

73



## *Always in Reno Mode*

Dfy Studio's Adah Noelting has built a career breathing new life into old buildings – skills that came in handy when she fell in love with an old house

From the curb, trees shield the wrap-around veranda of Adah and Phil Noelting's Kitchener house, one of many features that let them know they'd found the home they wanted.



Whether it's a company's office space or her own home, Kitchener's Adah Noelting is constantly reimagining the space around her

BY KATHRYN STORRING  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALISHA TOWNSEND

Should the kitchen cupboards be painted or would classy new handles be enough? Should the old-fashioned bathtub be ditched in favour of a modern shower stall? Should the second floor be reconfigured, turning two of the bedrooms into a large suite complete with modern storage? And what's with that closet taking up space in the dining room?

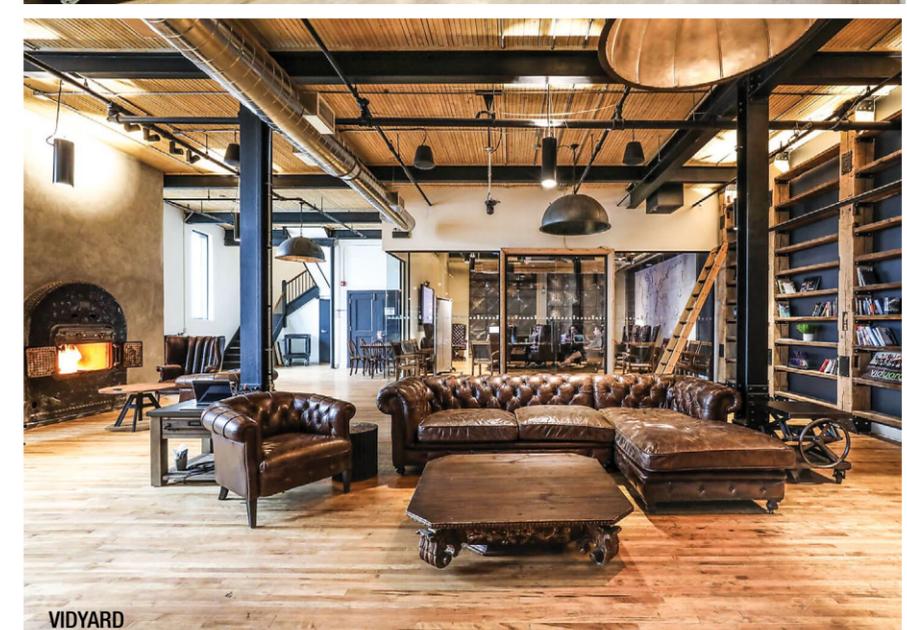
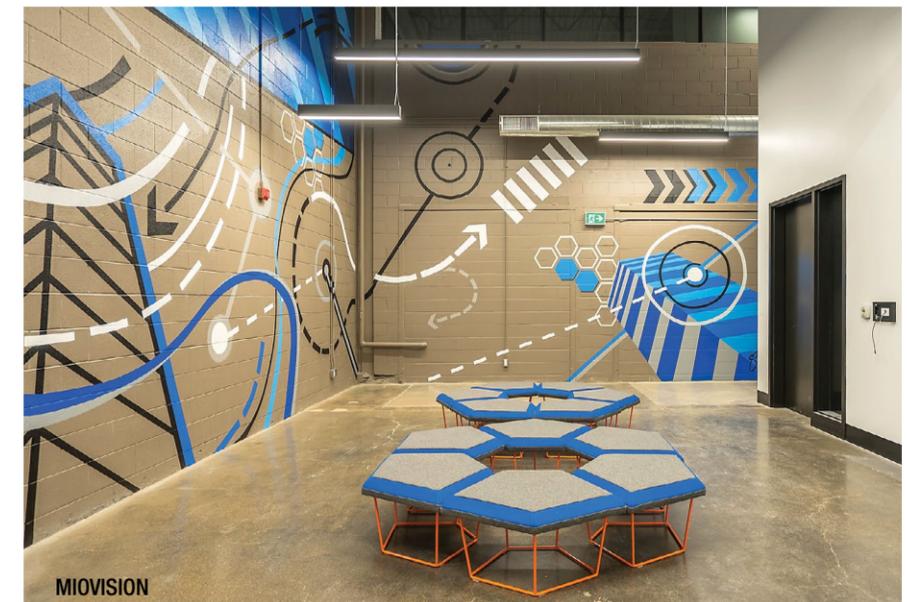
Ah, yes – the joys of falling in love with an old house. No matter how many revamps it may have endured over the years, there is always something more to consider.

But this particular house, in the Midtown neighbourhood of downtown Kitchener, is under the discerning eye of Adah Noelting, 34, who has built an impressive career out of transforming old buildings into funky, ultra-modern offices or commercial spaces.

Her interior design projects have included everything from Maxwell's Concerts and Events in Waterloo to the Rich Uncle Tavern (formerly the Berlin) in Kitchener, and from Thalmic Labs' expansion into the former Schreiter's furniture store in Kitchener to being part of the team that converted a 475,000-square-foot Kitchener warehouse into Catalyst137, a dynamic

**OPPOSITE PAGE:** Adah Noelting can often be found sitting on the living room couch, working away on her laptop. Reminders of world travels with her husband, Phil, decorate the wall.

**RIGHT:** Miovision and Vidyard photography by Jens Langen Thalmic Labs photography, courtesy of Dfy Studio



hardware-technology hub.

But applying her boundless energy to a 113-year-old house was another matter. So many ideas. So many possibilities. So many twists and turns on the road between getting it right and just getting it done.

The first challenge was finding the right house – a quest that took seven months and 88 viewings. It wasn't just a matter of being fussy. Adah and her husband-to-be, Phil Noelting, made seven offers during that time, only to be outbid.

Finally, in 2014, her tenacious search settled on the Midtown listing. She immediately lined up a showing with a real estate agent. "We walked through the house and I called Phil right away and I'm like, I think we've found it."

The home's appeal started at the curb where huge trees shield its wrap-around veranda and upper balconies, one large and open, and another tucked under a roof peak. Many fine features awaited inside, everything from original pocket doors

and quality wood floors to an intriguing wooden corner-guard where two walls meet at the top of the stairs.

"We walked through, and I felt like many families were happy in this house," she recalls. "Just how it was taken care of." She points to the staircase. "You see all the footsteps and you can only imagine who lived in this house before us."

The house would need updates and repairs, starting with a deteriorating ceiling in the living room, the result of a water leak along an old chimney. A house inspection assured the couple that the leak had been fixed, just the ceiling repair remained.

Still, even an experienced interior designer can learn a lesson or two from an old house.

Adah and Phil's moving day coincided with a planned trip to Mardi Gras in New Orleans. "All of our friends and family moved us in, we shut the door, locked it, and drove to the airport," Adah says.

The couple returned to a sea of boxes and

a made bed, thanks to Noelting's mom. The couple was excited about their new home, snug from the Kitchener winter. That is until they discovered their pipes were frozen.

"We had no clue what to do," Noelting says with an infectious laugh. "We came from a condo. So we were googling how to fix it."

Their panic took them to the basement where they noticed a service sticker on the furnace boiler. They called the number at 11 p.m. To their surprise, when they gave their address, the voice on the phone said: "Oh, you're the new neighbours? I will just pop over."

Indeed, the service call was provided by a knowledgeable neighbour who prescribed concentrated heat from a hairdryer. It took a few hours, but the trick worked.

Disaster averted, Noelting set to work on a lengthy to-do list. She had lots of time – or so she thought.

She had just launched her interior design

business, Dfy Studio, so she planned to throw most of her energy into the house – creating a short-lease apartment in the small former store/studio beyond the kitchen for starters.

But then her business took off in a flash and became her No. 1 priority.

In Noelting's mind, the renovation progress since then has been slow, but a tour of the house accompanied by Cleo the curious cat (who constantly poked her mottled head out of closets and shelves) revealed many accomplishments.

The apartment unit has indeed been revamped into an attractive space. In the kitchen, cupboard handles have been replaced, and granite countertops and a new island added to better accommodate the couple's culinary exploits. Throughout the house, paint and wallpaper projects have been completed, doors and windows have been updated, and carpeting added to bedrooms that had linoleum floors.

Adah has claimed one of the bedrooms for a home office, a space flooded with natural light from the exterior balcony; Phil set up his office in the renovated attic.

The couple does as much as they can themselves, like removing the window and door frames in preparation for replacements or stripping old wallpaper.

Not that the latter is always easy. In the dining room, they discovered they were not just ripping down wallpaper but wallpaper that had been painted over. And it wasn't leaving without a fight. But there was more. Like a nasty scene from a TV home-make-over show, it turned out the ceiling had also been wallpapered – and painted. (Cue the ominous music.)

The dining room was already a substantial project. They had decided to replace a large, seemingly out-of-place closet with attractive cabinetry; a matching bookshelf makes great use of a small corner beside the doorway to the kitchen. The new wallpaper is dark and the trim a dazzling white; new

mouldings were custom made to mimic the home's original stylings.

But the room's main wow factor comes from the new sliding glass doors to the backyard – a project that gave Noelting pause. Despite her daring ventures in the workplace, the idea of knocking a huge hole through the double-brick exterior wall of her home rattled her.

"I was like: 'The whole wall is going to fall in! I don't know what is going to happen,'" she recalls, laughing. "I can't be here while this is happening. Call me if anything bad happens!"

Fortunately, the skilled workers prevailed. Today the glass doors not only usher in oodles of light, but the view over the large deck, patio and landscaping also extends the home's visual footprint.

Actually, the outdoor projects held surprises too, starting with the original little deck that had a rug hiding the fact it was rotting. Noelting stepped on the deck and broke through.



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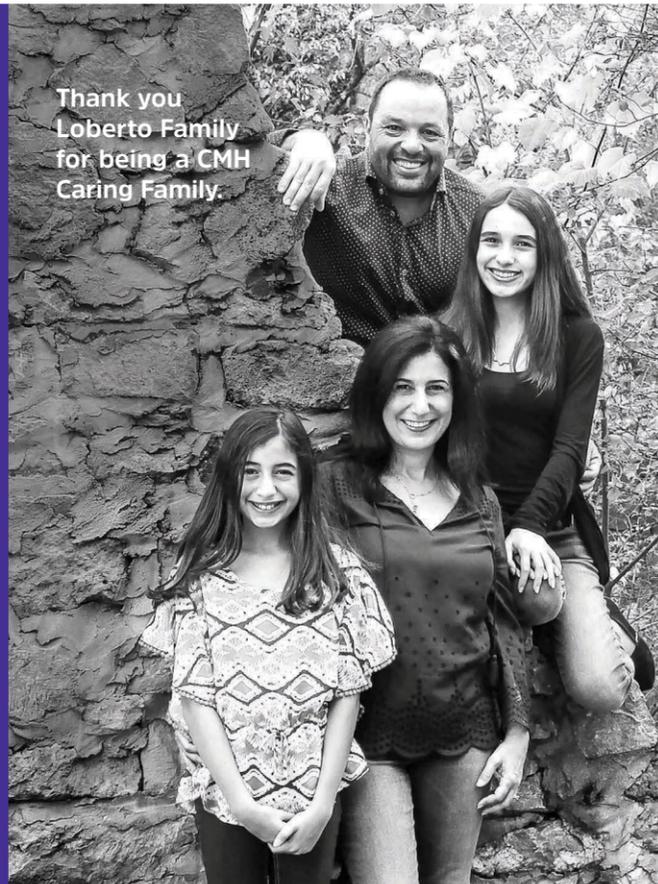
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The previous owners were not into gardening and the backyard was overgrown. No problem. Noelting designed a fresh start featuring cobblestone she had purchased from a client who was having it removed. The cobblestone looked great as a driveway, laid by Phil and Noelting's father, and there was lots left over.

But in the garden, "no matter what we put down, it started sinking," Noelting says. That's when they discovered that two owners before them the space was the domain of a dedicated gardener who had added about a metre of rich topsoil. A fat layer of that soil has now been removed, and a new patio created featuring a more-forgiving cultured stone and moss.

As Noelting notes: "Everything has been a bigger job than it was supposed to be."

**"E**xpect the unexpected" could be the mission statement for Noelting's career too.

"There are always surprises. Always," she says as she outlines the mind-boggling tangents that unfold in her interior-design projects. "You have a timeline and you think the timeline's going to work, but then some massive project comes up in the middle of it."

It is partly why the interior designer stays involved from the first walk-through of a proposed space to moving day.

As she describes her work, one marvels that she ever has time to focus on her home. And one does understand why she turns to yoga, meditation and cycling for stress release.

It's not as if Phil has time to burn either. Originally from Toronto, he honed his entrepreneurial skills at Babson College in Boston before moving to Kitchener. His startup, Qwalify, which creates business recruitment software, now has offices in Kitchener, Toronto and Montreal.

Phil and Adah were married in September 2017 after six years together.

Adah, whose family surname is Trabulsi, grew up in Kitchener and graduated from

St. Mary's High School. After studying interior design at Fanshawe College in London, she earned her interior design credentials from the Association of Registered Interior Designers of Ontario. Including co-op placements, she spent about a decade with Premier Project Consultants, a Kitchener architectural-design company.

After launching Dfy Studio Ltd., where she now employs three people, her first projects were in two multi-million-dollar homes in the Toronto area. They were "amazing" initiatives, but Noelting found herself drawn to the opportunities – and challenges – of reimagining old buildings for business ventures, often for the tech industry.

"I really clicked with commercial design and hospitality," she says. "I just have so much more excitement and passion for that. I really like to create spaces that people walk into and have some sort of emotion or have a reaction to it."

On many projects, Noelting not only does interior design but also acts as the prime consultant, co-ordinating the other key players, such as architects and mechanical and electrical engineers.

On huge overhauls, however, she is happy to have an architect take responsibility for the overall vision. At Catalyst137 and its major tenant Miovision Technologies, for example, she worked with SRM Architects. For Graffiti Market, an innovative foodie venture at Catalyst137 that blends a restaurant, craft brewery, coffee roaster and food market, she is providing interior design for Martin Simmons Architects.

A major chunk of Noelting's work is completed before a client even signs a lease. In fact, some companies contemplate plans for more than one space before choosing a new home.

The "test fit" will lay out the options: Is the potential property big enough – or too big? What about ventilation, daylight and other basic criteria? And then, of course, there's the fun stuff – the possible design elements.

"The one thing we always look for is what is the character in the existing building and what can we pull out?" Noelting says. "How can we use what's here and make it stand out even more?"

Homeowners, forever looking for ways to outwit a house's faults, may be surprised by some of Noelting's "finds."

"Are there concrete walls we don't have to plaster over, drywall or paint, because it has enough beauty in it? Is there tin sitting in the basement that we can pull up and put on the walls instead. Are the existing mullions black and then what can we pull out to make sure they stand out in the design?"

Once a lease has been signed and construction permits submitted, a flurry of details come into play as she ensures every corner fits the company's needs. For example, with a tech company, developers may need a darker, screen-friendly area whereas a marketing department may prefer a creative, collaborative space. But the design goes much deeper than that.

"You already have the space plan done, but what pieces are millwork, and what do they look like?" Noelting says. "What is the theme of the space? What is the concept for the space? How much furniture are we buying? Are there bulkheads, ceiling features? Is there over and above lighting? How much glass is in the space? That kind of thing.

"So, it's basically taking it from a space plan to a 3-D (vision): that's the office. That's the concept and the design."

Those toiling in traditional offices might wonder if elements of her designs are just trendy or quirky. For example, at first glance "quiet booths" that can be used by an individual or pushed together for a meeting may just make you smile. But Noelting sees their functionality, how they add fluidity to an office space, allowing staffers options for both solitary and collaborative tasks. In some offices, she eases the tedium of concentrated work by incorporating unconventional seating areas

that mimic a café or a homey setting.

At Vidyard, located in the former Goudies department store in Kitchener, employees can also kick back in a games space or a welcoming roof-top patio. And, speaking of unconventional, one of this tech company's meeting areas has a library theme complete with traditional leather furniture, a custom fireplace and, yes, books.

Open-concept offices might include wooden trellises to add interest and a hint of privacy without the permanency of walls. Exposed beams and pipes can lift the height of a room while colourful murals and sleek accent pieces enliven walls at eye level.

But above all, each project has an individual stamp.

"We don't look at what the trends are now or what's modern and what's contemporary," Noelting says. "We get to know the company very well first, and we design for their function and for their culture."

Kurtis McBride, chief executive officer and co-founder of Miovision, can attest to that.

In an interview, he praised Noelting's ability to manifest the company's cultural perspective in physical terms, noting that she not only presented the big-picture ideas, but also a design that fit the company's budget and other constraints. As a bonus, "she's probably one of the friendliest people you could meet," McBride says.

Miovision currently covers 65,000 square feet, but its total office footprint within its Catalyst137 home is 125,000 sq. ft. Noelting has designed two additional spaces, primed for future expansion, and hidden them behind temporary walls.

Very practical, but her design also comes with a whimsical flourish. Miovision specializes in traffic management and data collection so what better focal point for the open-concept office than a clever round-about design? It has a lunchroom in the centre with hallway "roads" branching off into the key office functions.

"The office is big enough that people can drive scooters to get around. No one is

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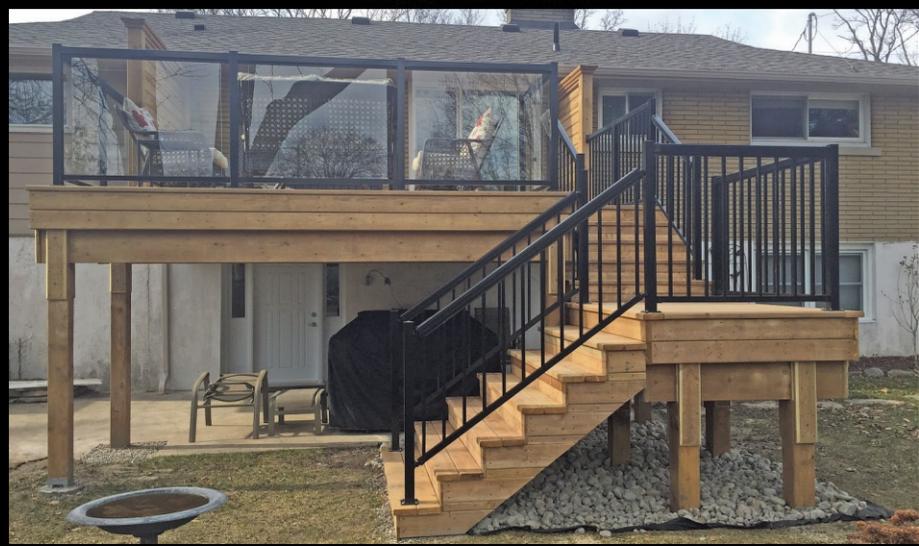
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driving cars, thankfully, but we may have to signalize the roundabout at some point," McBride jokes.

McBride is also one of the co-developers of Catalyst137, along with Voisin Capital and Osmington Inc. Throughout the massive enterprise, Noelting worked with SRM Architects to create a fluid design that meshes the exterior with the common interior elements.

McBride is particularly pleased with the lobby's 6,000-square-foot events space, an attempt to bring together what he described as the local silos that separate tech, the arts and philanthropic initiatives.

"The hope was to try to break these community silos down and provide this space that, by virtue of it being free, would attract all different types.

"When you walk into that space, you can feel (Noelting's) fingerprints all over it and it speaks to what we were trying to do there," he says.

The events space not only provides users with a giant screen and speakers, but also the beauty of natural light and living moss walls. Two to three events are held weekly, everything from a charity fundraiser to an art show to a poetry slam.

Frank Voisin, president of Voisin Capital Inc., echoed his Catalyst137 partner's praise.

"It is hard to overstate how impressed I and Adah's other clients are with her attention to detail, design skills, and focus on the budget," Voisin said in an email.

Voisin's other Kitchener properties include Vidyard's home, at 8 Queen St., and 41 King St. W., which houses office space and the Rich Uncle Tavern.

He said he first noticed Noelting's knack for impactful design at Vidyard. These days, a number of his tenants at Catalyst137 have hired her for their individual spaces after seeing her work in the tech hub's common areas.

"Over the projects we've worked together on, I've been consistently impressed by her ability to value-engineer – creating highly

attractive spaces at a fraction of what others could," Voisin said.

"Moreover, her design sense is incredibly versatile, and I've seen her perform equally well across a range of esthetic styles and in a variety of different use cases, including a number of tech office users, a grocer, coffee shop and restaurant."

As well as reinventing old buildings as chic new spaces, in recent months, Noelting's creative eye has been tested in outdated office buildings.

A Toronto architect has included Noelting in some of its renovations within buildings purchased in this region by Europro, a Toronto investment and management firm. Local holdings include The Galleria, 22 Frederick and the Market Square.

Noelting's contributions have ranged from updating common washrooms to designing Europro's Kitchener office in the Galleria building at Frederick and Weber streets. In July, Noelting also moved her Dfy Studio office into this building.

Working on straight-ahead office buildings might seem less inspiring, but not to Noelting.

"Everyone's looking at the brick-and-beam buildings, but what about these big beautiful structures in downtown Kitchener that kind of got forgotten about?" she says.

"So (Europro) is going into them and giving them all new life, which is fantastic. All of this office space is just sitting here in downtown, waiting for all these new companies."

She talks about the beautiful views over the city and the design potential once partitions and drop ceilings have been knocked out and the space reconsidered.

However, her enthusiasm is probably not a surprise.

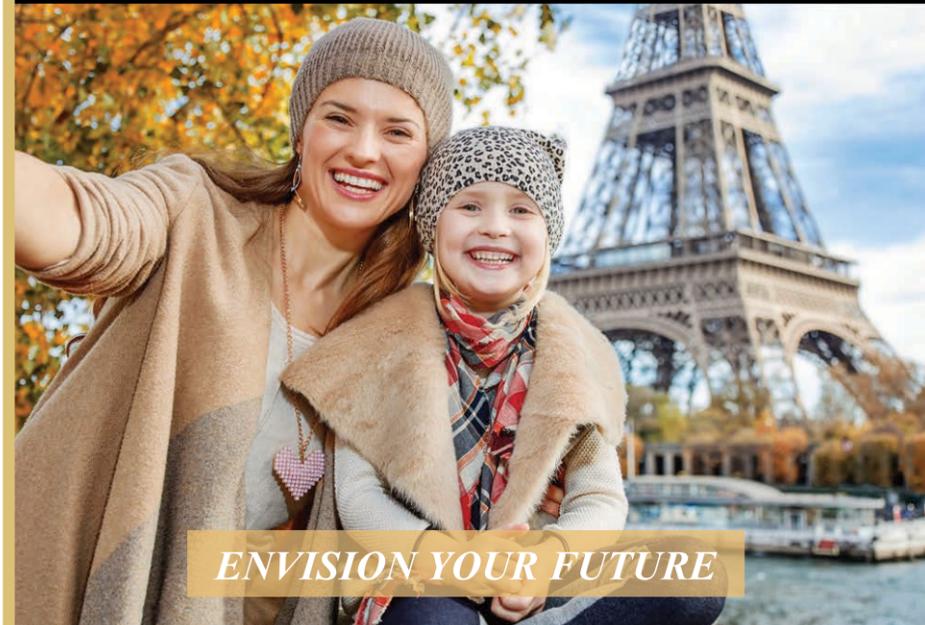
When asked to name a favourite revamp, she answered: "I love every single project. They are all so different and all so special in their own way."



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