

Vision takes shape

Floor-to-ceiling curved wall highlights couple's dramatic overhaul of a dingy downtown loft

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BY DEE GIBNEY

Dracula's lair. A year and a half ago that's how Tania Scarangella described the loft her then fiancé Domenic was proposing to buy.

"I was afraid to show it to her," he says. "It was really bad."

"It was scary," she recalls with a wince. "It was dark and decrepit and dank. Five guys lived there and it smelled. It looked like a boys' tree house."

The upstairs mezzanine of what was then a rental was a maze of cubicles separated by pressboard half walls and tatty bedsheets. Sheets also covered the windows. Worn linoleum delineated the "kitchen". And all the walls were a dark purple.

"The kitchen looked like a tool shed," Tania says, "like a workbench. There were no cupboards. It looked like they played darts on one wall.

"Domenic kept saying 'it has potential' and I thought, 'omigod it needs so much work'. But I had all the faith in the world in him."

Tania, 24 and a funeral director, readily concedes that her husband is the one with the vision.

Domenic 29, is a restaurateur who trained as an architectural technician then apprenticed and went on to work as a carpenter for five years (his family is in the building industry). He knew a buy when he saw one.

At \$143,000 for 1000 square feet, the ratty apartment on Carlaw just north of Queen, was a bargain compared to what he had seen elsewhere – like the 450 square foot loft selling for \$175,000 at the Merchandise Building. It needed someone to see past the grit and grime.

“The day we took possession, I primed the whole place white,” Domenic says. “It brightened the place up immediately and made a huge difference.”

With the filthy appliances gone and the pressboard torn down, he was able to get to work.

Engineering, plumbing and electrical drawings had to be submitted and permits obtained. Scarangella knew from experience that it was better to secure all the permits – then schedule the contractors – rather than doing it piecemeal.

He planned the structural work first (the mezzanine) – then the steel work for the drywall followed by electrical, plumbing, drywalling and finishes such as hardwood floors and cabinets.

The work took 5 months including trade delays – and time off for a June wedding followed by a honeymoon in Greece, Paris and Italy.

Domenic’s vision was to build a large curved floor-to-ceiling wall with recessed spaces for the television, electronic equipment as well as favorite display pieces highlighted by concealed lighting.

“I knew it would be a great focal point”, he says. “I wanted it to be the first thing people notice when they walk in.”

Then he would repeat the curve at the opposite upper end of the suite in the form a half wall to screen the bedroom on the mezzanine level.

The 740 square foot ground floor would be divided into thirds “to make each space look individual” he says.

This was achieved by raising each section up a step – the kitchen area is a step above the dining area and the living room with its dramatic curved wall is a further step up.

But the kitchen is the hub – open and in the middle of the loft with a large counter and breakfast bar where guests could congregate to chat while dinner is being prepared.

“I wanted it to be a focal point for entertaining with everything revolving around it,” he says.

As part owner (with his older brother Jack) of Mercato, a restaurant in the city core, Domenic knows kitchens. The mill worker who built the cabinets for the restaurant was now pressed into service to build the maple cabinetry Domenic designed for the loft.

Tiling the countertop, which Domenic built himself, became a two-day family affair. He asked his uncle, a retired tile-setter to “come and take a look” at what they planned to do.

“He took a look and just started,” he chuckles. “He had even brought a change of clothes with him.”

Domenic’s cousin pitched in as did Tania’s mother and sister. Tania had envisioned a random pattern of caramel, gold and black tiles. Domenic wanted all black. As with so many other aspects of this challenging endeavor, they compromised.

Domenic conceded on the tiles – after all Tania had trusted his instincts on other far more radical ideas, such as a “floating” staircase with no rails designed to hang off the steel post supporting the mezzanine.

But before any of this could begin, there was the issue of the layers of white paint on the 18-foot ceiling. They had seen a neighbor’s natural wood ceiling and thought it looked beautiful, far more “lofty”. The ceiling is original Douglas fir tongue-in-groove planks, three inches thick and six inches wide.

So every weekend during February and March last year the couple trekked in from Woodbridge where they lived during the renovations. They donned coveralls, gloves and protective masks and eyewear, mounted a scaffold and armed with paint stripper, scrapers, steel brushes and steel wool, they scraped and rubbed and scraped some more.

“The people down the hall hired two people for four days to do theirs and it cost \$2,500.00,” says Tania, with a hint of pride at the success of their own efforts.

In the meantime, they tackled the challenge of fitting pieces of flat drywall onto a curved frame. The task fell to Tania’s father (a dry-waller by trade) and brother.

The half-inch drywall would snap and break when they tried to screw it down at the end of the curve. So they switched to double sheets of 3/8” dry wall which they overlapped back-to-back along the frame.

Domenic built the bathroom countertops and the raised platform for the tub and tiled it all himself with one inch mosaic tile, learning as he went. He also made the concrete sink for the powder room using two large stainless steel mixing bowls as molds, pressing a one inch layer of concrete between the two.

Italian designed fixtures grace both bathrooms. The sink in the ensuite off the mezzanine bedroom was salvaged from a job site.

Domenic's father, a general contractor, executed the um, off-the-wall design for the stairs. Each step is a hollow steel tray bolted into a beam along the wall on one side, like teeth in a comb, and filled with concrete.

The two-metre wide, neatly arrayed open bedroom closet is the frame of a former wine rack from the restaurant. The light columns on either side of the platform bed – which their cabinet maker built – are hardware store issue lengths of dryer hose attached to pot lights in the ceiling and falling freely to the floor. The look is sleek and contemporary.

The sophisticated artwork throughout the loft is by a woman who used to work at Domenic's restaurant and is now trying her hand in New York.

In all, the renovation including appliances and new furniture, cost between \$70,000 and \$80,000.

Today the same space, at bare bones stage, would sell for \$250,000 says Ravi Jain, president of I-Zone Live/Work Lofts.

It's been six months now since all the work was completed but Domenic is already thinking ahead to the next project. But first they plan to build a patio on the roof above them and have just purchased the rights to the space.

"I want to do this again," Domenic says as his wife raises a quizzical eyebrow, then smiles, shaking her head. "I'd like to put this place on the market," he continues, "or rent it and look at another space. Maybe do it as a business."

