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White Out

A former 1970s hotel suite in downtown Victoria is redesigned to fade into the scenery.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Homeowner Sylvie Rochette is the founder of Epicure, a purveyor of clean-eating ingredients and recipes, so there's always something delicious up for grabs atop the beautiful Neolith porcelain countertop in her dreamy all-white kitchen.

Over his long career designing houses and condos in Victoria, Bruce Wilkin has embraced architectural periods ranging from Arts and Crafts to Classical Revival to Brutalism. His philosophy? Why limit yourself to just one? Every home has its own history and particularities, and there's a rich, vast world of references from which to draw. And yet, for some projects the answer isn't to reference but to simply carve away. Sometimes, paraphrasing Dieter Rams, the best design is as little design as possible.

When Wilkin accompanied long-time clients Sylvie Rochette and Bernard Delecroix to a showing of a two-storey condo in downtown Victoria, his immediate advice was to take everything out and start anew. What did it look like? Brief pause. "The opposite of this," he says. There were wrinkled gold carpets, heavy valances, popcorn ceilings, awkwardly placed fireplaces and, visible from nearly

every angle, a bulky staircase with dark-stained oak spindles and a chunky newel post. "It was that late-'80s look that had carried over into the '90s," says Wilkin. "All of it needed to go."

The building has its own particularities indeed. Built in 1981 both as a hotel and for residential use, it met with some controversy at the time for its modern look (a departure from the neighbouring century-old brick buildings) and its bold siting (it juts out into the city's Inner Harbour like a blunted cruise ship, dark water lapping at its foundation). The unit was often used as a grand hospitality suite; sometime later, it was connected to the unit below and redeveloped as a condo. It had also been damaged by a fire, which had prompted the extensive 1980s remodel. Rochette and Delecroix could see past all of it, zeroing in on the nearly 270-degree views created from its pinwheel floor plan, the large



rooftop terrace accessible from multiple rooms and over 2,300 square feet of living space, gold carpeting and all.

“We did not keep one screw,” says Rochette, laughing. “And we didn’t add very much back in. I like monochromatic, restful, minimalist homes.”

Wilkin envisioned a highly polished *pied-à-terre* reminiscent of the glamorous high-rises that line the shores of Miami Beach; an unencumbered vacation home in the heart of a government town. To pull it off, he embarked on a “theme of concealment,” giving as much consideration to the invisible as to the visible. The heating and cooling systems and custom motorized blinds were tucked away in a complex network of plywood troughs installed in the ceiling before drywalling to prevent awkward bulkheads and drops from cluttering up sightlines. Televisions were similarly recessed to minimize bulk, as were lights in the bathroom ceilings and mirrors. Virtually every element subsequently layered overtop—from the transparent Flos pendant lights used in the kitchen and dining room to the



ART WORKS A bold painting by Kwakwaka'wakw artist Rande Cook (*Idle No More*) is the focal point of the dining space, which is given a cozy, intimate feeling thanks to the wood-paneled ceiling that closes the otherwise open-concept area in. Transparent Flos pendant lamps illuminate the table at night without blocking the natural flow of sunlight during the day.

THE GATHERING PLACE

Photographs printed on acrylic by artist Susanna Lehtinen (*Atopia 116* and *117*) hang over Cassina sofas. The tables are a custom design by Bruce Wilkin, in collaboration with Gabriel Ross, using Hawaiian koa wood.



Bruce Wilkin's Design Tips

- 1 Repeating materials creates cohesion.** The entire space reads as one: walls and trim are painted in the aptly named All White by Farrow and Ball; the countertops and fireplace surrounds are a porcelain by Neolith; and all of the fittings are by Dornbracht in a soft platinum finish.
- 2 Use wraparound panelling to add definition to an open floor plan.** In the dining area, Wilkin carried the wide-plank white-oak flooring up to and across the ceiling to create "a cabin effect." Transparent glass lighting keeps the lines of the panelling visible from every vantage point.
- 3 Consider custom mechanized blinds in a space with an overabundance of natural light.** They add warmth and privacy, and reduce glare (that high-gloss cabinetry finish would be blinding without them).
- 4 Use a staircase as a focal point.** The staircase couldn't be moved or suspended, so it was stripped down to its most basic components, retreaded in white oak and framed in glass panels to carry the reflective surfaces up from the main floor. A Bocci 14 light fixture shimmers above.
- 5 Create a warm welcome.** A special niche was created in the front entrance for a Martha Sturdy console table and charger—a favourite vignette of Rochette's: "Those pieces have followed me around over the past five years."





BATHING BEAUTY In the master bathroom (above), Wilkin created shiplap panelling using Garry oak wood the couple had saved and stored on their property in Saanich for years. An illuminated niche behind the freestanding Toulouse tub by Victoria and Albert doubles down on the sauna-like ambience.



glass-panelled staircase to the integrated Miele and Wolf appliances—vanishes into the all-white canvas, or else makes a point of reflecting the endless views outside. The kitchen cabinetry, for example, was finished in an ultra-high-gloss product sourced from Carrier Finishing in Quebec, a detail Rochette requested so she could see the surrounding buildings outlined on the door fronts. Even the boldest statement of all, the large-scale painting by local artist Rande Cook, was chosen for its broader connections. It references the unceded territory on which the building resides and was installed in the dining room to face the B.C. Legislature across the harbour. “It’s a little wink back,” says Rochette, “and a great conversation piece.”

In the evening, as the city lights play on the surface of the water and iconic buildings with their own colourful histories loom in the distance, the interior is practically enveloped by its surroundings—a disappearing act decades in the making. CONDO