

## A steep learning curve – design challenges of unusually shaped suite

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When Alessandro Munge was 10 years old he would accompany his mother, a drapery seamstress, on her client visits.

Unlike most restless little boys who might have required a sack of action figures to keep them occupied, his preoccupation was drawing. Not fanciful boyhood images, but elevations to illustrate his mother's ideas for her clients. "Doodling solutions" as he jokingly describes it.

Today, a scant six years out of interior design school, the young designer is doodling solutions for a wide range of clientele from the upscale enclaves of Rosedale, Forest Hill and the Bridle Path to ultra modern condominiums.

Three years ago he joined forces with another promising young designer, Sai Leung, to form munge//leung: design associates. Within two years they had quadrupled their office space.

Last year their 600 square foot show suite at the Toronto Interior Design show propelled them into the public eye.

"No one knew who we were, so we said, we're going to put everything into this project – time, energy, money, level of design," says Munge.

"We're a company totally driven by passion. Maybe it's a young and naïve way of thinking but it's what has taken us to where we are today," he adds.

Munge's enthusiasm for good design is clearly evident as he guides a reporter through the model suites he recently designed for the new Ellipse condominium project in Scarborough, so called because of the elliptical shape of the two slender 30-storey glass towers facing each other.

The idea according to Clifford Korman of Kirkor architects and Planners (responsible for the downtown Waterclub complex) was to use tinted glazing to literally reflect the surrounding neighborhood, and to juxtapose the new with the old in an existing setting.

The challenge for the interior design team was to work with the unusual shape of the suites' exterior curved wall as well as the small scale of the suites themselves. This is not a setting for your overstuffed sofa or your grandmother's Sheraton dining table with seating for 12.

So furniture was designed and scaled specifically for the space. Try to fit a table into a tiny dining room, six feet at the widest end, that narrows to what Munge calls a dog leg – two points which come to a triangular end that serves no function. The solution? A custom designed oval glass table, 30 inches wide by five feet long with a light colored base and matching scaled down chairs.

It may mean keeping the serving dishes on warming trays on the breakfast bar, but the seating feels quite comfortable, albeit a tad cozy. It's a setting more in keeping with a dinner for intimate friends rather than one's boss.

Because the living and dining room follow the curve of the building, Munge also designed a semi-circular sofa to fit the space. Sections can be moved around to form an ottoman or extra seat elsewhere.

The design of the 817 square foot model suite is simple, elegant and rich looking – but still very achievable. The objective was to take a small space, Munge says, and make it livable, functional and practical – and on a relatively small budget for all that was required.

“It's actually more challenging to work this way,” he says, “because it really pulls out your creativity. You have to focus your money on the things that have longevity.

“I can easily change the fabric for instance, but not the headboard or credenza.”

The textural and tonal play of silk fabrics imparts a luxurious look to drapes and bed coverings - all purchased from the Designer Fabric Outlet and sewn by a supplier with whom he has a long standing relationship -- his mother.

Instead of full drapes, Munge used single drapery panels in raw silk to frame the windows. Panels of sheer organza are given a Roman blind look but without the yardage by using

simple dowels inserted into slim “pockets” in the panels to give the appearance of folds. In fact, it has something of a shoji screen look.

“It’s a nice soft backdrop as opposed to verticals which are so commercial. And a great way to maximize the light and the view. If you want privacy, add a roller blind,” Munge says. “Spend your money on what people will see – like the drapery panels.”

In the guest room, three large tin boxes from Ikea sit side by side under a simple low wall shelf, providing storage with a funky modern edge.

Textured canvas drapes with oversized grommets, also from Ikea, frame the bathtub adding drama to the bathrooms encased in grey veined Cararra marble from floor to tub enclosure. Walls are faux finished with a neutral linen like texture.

Pre-engineered “Merbau” wood finish flooring provides a rich backdrop for the neutral toned furnishings in the main living area. The warm reddish tones are repeated in the faux wood kitchen cabinetry giving the open kitchen an elegance that blends seamlessly into the living area.

“Its great to have an open kitchen but you have to ground it in some way,” says Munge. “You want it to be accessible but at the same time to have some sense of enclosure. The glass shelving above the counter helps to ‘cocoon’ the kitchen without it feeling like a partition.

“And the wall of pantry cupboards visually gives the kitchen much more width and surrounds it in this envelope. It wasn’t part of the original plan but we felt it was a practical feature – you have to be sensitive to storage -- but it’s also visual.”

The eight inch deep space was “borrowed’ from the adjoining bedroom closet.

“The flavor of the building is contemporary yet classic, timeless. We strove for a continuity of what the architect was trying to achieve,” Munge explains.

“They did not want cold stark modern so we created warmth with the textures.”

In the presentation centre, which replicates the look of the future lobby, this is achieved in the play of materials such as the limestone floors and desk, mahogany arches and layered

plaster textured walls, and in landscaping which carries into the interiors with river stones and wild grasses.

“We were all striving for a downtown feel – an urban look in a suburban setting,” Munge says.

And it’s been a hit. The Lee Development Group say that the Ellipse has been the most successful launch in the GTA with 250 units in the first tower snapped up the first weekend they went on sale last May. Because of this response the second tower has been launched a year ahead of schedule.