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A tale of two homes; Bob Chapin hired a designer to create a spectacular condo - but then he changed his mind

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Page: C1 / FRONT

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A couple of years ago, Bob Chapin decided it was time to downsize from his house to a condo.

"You're so tied to a house," he says. "You can't go the store because the roof leaks, the water heater breaks, the grass is up over the roof. So I thought maybe I'd like to change my lifestyle."

Indeed. Chapin lives in a Tudor-style heritage home in the West End that is brimming with elegant antiques, with a decidedly 18th-century French style.

It's also in one of Vancouver's best locations, two blocks north of English Bay, a block east of Stanley Park. The home even fronts on a small "pocket park," so it's a model of peace and tranquility.

How do you improve on the location?

You buy a penthouse condo on Beach Avenue, which is right on English Bay.

Chapin purchased a 2100-square-foot penthouse at Plaza Del Mar, a mid-1960s concrete building at 1575 Beach. Then he set about renovating it.

Not one to do things in half-measures, he decided to ditch his beloved Louis XV look for something contemporary. Ultra-contemporary.

Basically, he hired local designer Mark Pritchard and let him go to town.

"Mark's sense of history maybe goes back to 2005," he laughs.

"Maybe. His stuff is spectacular and I've come to really appreciate that. And I could live with it, easily."

The two-storey high condo was looking a bit '70s: beige wall-to-wall carpet, harvest gold bathroom fixtures, decorative oak-trimmed kitchen cabinets.

Though it was quite big in terms of square footage, it seemed a little cramped, with three bedrooms upstairs and a small galley kitchen downstairs.

Pritchard took it all out, right down to the studs, and started from scratch.

Two years and several hundred thousand dollars later, the condo has been completely transformed. It still has a '60s feel thanks to the three arched "barrel vault" windows that are Plaza Del Mar's defining architectural feature, but otherwise it's totally contemporary.

"The idea was just to make it an open, spacious, very urban space," says Pritchard.

The apartment was totally reconfigured, with walls taken out and spaces opened up. The wall

between the kitchen and living room came out, opening up the apartment from one end to the other. Upstairs was converted to two bedrooms, a large walk-in closet and a "flex space" that makes use of the ingenious Raumplus sliding glass door system.

The doors are made of translucent white laminated glass. Pull them out, and they wall off the master bedroom for privacy. Pull them in, and the master bedroom is combined with a room which can be adapted to a variety of uses.

"It can be used as a sitting room, TV room, it could be a home office," says Pritchard. "The idea is that it can be open or closed, depending on how you want to use the space."

The beige carpet was tossed in favour of walnut floors. But not just any walnut, wide-plank Peruvian walnut.

"That's the new direction in wood flooring, the very wide, long lengths of planks," says Pritchard. "Eight feet long, seven inches wide."

It looks quite beautiful, particularly when placed in rooms that are all painted white.

"I used white just to keep it a neutral background," Pritchard explains.

"I find when you have open, flowing spaces the colour has to go everywhere, so it has to be quite a neutral colour, so you can use and feel comfortable in every space. We wanted the architecture and the view to be the highlight."

The view is quite remarkable. Plaza del Mar has three penthouses, and this one isn't on the water, it faces north. Which means you get a front-row seat to a vibrant cityscape of towers, trees and the North Shore mountains.

"It feels very urban, almost like a New York kind of feel," says Pritchard. "Especially at night, because you get the lights coming on."

Pritchard installed new windows, which means you get a floor to ceiling view on the bottom floor and the cool arched view above.

"If you look at some of the brand new Coal Harbour or Concord properties, you wouldn't get this kind of character, or feeling of space," says Pritchard.

"I think you'd tend to get more rectilinear standard spaces. This one is quite unique: you get these snippets of views, corridor views, peekaboo views."

The best peekaboo view is from the master bathroom, which features lots of white calcatta marble and a raised Bain Ultra soaker tub that offers the apartment's best water views. The view also takes in the Beach Towers highrise apartment complex, which would also have a good view of the bathroom.

"You probably would want some window coverings in here, I think," says Pritchard. "But who knows, some people might not."

Calcatta marble was also extensively used in the living room fireplace surround and the long, sleek kitchen. The kitchen cupboards were custom made by Seagull Enterprises and are done in a tres groovy white lacquer.

"It's an automotive lacquer finish," Pritchard relates.

"They actually use the same paint you put on your car. The white was chosen to blend in with the marble, so the millwork just becomes the wall, it doesn't become a feature."

The extensive use of white in the condo is the polar opposite of Chapin's house, where the walls are as rich and colourful as can be. The downstairs living room is painted a rather bright yellow, the upstairs library is done in a deep red, and one of the bedrooms has lilac walls.

But that's the 18th century French style Chapin loves. There's nothing neutral here: the living room couch is mauve with silver gilt legs, the dining room table is a deep, deep mahogany.

It's quite the table, an 18th century Gothic revival piece that was hand carved in Spain and was formerly used in a bishop's residence in Cuba. And it comes with a story.

"I got it through [local antique dealer] William Switzer," Chapin says.

"He goes around Europe collecting antiques and then doing copies. He had met the minister of fisheries from Cuba. He called his cousin Hymie Aisenstat, who owned Hy's Steakhouse, and said he was having dinner with this guy and he might want to come along.

"Off they went to dinner. [The Cuban minister] said 'We have a lot of antiques. If you guys want to come and look at the stuff, we have warehouses [of it].' The catch was they had to spend a million bucks, so they went off to the bank and borrowed this million bucks, probably in 1972 or '73."

Anyway, Chapin's table was part of the cache of Cuban antiques. But many of his pieces are reproductions, which look great and are less pricey. A trio of large Victorian bookcases in the library, for example, were made by Chippendale Furnishings in Coquitlam.

"I like the style, but I couldn't have bought [genuine antique] bookcases like that," says Chapin.

"I wouldn't have been able to buy a Louis XVth chair or a settee that you could sit on. You'd be [panicked voice] 'Ahhh! Don't sit there!'"

"Actually the settee in the front hallway, [at a party] somebody told me five people had been sitting there, three on the seat and two on the bench. So anyway we had cocktails and somebody was going around with hors d'oeuvres and then I served a late supper. Some poor little guy sat on it and all four legs broke. He was so humiliated, and so was I.

"That's the problem with real antiques, you often can't use them. Now I've had that thing supported with false legs underneath, which would destroy the value [of an antique]. But it's better than having to say 'Oh no, no, no no, don't sit there!'"

He definitely lives in the period. Each of the 2,800-square-foot home's three bedrooms comes with an impressive four-poster bed, and there are Napoleonic tables, Victorian grandfather clocks and all sorts of reproduction chandeliers with Versailles crystals.

But it's all done in good taste. For a house filled with large 18th-century French furniture, it's surprisingly spacious and roomy.

"I'm very worried about having one piece too many and having that elderly lady look," says Chapin.

"And people have said it's amazing that you have this kind of furniture and you haven't overdone it. I think that's very important, because most people with antiques don't know when to quit."

Looking around his house, it's hard to imagine how his furniture would fit into his ultra-contemporary condo. It's also hard to imagine him parting with it, because he clearly loves it.

In fact, he's not parting with the furniture, or the house. After completing the penthouse reno, he's decided to stay in his house, and sell the penthouse. It's just been put on the market for \$1.98 million.

"It's beautiful, it's striking. I had the best designer in the city," Chapin says.

"But I think I've opted for the house. I just have too much energy to get up and have nothing to complain about, and nothing to do but sit and look out the window."

Chapin doesn't like to sit around. In a previous life, the lifelong Vancouverite was a English teacher who rose through the ranks to become a vice-principal at Burnaby North. After he took early retirement, he started a bed and breakfast called The English Bay Inn at another house he owned across the street from his current residence.

He bought his current house when it went up for sale in 1995 because he was scared what would happen to it if someone else bought it

"I think I paid \$625,000," he says. "The house across the street I think I paid \$135,000 for. But the guys next door really got ripped off -- they paid \$34,000 for that huge mansion."

For awhile he ran two B&B's, but found it a bit much, and sold the English Bay Inn and just lived in his current house.

"It was too much having two houses and 16 guests for breakfast every morning, because I make such a fuss over breakfast," he says.

But he missed it, and two weeks ago, he went back into the bed and breakfast business. His home at 1140 Chilco is now the Stanley Park Inn, with three rooms that rent for \$250 to \$350 per night.

"I do have people skills, I really like being around people," he says. "And here I've only been open two weeks, and I've rarely had a night free, just from overflow from other people."