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OTTAWA CITIZEN

The evolution of Friedemann: This former furniture peddler has moved beyond the expected, winning design honours for a lofty penthouse, a concrete bathroom and a funky kitchen with a reclaimed wood bar

The Ottawa Citizen
Saturday, **October** 29, 2005
Page: **J6**
Section: Style Weekly: Homes
Byline: **Karen Turner**
Source: The Ottawa Citizen

When it comes to designing cutting-edge kitchens, Friedemann Weinhardt doesn't let logistics cloud his vision. Even if it means having to hoist a giant slab of granite up 17 storeys with a crane and ease it into place through a skylight window.

It's this no-holds-barred approach to innovative interior design that garnered the owner of Design First Interiors two glass trophies for an ultra-sleek penthouse apartment on Bronson Avenue at last Saturday's Housing Design Awards. The awards were organized by the Ottawa-Carleton Home Builders' Association.

Still beaming from his triumphant night at the National Gallery gala, where he also won an award for a compact concrete bathroom and a kitchen with a breakfast bar crafted from reclaimed wood, Weinhardt says pushing the limits of conventional design has helped him expand his portfolio. He has gone from designing strictly kitchens and bathrooms to the complete home, including lighting, millwork and even the furniture.

The sleek penthouse, with its exotic wood cabinets, integrated appliances and heavily detailed ceilings, is a case in point.

Weinhardt was hired to combine two condominiums in The Gardens, a luxury highrise built by Charlesfort Developments at 95 Bronson Ave., into a "showpiece home" filled with original paintings, clever lighting and expensive finishes.

"(The homeowner) wanted to buy art he could live in," says the German-born designer, pointing to the coffered ceilings above the open-concept kitchen and living room, the maple platform bed he designed with hidden storage and a granite bistro table jutting from the kitchen island that's supported by a single tapered wood leg.

"Every room had to be very detailed," he says.

In the kitchen, the details are often subtle, but calculated. There's a row of apothecary drawers lined with felt to cradle bottles of the homeowner's favourite wines. A built-in salt-water fish tank blends seamlessly with the curly sycamore cabinet fronts and the dishwasher and microwave are stashed behind a dark walnut pocket door.

Many of the cupboards have no handles, but instead open with touch latches to keep the look clean and simple. Meticulous attention was also given to ensure the grid pattern on the ceiling lined up perfectly with the centre of the monstrous nine-foot-long hood fan.

"It's just wonderful," said judge Linda Nolan of Linda Nolan Interiors, who was impressed with Weinhardt's attention to detail, which landed the penthouse an award for best customized tract and custom kitchen under 179 square feet.

"When I saw it, I thought he had gone to another level."

Weinhardt, who credits assistants Brian Atterbury and Julia Fortey for "opening up a whole new world of design" to him through sophisticated computer technology, was undaunted by the two-bedroom condo's top-floor location.

IMAGES



Pat McGrath, The Ottawa Citizen
Friedemann Weinhardt, right, owner of Design First Interiors, nabbed four housing awards at last Saturday's design gala. He credits the wins to design assistants Brian Atterbury and Julia Fortey for 'opening up a whole new world of design' through sophisticated computer technology. (FPinfomart: **Allowed,** Canada.com: **Allowed**)

Instead, he saw the sprawling living spaces as an opportunity "to experiment with scale," outfitting the kitchen with granite counters mitred to look 17 centimetres thick and a 91-cm wide fridge panelled in blond veneer and framed by full-length pantry cupboards faced in dark walnut.

For the behemoth island, a massive slab of granite had to be lifted by crane into the kitchen through a skylight off the terrace.

"It was impossible to manoeuvre it into the elevator," says Weinhardt of the oversized countertop, adding, "Even the tall pantries had to be delivered by crane."

Though his client had clear ideas of what he wanted his contemporary home to look like, Weinhardt says convincing him that less was better was one of his biggest challenges.

"I had to bring him back from trying to over-ornament the house," says the laidback bachelor, who insisted on "boiling off all the unnecessary details -- otherwise they would have detracted from the design."

At the entrance to his Westboro showroom, a simple message is etched in glass that supports Weinhardt's view on good design. The words are from famed painter Leonardo Da Vinci: "Where the spirit does not work with the hand, there is no art."

As a teen growing up in southern Ontario, Weinhardt was bored with high school, opting instead to pursue a lucrative career in sales rather than put his creative talents to good use.

He says it was Canadian songstress, Joni Mitchell who finally gave him the courage through her inspiring lyrics to follow his dream as a designer.

"I was shamed into doing something with the gift I was given," says Weinhardt, whose first foray into the design world was as a contemporary furniture designer, peddling custom coffee tables and platform beds at the former Stittsville Flea Market more than 20 years ago.

He spent two years learning the ropes as a designer at Van Leeuwen's in Kanata before opening his own business in 1992.

Along one wall of his Richmond Road storefront is a crowded trophy case from his many wins at the local housing association's annual awards.

In September, he took home his first provincial award from the Ontario Home Builders' Association's design conference in Niagara Falls for the same green concrete bathroom that captured top honours at this year's design gala in Ottawa.

So what do all these design accolades mean to him?

"Kaizen. It's a Japanese term for constant growth," muses the ambitious designer, who turns 50 in a couple weeks.

"Improvement. That's what it's all about. We must evolve. If we stay the same, we start to slide."

Illustration:

• Photo: Pat McGrath, The Ottawa Citizen / Friedemann Weinhardt, right, owner of Design First Interiors, nabbed four housing awards at last Saturday's design gala. He credits the wins to design assistants Brian Atterbury and Julia Fortey for 'opening up a whole new world of design' through sophisticated computer technology.

Idnumber: 200510290055

Edition: Final

Story Type: News

Length: 879 words

Illustration Type: Black & White Photo

PRODUCTION FIELDS

BASNUM: 4440724

NDATE: 20051029

NUPDATE: 20051029

DOB: 20051029

POSITION: 1

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