tile + Stone  
[eurotilestone.com](http://eurotilestone.com)

