



GlobeReal Estate

RENOVATION

From corner store to corner star

'You get to a point where you just want it done'

CAROLYN IRELAND

FROM FRIDAY'S GLOBE AND MAIL
MARCH 13, 2009 AT 12:00 AM EDT

It's hard to imagine a house with less pulchritude than the abandoned tailor's shop at 163 Victor Ave. in Riverdale.

When the property went up for sale in 2003, the building had been shuttered for about four years. Photos taken about that time present a decrepit showroom on the main floor and shabby apartment on the second.

"It wasn't uninhabitable, but it wasn't far off," says filmmaker James Davis, who nevertheless vied with seven other bidders in order to become the new owner of the former Stitchcraft Specialties showroom.

Mr. Davis had only looked at one or two other houses when he entered the gloomy cavity at the corner of Victor and Logan Avenue and envisioned a light and airy glass box.



163 Victor Ave. in Toronto's Riverdale neighbourhood (*DEBORAH BAIC/THE GLOBE AND MAIL*)

The metamorphosis has kept the neighbours riveted for years.

From the day he picked up the key, Mr. Davis had ambitious plans for the building. But as a partner and managing director of Untitled Films, he was consumed by the business of producing television commercials. He was also devoting a lot of time to supervising the transformation of an old brick and beam warehouse at Richmond and Sherbourne streets into company offices.

So for more than three years, plaster continued to crumble from the walls of the old tailor's shop behind windows covered in plywood.

"It was a neglected kid for a while," Mr. Davis says. "But I couldn't have done it before — there was too much going on."

Mr. Davis also found himself diverted by advertising executive Christina Yu, whom he met along the way. His original vision broadened. Perhaps the house would accommodate a few kids some day.

In 2007, the couple was ready to tackle the all-consuming task of renovating.

"It was very exciting to build a house together," Ms. Yu says.

Mr. Davis was already working with designer Mazen el-Abdallah as the two overhauled the film company's 17,000-square-foot office building. Late in the summer of 2007, they shifted their focus to the house in Riverdale.

Mr. Davis had always been drawn to the potential in the building's ceiling height of 10-1/2 feet.

The three were in agreement that the makeover would create the kind of open space and simple design available in modern lofts.

Mr. Davis and Ms. Yu asked for a space that was very modern, loft-like and simple in approach, Mr. el-Abdallah says.

"Because they are in creative fields, they had a definite vision and direction," he says.

The designer also looked around at the couple's possessions and envisioned a subdued backdrop that would let their personalities stand out through their books, paintings and photographs.

Mr. Davis is an executive producer accustomed to marshalling resources, so he stepped into the role of general contractor.

The team decided to dispense with load-bearing walls that would run across the main floor and chop up the space. That meant bulking up the structure by embedding a steel I-beam in the ceiling and reinforcing the outer walls.

"It's a big, long tube house without any cross-walls," Mr. el-Abdallah says.

When the workers removed the old showroom door, Ms. Yu and Mr. Davis looked for a way to incorporate the vestige in the new design, but it didn't seem to fit. Instead, they left it out in front where it was claimed by relic hunters.

The new doors and windows are industrial strength and trimmed in aluminum. Mr. Davis had 70 windows replaced at the office site, so bringing in the same company to install large, commercial windows at the house was not a daunting task.

But the overall design created an additional challenge because all of the plumbing, heating and electrical gear needed to be hidden above the ceiling as well. "That was ground zero for co-operation," says Mr. Davis, who spent a lot of time cajoling workers into trying to preserve the ceiling heights by squeezing their systems into less space.

"That was difficult because every single thing affects someone else," he says of the many trades. "We had to help them along and have them understand the vision."

A few months in, Mr. Davis became immersed in the film business again and the project went on hiatus for about three months. But when work started up again, the team pushed through until Mr. Davis and Ms. Yu could move in at last in April, 2008.

When it came to deciding on finishes and furniture, many choices seemed naturally determined by the architecture. It's as if the project had a mind of its own at some point, they all agree.

In the kitchen, for example, stretching the island out to 16 feet made sense as a way to delineate the space and as a strategy for creating more storage space. That way the couple was able to dispense with upper cabinets altogether.

Ms. Yu, who loves to cook, enjoys setting the food out on the island when guests are circling around.

"I sprawl when I cook, so that island is so much fun."

At the same time, the stainless steel is very functional and very easy to clean, Mr. Davis says.

"It's not precious. It's not about being in a big, showcase kitchen."

That lack of ostentation is evident throughout the house. Textures and colours are deliberately muted, and materials are serviceable.

While construction costs are expensive, Mr. Davis says, the couple stayed away from exotic hardwoods, for example, and luxe finishes.

"Mazen kept us true to that," he says.

The use of black slate is repeated throughout the house. For the floors and millwork, the trio decided on Douglas fir.

"Douglas fir is a beautiful wood that really ages beautifully," Mr. Davis says.

Upstairs, the bathroom is the only enclosed room in the house beyond the basement. For the master bath, Mr. el-Abdallah created a kind of wet room with an open shower that has no need for doors or a curtain.

The second floor is largely open, with an airy bedroom at the back and a library overlooking the street at the front.

Mr. el-Abdallah's design, however, allows for the simple erection of a wall should the couple decide to enclose the master bedroom. Similarly, the library could be easily converted to a second bedroom.

The designer's goal throughout the house was to create different conditions in the various rooms so that the couple will feel comfortable at different times of day and during different activities. There's a main-floor living room that allows for a strong connection with the street. Upstairs, the library is more removed and private when the lights are on in the evening.

"At night it's almost like a glowing box," Mr. Davis says of viewing the house from the street.

In the basement, a recreation room lets the couple watch television in complete solitude.

"That's a lot of sitting area, but we use it all," Ms. Yu says.

Throughout the house, Mr. el-Abdallah preferred to allow the books, art and furnishings to provide interest, so he cloaked all of the walls in Benjamin Moore's Oxford White. Against that serene backdrop, a vibrant orange lamp standing in the living room becomes sculptural.

The trio soon realized as well that maintaining a quiet interior palette allowed the cityscape beyond the glass to provide much of the colour.

"Visually, the urban landscape is very much a part of the house," Mr. el-Abdallah says.

That transparency flows both ways, of course, and Mr. Davis, who thinks of himself as an introvert, was uncertain about whether he would ever become comfortable with people passing on the outside looking in.

"I'm used to the people staring — which I didn't think I would be," he says.

At the same time, the neighbours have become just as accustomed to the house.

"This is a real dog route," he says of the daytime pedestrian traffic. "If you walk a dog, after six months, you don't look [at the house] the same way as you did at the beginning."

Meanwhile, the couple's own dog, a Coton de Tuléar named Ralph, has become a fixture on a chaise lounge set overlooking the street.

"People know him as, 'the dog in the window,'" Mr. Davis says.

The couple has also installed window coverings that they can pull down whenever they want less light or more privacy.

This year, they plan to start the final phase of the project, which will include landscaping from the sidewalk at the front all the way to a carport at the back. The patio and plantings at the front will provide some additional screening from the street.

At the rear, a terrace will provide space for outdoor dining. When the weather is fair, the couple plans to slide away the front and rear glass to provide one long, continuous space.

Mr. Davis and Ms. Yu found the process of creating a house together hugely satisfying, but they also acknowledge that the time commitment becomes almost overwhelming at times. The couple had planned to do the landscaping earlier but they needed time to just enjoy living in the house for a while.

© Copyright 2009 CTVglobemedia Publishing Inc. All Rights Reserved.
globeandmail.com and The Globe and Mail are divisions of CTVglobemedia Publishing
Inc., 444 Front St. W., Toronto, ON Canada M5V 2S9 Phillip Crawley, Publisher

CTVglobemedia

Picture Gallery

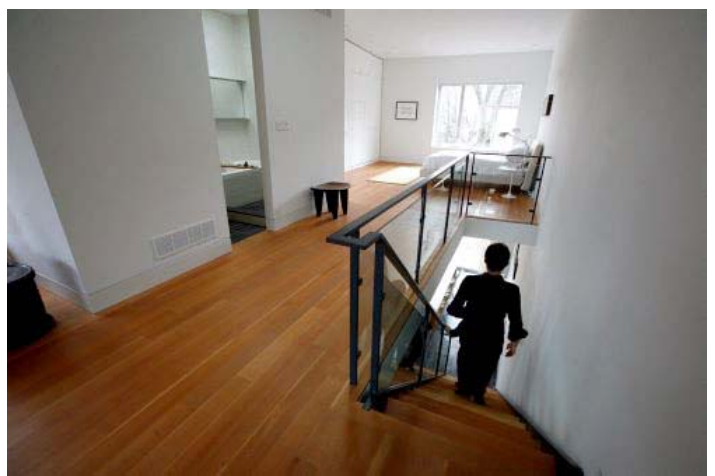




Photo: DEBORAH BAIC/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

163 Victor Ave. in Toronto's Riverdale neighbourhood © Copyright 2008 CTVglobemedia publishing Inc. All Rights Reserved.