

HOME+ GARDEN



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Editor Barbara Gunn 604.605.2179
homes@vancouver.sun.com

CONVERSION

Rail revival



The massive arched windows provide an abundance of natural light.

The transformation of an industrial substation into a contemporary loft space combines the old and the new and is a 'fantasy come true' for the owners

LUCY HYSLOP
Special to The Sun

From cottage and castle to pied-à-terre, there are some beautifully evocative names given to housing around the world. As for the descriptor "substation," however, not so much — unless you're talking about the deftly converted one on Earles Street in Vancouver.

Even on the duller day, little inspection is needed to see why transforming this 1912 industrial heavyweight, situated near Vanness Avenue in the Collingwood neighbourhood, is such a winner. Traditionally paned, its expansive windows are 10 feet high and confidently cast light on every inch of the loft, which itself boasts 12-foot ceilings. With such sweeping scales, it's easy to see why the owner of one of the 12 condos feels like his B.C. home encapsulates the wide-reaching vistas and feeling of space he enjoyed growing up in the Prairies (Regina and Saskatoon) before moving west.

"After a while, the grey of Vancouver can rattle me, but even on the greyest days we get the most wonderful, wonderful light," enthuses Garnet McElree.

height of the room, then this magical late-80s conversion by Vancouver architect Linda Baker hits the bull's eye. The open-plan living is seamless — kitchen/sitting room segueing into hall and study and bedroom — with some ingenious twists. Not only does the wooden seating and counter area in the kitchen match the inviting pine floor throughout the main space, for example, but the industrial cool of the concrete floor in the bedroom is warmed up considerably by a layer of tinted amber paint, which has then been glazed.

When it came to painting, a neutral colour was always going to help showcase the couple's furniture and art. After all, the rooms are plump with notable pieces that fill the space with colour and character — from the newly installed farmhouse sink and a few creations such as "crazy, New York-style" cookie jars by designer Jonathan Adler to vintage art-deco olive-wood drinks' cabinet ("I've had many great parties with that") and a giant light bulb by Ingo Maurer. But McElree knew picking the wrong white would leave the space feeling cold. "We had to go for one that was warm and embraced the light," he



PHOTO BY KIM STALLNECHT/PMG



PHOTO BY KIM STALLNECHT/PMG



PHOTO BY MARTIN KNOWLES PHOTO/MEDIA

1912 building on Earles Street near Vanness Avenue in the Collingwood neighbourhood offers open plan with seamless living. The kitchen and sitting room flow into the hall and study. While colour has been added to some walls, the neutral palette overall helps showcase the owners' furniture and art. One of the resident telines, Mr. J, takes a stroll through the kitchen.



...takes a stroll through the kitchen.



PHOTO BY KIM STALLKNECHT/PNG



PHOTO BY MARTIN KNOWLES PHOTO/MEDIA

even on the greyest days we get the most wonderful, wonderful light," enthuses Garnet McElree, who has lived with his partner Dave Johnston in the eastside anomaly for seven years. Today, nothing more than a simple, organic unbleached cotton curtain frames the "beautiful shape" of the windows. "It's such a focal point — it's the first thing people notice," he adds.

If perfect design is down to the proportion of the window to the

Continued on C10

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Rail revival: bathed in light

CONTINUED FROM C8

Needless to say, the substation's erstwhile life as part of the BC Electric Interurban railway system that connected Vancouver with Richmond, New Westminster and Chilliwack tickled him on many levels. "Believe it or not, the Prairies had many more old buildings, so not only did I want the light, but I also wanted something that had a bit of character and history," he pipes up of the building, which won a vaunted City of Vancouver Heritage Award. "That combination of old and new, an old building and contemporary interior, is a contrast that creates harmony. My fantasy came true when I found this building."

Apart from the decor, of course, the pair has changed little from the original transformation of the building created by Scottish-born architect Robert Lyon. However, one side window leading into the study — which makes the space even more airy — has become a tad smaller. "I get a little bit crazy obsessing about



Homeowners Garnet McEFree and Dave Johnston have been living in this apartment seven years. The conversion has occurred over time, complete with large windows streaming in light, and interesting bathroom details. **below right** A simple, rustic, unbleached cotton curtain frames the beautiful view of the substation from the building's balcony.

KIM STALLMECHT/PNG

his day job as a creative director/curator for wanting to fiddle with the design. "I thought it was too much so we peeled that back and it's amazing what just subtle changes to design will do."

He explains that good sources to marry the contemporary loft space with virtually turn-of-the-previous-century cement building include period lighting from Schoolhouse Electric & Supply Co in Portland, along with Vancouver stores such as Liberty and the Armoury's Mint. Tag or estate sales were also good solutions ("such a great way to see what other people are doing in their spaces"). "I'm very influenced by pop culture but I have an absolute love for history so it's an interesting opportunity and somewhat of a challenge to decide what to bring in," he adds. "A sense of quirkiness really helps to bring things to life."

Choosing artwork to fit into the vertiginous walls required much thought, too. The home has an impressive lineup from Prairie artists Vic Cicansky and David Thauberger, as well as B.C.'s Anselmo Swan and Vancouver photographer Adam Blasberg. But when it comes to those 12-foot walls, not all sizable pieces — some measuring around seven feet



by seven feet — have always dented the space as much as he hoped. "It's definitely one of the challenges living in a space like this — I've bought art that looks like it's going to be big and then I get it home and it looks so small on the wall," he says, laughing. Thankfully, of course, that's where those windows can always help out yet again. "They really act as a piece of art just by themselves."

Choosing artwork to fill the walls of the apartment, above, was a challenge for the owners. "It's definitely one of the challenges living in a space like this — I've bought art that looks like it's going to be big and then I get it home and it looks so small on the wall," says McElree.

