

# A silk purse of a home in Little Portugal



Little Portugal, Toronto home of Pietro and Vivian Gagliano.

Andrew Snow

Through heart, smarts and economizing on the fly, a tiny storefront home regains a little retro-dignity

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**DAVE LEBLANC** >

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It used to be that, if you wanted to live downtown, you looked for the worst house on the best street. Then, as the real estate market grew hotter, the strategy switched to off-the-beaten-path streets.

Now, savvy urbanites must look for forgotten buildings to find a foothold. And the few dollars saved usually go right back into transforming these sow's ears into something habitable.

To those who wander the long avenues of Little Portugal north of the cultural bookends of the Drake and Gladstone hotels, a silk purse has recently appeared in the form of a tiny storefront that Pietro and Vivian Gagliano now call home.

Where there was, for decades, a hastily bricked-in shop window (leaving only a suburban window floating in angel-brick soup) and a cheap, "big box" front door, there now is a robust, mahogany-trimmed composition of big window, clerestory,

and a fully-glazed door (all by Etobicoke's Amberwood Doors Inc.) to let the sunshine in.



Pietro and Vivian Gagliano transformed the façade of their home by installing large windows to let sunlight in .

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Just like the gold-leaf street number Mr. Gagliano applied to that door himself, it's a conscious move to bring a little retro-dignity back to the building, says architect Tim Mitanidis of Creative Union Network, who lived for a time in Amsterdam with his design/life partner, German-born Claudia Bader.

"There, they're really big on leaving their windows open, so you'll walk down the street and all the apartments on the ground level, and even on the upper levels, they're always open," Mr. Mitanidis says. "There's really this extension of living spaces that spill out onto the street, and it works in the reverse: there's this light and activity and life that comes in off the street that you get to enjoy [inside]."

"This will have a big number, but it's the façade of your house," Ms. Bader remembers telling the Gaglianos, "but it's where you want to invest your money."

And just beyond that new façade and the now-generous foyer, other rich materials were found when sledgehammers started swinging. Two original walls of beautiful, multicoloured brick now flank a long dining table; overhead, exposed floor joists found to be in relatively good condition give the couple a loft-like feel ... after being coated with a lick of white paint.

In one area of the ceiling where joists had been hacked away and hastily patched up, Mr. Mitanidis and Ms. Bader have installed a decorative screen sporting an intricate pattern created by a computer-controlled cutting machine. "It's a voronoi pattern," Mr. Mitanidis says. "It's a mathematical pattern that's found in nature, based on triangulation; so if you look at mud flats when they dry out and crack, they always crack in that particular pattern."



The large dining area is used mainly for dinner parties and laptop work.

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The living room is located in the middle of the main floor, with the dining space near the windows at the front, to afford some privacy for the family.

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In addition to appealing doubly to math and nature nerds, a second voronoi screen drops down to partly enclose the stairway to the second floor. This affords privacy to the family when they're in the living area in the middle of the space (while it might seem logical to place the living room at the front, it was decided that the big dining table – used mostly for dinner parties and laptop work – would be the better choice to show to the street).

The kitchen, Mr. Mitanidis says, was placed at the back of the long space because "proportionally, it makes a lot of sense," and a wide gap between the buildings created an opportunity for a few more light-gathering windows (one of which was a former door to the backyard). Interestingly, the kitchen's flooring has been carried up onto the IKEA cabinets to create a novel, wraparound look; actually, only the IKEA carcasses survived, as new doors had to be fabricated from plywood (to which the flooring material was affixed) so they wouldn't warp.

And these semi-custom doors didn't dent the homeowner's budget, either, since they came in well below the cost of bespoke pieces. "It's a greater effort in organization and finding the people to do it," Mr. Mitanidis explains. "Even at IKEA, a single door can be 60 bucks, but the flooring is, what, \$10 or \$12 a square foot? ... But go to a millworker and tell them you want to put a floor onto a kitchen cabinet ..." he trails off, laughing.

Since the brick walls back here had been semi-parged with concrete, the decision was made to treat the entire wall with this "non-traditional" interior finish (the result is so good, it resembles Venetian plaster). A concrete countertop with built-in draining board was added also. "They weren't too hung up on really slick finishes," Mr. Mitanidis says, "and this building became ideal for that taste."

This lack of slickness makes sense when one considers how the two couples met. About 10 years ago, Mr. Mitanidis and Ms. Bader returned to Toronto after working abroad and, unable to find a decent rental apartment, they ended up purchasing and converting a former Victorian rooming house on Wolseley Avenue into three apartments. Next door, in a small warehouse building, lived Mr. Gagliano.

"The first time I met Pietro, we were getting a big bin delivered for moving waste out and we had to come across his property and his car was in the way ... I was knocking on his door at 7:30 in the morning and he had pulled an all-nighter working hard," he says.

Many years and a firmly established friendship later, Mr. Gagliano knocked on his door after spotting the old sow of a store. Could it become a vintage silk purse?



The flooring in the kitchen carries onto the cabinets, creating a wraparound look.

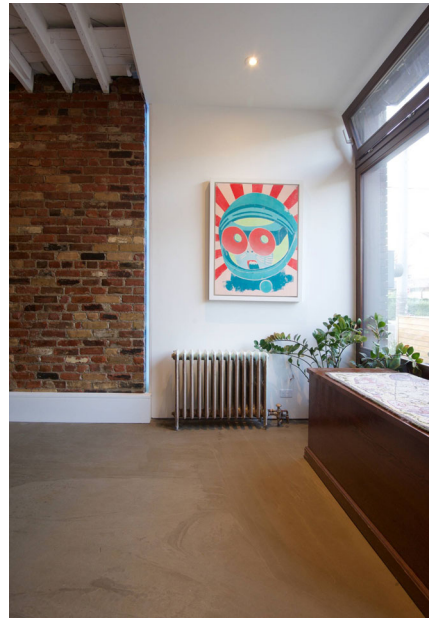
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"I love how these guys brought that look back," says Mr. Gagliano, who has just asked his friends to add a third storey. "We just load these guys up with dreams, and they make them come true."

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Parged walls and exposed joists and bricks are complemented with tasteful decor

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