

Clutter-loving couple gets sleek new digs – Pair embraces pared-down décor for condo

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Chintz, clutter and tchotchkes. These were the defining elements in Pam and Charles Hanbury's 70-year-old home in a Thornhill heritage district.

There were floral chintz wing chairs and a custom made horsehair stuffed sofa upholstered in pink shot silk they had brought with them from England when they moved here in 1969.

There were countless collector plates, blue and white china collectibles, antique milk cans and benches, pine furniture and framed antique prints on every available inch of wall space.

"I loved antiques and I liked a formal look," says Pam 66, whose very work put her in temptation's path. As an antique jewelry dealer she was surrounded by other dealers and not a few pieces found their way to her home -- whether they fit or not. If she liked it, she bought it.

But over time she says, she started to feel frantic with the clutter.

"It was hard to relax. I could never find anything. And the house was gloomy. I'd come home on a beautiful day and the house would be dark. I couldn't get to the outside from the main floor without going down a flight of stairs half way to the basement."

When the stairs in the two storey house became too difficult for Charles, 66, to manage because of his bad back, the couple, encouraged by their son and daughter, decided it was time to sell the house and move to a condo.

They searched for three years – across Toronto and as far as Oakville. Pam liked the Yonge/St.Clair area. Most of her friends and activities were downtown. An active member of the Royal Ontario Museum and the Art Gallery of Ontario, she also takes regular continuing education classes at the University of Toronto and Ryerson University.

But Charles wanted to be closer to his office at Steeles and Highway 400.

One day their realtor took them to building in a lovely landscaped setting at Bathurst and Steeles. It was only four years old but the suite that was for sale resembled a garbage dump. They were appalled.

“It looked horrible,” says Charles. “It was filthy. The bathtub in the guest bathroom was stacked with boxes. Food had been left on the stove for days and was stuck to the floor. The small den had one large ugly bed in it and nothing else. The drapes were drawn so it was also dark and gloomy.”

But their son encouraged them to look beyond the dirt. The size was right and so was the price.

With some trepidation they made the decision to buy. Out went the grungy appliances. Floors were refinished, the bedrooms re-carpeted and the ensuite bathroom remodeled. Walls were painted in a palette of soft taupes, and a slate backsplash added to the kitchen. In September 1999 they moved in with only their bedroom suite and a new sofa and love seat.

“Everything I knew I wanted to get rid of went into a garage sale,” says Pam. “We have a large driveway and it was covered. The dishes and the horsehair sofa went to my daughter. Paintings went to an antique dealer. Everything else, anything that appealed to me but I wasn’t sure about, went into a van and into Charles’ warehouse.”

The warehouse stores the Charleston hair care products that he manufactures.

Then began the process of redefining how they would live. Not that they even recognized it at the time.

“We lived in an empty condo for a year and a half,” says Pam. “I would look at this empty space and say to myself, ‘let it happen, let it happen’. When you move to a new home – and every home is different – you have to become a part of that home. You have to let the bonding happen. And you have to go through the embarrassment of living in an empty space for awhile.”

Pieces came out of storage one at a time – like the beloved antique desk which had a good year’s reprieve in the new condo before being sold – and were slowly eliminated.

Other pieces like their pine dining room suite were transformed. It too had been banished to the warehouse, awaiting its fate – for a full 18 months – while they looked to buy something new.

“We couldn’t find anything we liked and Charles really wanted to keep it,” says Pam. “Then we came up with this idea to refinish it.”

They got rid of the hutch part of the buffet and had everything refinished in a creamy stippled white. The job cost \$3000 (not including the \$500 deposit they forfeited for a botched first attempt with another refinisher). But now they are delighted with the results.

The sectional sofa from the old family room found a home in the small den. To open the room up, the closet doors were removed and a wall unit built in to house entertainment equipment, books, CD’s, photos and a few small prized antique items. The linen closet which opened into the condo’s entrance hall was re-routed to open into the den next to the wall unit, freeing the angled hall wall for a simple glass console shelf and mirror.

Many of these changes were suggested by their son, who also embraces a minimalist approach to décor. He also recommended interior designer Remy Cyr who came into their lives about 18 months after they moved in. She helped them refine their vision, developed an overall plan and continues to provide guidance and input on new purchases such as their electric fireplace.

“I remember sitting and thinking, ‘what am I going to do with that wall?’” says Pam. “And realizing I missed my old fireplace. I also needed a shelving unit. And I thought I would like to have pot lights. But the contractors said you couldn’t do pot lights because of the concrete ceiling.

“Then Remy came up with the idea of the cantilevered shelves and false chimney breast (front) and pot lights in the bulkhead.”

The Georgia O’Keefe painting of poppies over the fireplace provides the finishing touch, forming a strong focal point for the room.

Then there was the question of area rugs for living/dining room. One – or two? And what kind of rug.

“We were sure it had to be Oriental but everything we tried was wrong. Maybe it was a leftover (way of thinking) from the house. We had so many rugs go back and forth from Elte carpets – they were so good to us. But none of them worked with the poppies.”

With Cyr’s help they eventually found a taupe and poppy colored checkerboard area rug which acts as a perfect foil for the dramatic art work.

“When you do one thing it leads you to the next,” says Pam. Sometimes it’s not the direction you thought. So you have to rethink your next step. And it will come. It sounds mystical, but it happens. Let the place speak to you. It suggests itself.”

So minimalist has her style become that she even got rid of her kettle, installing an instant hot water tap instead.

“I wanted to simplify my whole life. It was a gradual thing that began with the move. But it just evolved. From the age of 15 all I did was work. I had never thought about these things,” says Pam referring to planning her space. “So now I didn’t want to make any rash decisions.”

It was only last summer that the last of the Hanburys’ stored possessions were eliminated – a full two years after the first garage sale. Pam rented a table at the St. Lawrence Sunday antique market and parted with all the remaining items that until then she had been unsure about: more china, plates, pictures, glass objects, books and small furniture items.

One prized painting, bought for a song, fetched US\$1000 on eBay.

Next up for change is the master bedroom.

“I now realize that it looks like the old house,” says Pam of the pine suite and turn-of-the-century prints. “It’s cluttered.”

The move sparked many changes, among them a chic new haircut that now frames Pam’s delicate bone structure, previously hidden by a mass of what she describes as “problem hair”.

“I fought my hair for years, trying to force it into something it was not. Now I feel rejuvenated. Maybe I was hiding behind my hair before – hiding from myself. Very little of it was conscious. I like what is happening not just to me but to my home as well.

“And I’m really enjoying my life much more now. Everything is within walking distance – the synagogues, Starbucks (my favorite place). I hardly use the car anymore. The gate at the back takes me to the bus stop and the Finch subway to downtown.

“I’ve discovered Toronto in the last two years and made some good friends through the lectures. I feel happy, I really do and that is not something that came easily.”