

Giller-prize winning author Vincent Lam has built a forward-looking house

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Home of Giller-prize winning author Dr. Vincent Lam in Riverdale, Toronto.

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Right now, Vincent Lam prefers to get his daily cardio by cycling. Every morning, at 6:30 a.m., the Giller-prize winning author and doctor hops on a silver road bike in the east end Toronto neighbourhood where he lives, then, with some friends, heads down to the lake, touring the city's eastern beaches before turning back home.

Although they don't necessarily join the pre-breakfast rides, pedalling is also important to the rest of Dr. Lam's family. His wife, Margarita, also a physician, and their three school-aged kids prefer getting around town on two wheels to sitting in traffic in a car or on transit.





The mudroom has a locker for everyone with a cubby perfectly sized for helmets.

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Which is why the Lams built-in special bike spaces during a recent overhaul of their house. In their mudroom, everyone has a locker with a cubby perfectly sized for their helmets (“we measured,” Dr. Lam says). The mudroom is also located in the back, as opposed to the front, of the ground floor to be closer to an outside storage garage where their wheels get locked up post ride.

But as much as the renovation reflects the vigour of a healthy young family (Lam is 45), the spaces were also thought through for multiple age-in-place scenarios. “We tried to envision all the possible ways that the house could work, both now and in the future,” Dr. Lam says. “We wanted this built so that we, or maybe our parents, could just live on the ground level, if that’s the right thing to do at some point.”

Adjacent to the mudroom, a full bathroom currently works well for post-spin showers. But the shower is also curb-less for accessibility, in case someone eventually can’t navigate the stairs to use the loo. At that point, the home’s second and third stories – which presently accommodate bedrooms and the office where Dr. Lam is working on a new novel – might become a separate apartment. “We wired one of the closets on the

second level so that it could be converted into a kitchen,” Dr. Lam says. “That’s some of the generational planning that’s gone into the house.”



At the back of the house, the architects added a new, two-storey volume clad in red corrugated steel.

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More future proofing: all the ground floor, open-concept living spaces can all be swapped out for different purposes. “Before we moved in,” Dr. Lam says, “we didn’t say the dining room will be here or the living room there. When we have our extended families over, the whole space can be a dining area – with 25 people sitting around a long, fold-out table – the kind that’s typically used in a German beer hall. One day, where we currently have a couch, might have to become a bedroom. It’s all flexible.”

According to Dr. Lam’s architect, Heather Asquith, “we get requests for that kind of flexibility a lot more these days,” she says. “Sometimes, people need the flexibility to add a rental unit if, say, one spouse loses a job. Being able to subdivide the house also helps if elderly parents need to move or, very often, if kids can’t move out – which is a reality given the high cost of real estate these days.” (From Re/Max sales data, the average list price for homes in Riverdale is currently \$1.28-million).



Open-ended design allows rooms to be converted to large dining, living space or even a bedroom.

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Dr. Lam was further interested in resilient architecture because he wanted to build something more lasting than what he replaced. The majority of the house dates back to 1910 – the same time that nearby

Withrow Park was laid out – and was solid. But a relatively modern rear addition, dating to the 1980s and where the kids used to play piano, was falling down. “What pushed us over the edge,” Dr. Lam says, “was when snow started coming into the sunroom. It wasn’t exactly comfortable for playing the piano anymore.”

Ms. Asquith, who lives in the area and has long been friends with the family, tried to match the robust, early construction, yet, do so in a contemporary way. The front of the house didn’t change. At the back, she added a new, two-storey volume clad in red corrugated steel. “It’s nice when people try something other than black or grey,” she says, “particularly when the materials are industrial strength so not inherently warm.” The metal is punched with large windows framed in sapele, a weather-resistant mahogany that’s further “set within an overhang to keep it extra protected and reduce maintenance,” she says. “And I like how the rich tones of the wood compliment the red of the metal.”





Large windows allow ample light to pour into the bedrooms.

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The new addition also created opportunity for some practical enhancements to the interior. It allowed for big new windows to draw more natural light into the otherwise dark basement, where the kids have a keyboard, Dr. Lam has a second office (“it’s where I do my taxes and pay my bills,” he says. “The office upstairs is just for writing”) and a stationary bike is set up for winter spinning. Hardy finishes (marble counters in the bathroom, the off-cuts of which turned into a backyard picnic table) and lots of storage (including wall-to-wall cupboards in what’s now the dining area) improved day-to-day functionality, as did the expansion of a shared kids bedroom. Once cramped, the room now has space for an array of Lego creations to sprawl across the floor and wide picture windows framing treehouse-worthy views of the tall cedars in the backyard. Of course, true to the home’s concept, the room is large enough that it could be converted into a studio one day, especially as its next to the closet-cum-kitchen.

Not everything in the renovation was done purely for practicality, though. There was also room for poetics. “My favourite part of the house is definitely the ground floor,” Dr. Lam says. “It’s where we live, eat and hanging out. I like to be next to the big sliding windows at the back. When they’re open, I feel like the garden is right inside the home. Even when it’s too cold for that, the view is still beautiful.” In other words, it’s the perfect place to contemplate the passing of the seasons, things changing through time.

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