

“We are continually looking for new and innovative ways to reduce stress for our clients.” **EVELYNN RATCLIFFE, GENERAL MANAGER**



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True Transparency

Alair Homes prides itself on providing its clients peace of mind through the entire construction process. **BY BIANCA HERRON**

Andrew Black has had a passion for homebuilding since his youth. His father was a commercial painter who introduced him to the industry at a young age. As Black got older, his passion grew, prompting him to found Black General Contracting 10 years ago.

Black and his business partner, David Steckel, grew the Toronto, Ontario-based company and were approached by Alair Homes in 2015 to become a franchise unit. Today, the company is now known as Alair Homes Forest Hill. It is one of 10 divisions of Alair Homes serving the Greater Toronto Area.

THE ALAIR HOMES DIFFERENCE

Alair Homes has nearly 100 locations across North America providing a variety of services including custom homes, remodeling, new construction, green building, and home additions and extensions.

Each unit owners interact with its other divisions at least once a week. According to Alair Homes Forest Hill General Manager Evelyn Ratcliffe, the owners work together to not only become

PROFILE

ALAIR HOMES

www.alairhomes.ca / Headquarters: Toronto, Ontario /

Specialty: Custom homebuilding and renovations / Employees: 11

a leader in its industry, but also share best practices. “We’re constantly refining our processes so that we can communicate more clearly,” Ratcliffe says. “We want to continually find new and innovative ways to reduce stress for our clients. We also leverage each other’s networks to provide clients with better pricing through trade partnerships.”

She adds that although Alair Homes’ design and construction team is local, the company offers clients a national reach and network. “Our entire software is cloud-based, so our clients have access 24/7 all year round,” Ratcliffe says. “They can see their budget, schedule, and photos taken on the site all in one location in near-real time.”

Alair Homes prides itself on prioritizing transparency and communication through its Client Control™ process. Whether a client is building or renovating a home, Alair Homes aims to ensure the project is not only cost-effective but also as unstressful as possible.

“Renovations are ranked as one of the most stressful things you can do, but it doesn’t have to be,” Ratcliffe explains. “The stress typically associated with renovating comes from variables in cost and schedule. What if those variables were removed? We’ve done just that. We take the time to work with our clients so that we can fine-tune the scope of work and then provide them with a hard quote instead of just an estimate.”

By taking the guesswork – and surprise costs – out of the equation, its cloud-based software enables Alair Homes’ clients to view important information about their projects. This includes budget and payment spreadsheets, subcontractor bids, and the materials selection process and timeline data.

“They have full control and access to their project at all times,” Ratcliffe says. “It gives them piece of mind and still allows for flexibility in the building process. By educating our clients and creating transparency for them, we work in tandem with them to build their budget.”

The process ultimately alleviates stress for not only the client but Alair Homes as well. “If you fail to plan, you plan to fail,” Ratcliffe notes. “By taking the time to develop a plan every variable is replaced with real information. It creates a less stressful project and ensures a memorable experience for everyone.

“This ultimately makes us want to grow the business because it’s more enjoyable and scalable,” she continues. “That’s the biggest difference Alair Homes has brought to the table for us.”

PROJECT DENMARK

Alair Homes’ latest project is a unique one because it is Ratcliffe’s personal family home, which was redesigned to make for a more livable space, and serve as a showcase to potential clients of what can be done with renovations.

Located in Toronto, the renovation project included remodeling the main floor. The company started construction in late June and



Alair Homes’ Project Denmark was redesigned to make for a more livable space, and serve as a showcase to potential clients of what can be done with renovations.

completed the project in late September. According to Ratcliffe, the home hadn’t been updated since it was built in 1959. Its renovation included a new kitchen, dining room and living room. To achieve the goals of the project, Alair Homes also had to restructure part of the back of the house.

“For instance, the kitchen initially had an eight-foot-tall ceiling, outdated cabinetry and white tiles,” Ratcliffe notes. “Although it was 270 square feet, it felt closed in. Plus, it had limited lighting with two windows and a wooden door.”

The ceiling has now been lofted to feature ceilings as high as 18 feet in some areas. “It gives it a much grander and brighter feel,” Ratcliffe says. “We also incorporated four skylights.”

The kitchen was re-designed for two people to work in, to make entertaining easier. Alair Homes added an island and incorporated a four-foot-long sink that takes up its full width. “Whoever’s cooking can access the sink from one side, and if another person is prepping or tidying they can access it from the other side without being in each other’s space,” Ratcliffe notes.

The dining room, which is immediately to the east of the kitchen, also had two windows and a wooden door to the rear. To create more space, Alair Homes removed the wall separating the two rooms as well as the four feet of wall between the two sets of doors, and incorporated an accordion-style glass wall at the back of the house.

“The back of the house was a mish-mash of windows, doors, and drywall,” Ratcliffe says. “Now we have a twenty-two-foot open-

ing, which creates a very dramatic look. Unlike traditional sliding doors, where one panel slides in front of the other panel, these fold entirely out of the way. It creates the feeling of an indoor-outdoor space without materially impacting the budget.”

The home has four bedrooms and bathrooms, and features a butler’s pantry, theater room, floating staircase, and red oak floors throughout. “All the floors used to be a deep cherry wood color,” Ratcliffe says, adding Alair Homes stripped the floors to a natural, brighter finish.

“The top and front of each tread of the stairs was finished in a natural stain so it’s light on top, while the underside of each tread was painted a dark brown,” she says. “It’s a bit more playful because if you’re walking up the stairs it looks dark and as you’re walking down it looks bright.”

Alair Homes also incorporated a 10-foot-long window to replace five windows on the west side of the floor. “Each window had a very thick frame around it and they weren’t as operable as they once were,” Ratcliffe explains. “The new window is unobstructed glass and has no curtains, so you can see the forest in the backyard.”

WORKING TOGETHER

Working with the subcontractors during the project “was fantastic,” Ratcliffe notes. “It’s been wonderful working with the trades because these are people we trust and have worked with for nearly 10 years. If I don’t trust a trade enough to bring them into my home, how could I ever suggest them to one of our clients?”

Due to Ratcliffe’s career as a contractor, she notes that she looked at the renovation through a different lens from a typical customer. “I looked at it from the perspective of what would make the most sense in terms of return on investment if we ever sell,” she explains. “However, I also wanted to ensure the home is usable while my family and I are here.”

When choosing the trades she wanted to work with, Ratcliffe sought those with high quality standards, including quality of finishes. “I’m only planning to renovate this space once, so I want it to last,” she says. “That’s why I chose Velux for my skylights, for example. Windows was another category where I wanted best in class. There were a number of different window companies I could’ve went with. However, Pella offers the best warranty in the business, which is why I chose them.”

Ratcliffe also chose AyA Kitchens because of their responsiveness and value. “Our family couldn’t afford handmade kitchen cabinets, but we wanted a customized look,” she explains. “AyA allows for customization and makes it affordable.”

Ultimately, Ratcliffe’s family home went through the same client control process as any other Alair Homes project. Ratcliffe says she appreciates the experience because as a homeowner she can positively attest to the process firsthand.

“Even though I’m building for myself, this was one of my most

demanding clients; my husband,” she says. “If I didn’t have the Alair process I’m not sure if I would have been able to do this project. It was very helpful because I was able to tell him exactly how much everything would cost, how long it would take, and provide a list of vendors we needed to choose from. It put him at ease, which put me at ease.”

TEAM EFFORT

Ratcliffe says she and Black are most proud that they have been able to build a team that they can call family. “It has been a big part of our success,” she says. “That is why we are careful about who we hire. We want to find people who are not only passionate about what they do, but also life and helping others.”

Alair Homes’ philosophy is “living better starts here.” “We want to ensure that’s true not only for our clients, but also for our team in the office,” Ratcliffe concludes. “Working better starts with us, but living better does as well. I’m really happy about the team we’ve built, and the trades, designers and architects we can call partners. We’re really proud about the network of people we’ve been able to pull together because it makes coming into the office that much more enjoyable.” ■

