

An urbanist's retreat

Globe-trotting city theorist Richard Florida and wife Rana find a home to love perched on a Rosedale ravine

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Richard Florida is an urban theorist, an academic who's made an international name for himself redefining the city as a centre of creativity.

But when he moved to Toronto two years ago, he found that his own creative centre lay in a newly-renovated house at the edge of a forest.

Located in staid Rosedale, on a secluded ravine lot, the century-old two-storey isn't what he imagined he'd fall in love with as soon as he walked through the door.

The designated heritage property has a turret and leaded windows, mouldings and ceiling medallions – the sort of ornate details that Florida is usually loath to embrace.









(DEBORAH BAIC/THE GLOBE AND MAIL)

“I kept asking myself, ‘Why do I like this house?’ It’s more traditional and classical than anything I normally like,” says the scholar.

He purchased the house in 2007 after moving here from Washington, D.C., to head up the new Martin Prosperity Institute at the University of Toronto’s Rotman School of Management. He shares the house with his wife Rana, who runs their Creative Class Group consulting company out of the home.

“But then I met the architect [who executed the renovation], and learned of his leaning towards modernism,” continues Mr. Florida. “Suddenly I noticed all the symmetries and the graceful proportions, and realized that it wasn’t a traditional house at all, that it was all done with a modern orientation, which, of course, is what makes it feel so fresh.”

Trained in his native Belgrade and at U of T’s School of Architecture, Milosh Pavlovicz spent two years converting the formerly dilapidated dwelling into a home he describes as “contemporary-minded classicism.”

While the property's charm lay in its location, at the end of a cul-de-sac with spectacular views of the Rosedale ravine, when he first saw the house in 2005, it was dark and dated and split on the inside into three separate living units, says Mr. Pavlovicz. “It was in horrible shape, with an interior that looked like a maze.”

The intention was to convert the house into a single residence for him and interior designer Sasha Josipovicz, his business partner in Studio Pyramid, a Toronto-based home construction and renovation company specializing in breathing new life into old homes. To that end, the couple completely gutted the house, opening it up and reconfiguring 5,000 square feet of space to fit their specifications.

“We spent a lot of time figuring out how to combine traditional architecture with something more up-to-date, and underwent a great deal of mental gymnastics trying to achieve it,” Mr. Pavlovicz says. “Our working principle was to design slightly against the grain of the existing architecture to establish a subtle form of rebellion in the form of harmonizing contrasts.”

The first act of revolt was the ceilings. The entire house was put on stilts, the walls detached and raised from 8 feet to 10 feet. The walls were then rebuilt and embellished with trim and painted white for a crisp, clean modern look. To better match the new room dimensions all the windows were lengthened – a time-consuming process given all the permits they needed to upgrade a historic property. The staircase was also rebuilt and enlarged to conform to the new proportions of the space.

But all this work turned out to be exhausting and a decision was made to unload the property they had put their hearts and souls into. “We kept renovating, and changing and fighting City Hall. Everything was a struggle,” says Mr. Josipovicz.

In the end, they still created a house that looks Old World on the outside, but modern on the inside, with rooms laid out horizontally in gracious, synchronous lines that lead to the rear of the house and its forested setting. This is the home's epicentre.

Calling it an “amphitheatre-style setting,” the back is where Mr. Pavlovicz created a courtyard with a sunken pool and a cabana made from the salvaged remains of a crumbling garage. The second-floor master bedroom was cantilevered over the backyard, with a wall of floor-to-ceiling windows to capitalize on views of the sun rising behind the Bloor Street Viaduct.

“The whole house addresses the back,” Mr. Florida says, adding that is what he loves best about the house. And little wonder. As an in-demand academic, he and his wife travel frequently around the world, jet-setting from one international think-tank to another, from cities as diverse as Moscow and Madrid. Having a pool to slip into, sheltered by trees, offers a welcome escape from the life of the mind.

“It's a hectic life,” Mr. Florida says. “We wanted a feeling of peacefulness. We were moving not just to a new home, but a new city and a new country. We knew we couldn't move into a place we didn't love.”

Mr. Florida says he feels most content when lying in his bed watching, with amazement, the flora and fauna just beyond his east-facing window. “There's fox and raccoon,” Mr. Florida says. “It's really a part of Toronto I wasn't expecting – and so close to downtown.”

And so, at the end of the day, while the house is beautiful and modern and close to the centre of the city, its tranquillity is what has really won the urbanist over. He knew he'd be able to hear himself think.

“I have to say it being on a cul-de-sac overlooking a ravine was very attractive to me,” Mr. Florida says. “I thought how safe, how quiet, how perfect.”