

# TIMES COLONIST

## House Beautiful on a small scale

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Italian racing-red storage units hold a bed, files and more in the main floor office. Shoji screens add privacy while allowing lots of light to flow through. Photograph by: Debra Brash, Times Colonist

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With coconut and cork flooring, glossy marble baseboards, stone thresholds, stylish Italian furniture and space-saving savvy, designer JC Scott has created a chic and highly flexible, downtown live-work space.

The owner, Richard McKenster, bought his Chinatown pied-à-terre in 2002 and recently decided it needed a major redesign on all three levels, as well as the small roof terrace.

"I had the whole picture in my mind for a long time, but JC took that vision and ran with it," said McKenster, who said life is like that. "You have a vision, and life takes a while to catch up.

“All I can say is my new home is fabulous, so hold onto your dreams, whatever is closest to your heart. If you trust it, the dream will blossom and enrich your life journey,” said the financial planner, who has been in the business for 40 years. His company, Richard McKenster Financial Planning, operates in Calgary and Halifax as well as Victoria.

“At one point, I almost sold this townhouse and started looking at float homes, but I love this area. I walk everywhere, eat out a lot. I’m fascinated by the Asian approach to life: the way Asians cook, their plant-strong diet.

“I store my kayak over at Ocean River and can be on the water 15 minutes after leaving home. I go to yoga almost every day. There is no commute to work, and I have a minimal eco footprint.

“It feels incredibly healthy here,” said McKenster, who has lived in Victoria full-time for less than a year. He recently sold a home in Calgary, but still has property on the east coast.

Scott understands the attraction to Chinatown, having enjoyed a live-work studio in Fan Tan Alley for 35 years himself, and instantly tuned into McKenster’s affinity for things Asian.

One of the designer’s first suggestions was to use oiled coconut plank flooring on the ground level. Despite growing to maturity in just six years, coconut palms produce hard, dense timber, which is similar to hardwood.

“I first thought coconut would be dirty-looking or scratchy,” McKenster said with a chuckle. “But it has this gorgeous character appeal. Right then and there, I decided to get out of the way, and just trust JC with everything.

“I was so lucky to find him and his team. He warned me this reno was going to be like throwing a stick of dynamite in here and it was. He blew it apart.”

Scott enjoyed the challenge of making a 900-square-foot unit ultra-comfortable, livable and spacious-feeling.

“One of the reasons this works is the concept of fractals,” he said, referring to the scale of materials used, whether backsplash tiles or brickwork. It’s all about proportion and creating illusions, and the challenge was amped up when the owner asked for a lock-off unit within the townhouse — to separate his work area.

The lower floor can now flip from being an office to a residence, while the two upper floors and roof patio function as an independent apartment. The two even have separate entrances.

Scott said it’s a direction many people are taking today. They want to downsize, but they want flexibility and don’t want to compromise on lifestyle.

“It’s an important evolution.”

Having designed several ships’ interiors, including all the floating resorts for Oak Bay Marine Group, he brought invaluable skills to the project.

The result is Asia meets Europe, a theme enhanced by faux rice paper shoji screens for privacy, made by Trade Roots, and rich-looking panelling and cabinets made from sustainable rosewood.

Another expression of his inventive interior alchemy is the grey palette in both coffee bar on the main floor and kitchen above.

Scott created a spacious feeling by using monochrome grey for counters and backsplash. “Using stone in the colour of stainless or chrome helps prevent things like taps and appliances from jumping out visually.” And he doesn’t like anything too reflective, as it tends to bounce light and make a kitchen seem smaller, so Matrix Marble can triple-hone a surface for a satin look to add depth and interest.

The project involved a complete rebuild of all the interiors. A small coffee bar was installed in the ground-floor office, and a bathroom was added under the stairs.

On the middle floor, Scott created a sleek new kitchen with an island that doubles as a dining table. False recycled beams were added to the ceiling for old-town flavour and two walls were covered in antique bricks.

“We had them sliced in half so they only take up an inch of space. The room is psychologically much larger as you look outside, across the courtyard to more old brick walls. There is no jarring contrast. It flows.

“We also created more space on this floor by enclosing what was previously an opening to the lower level, and inserting large chunks of glass block in the new floor to allow light to flow through.”

He also opened up staircase walls on every level, “turning a dark stairwell into a huge skylight.”

The third-floor master suite looks more like a lounge than a bedroom now, with a sleeping system completely hidden by millwork and a stunning new ensuite, with space-saving, sliding glass barn door, and a wall of glass blocks.

The house sleeps six — handy when McKenster’s three grown-up daughters come to visit — and has lots of storage.

Everything was designed to make the home look bigger, to function spatially and psychologically, and to add much more light while using natural materials and integrating with the neighbourhood.

“Luckily, we had good ceiling height, which is really important in a small space. It’s one of those intangible values, vastly important to our psychology, like light and fresh air,” said Scott, a specialist in architectural history, who says harmonics are hugely important, too, because they appeal to both mind and the eye.

The owner is thrilled with the custom Clei units from Italy that provide storage and “incredibly comfortable sleeping,” thanks to the wizardry of transformational furniture.

The dining table-cum-kitchen island is another favourite spot thanks to its ergonomic Italian chairs with lumbar support. “They are amazing. You can sit in them all day.”

Appliances include a Jenn-Air fridge, with ample space but shallow design, an induction cooktop that heats in a flash, and a combination convection and microwave oven.

A small electric fireplace hangs on the living-room wall.

“Even when you can’t have regular large fireplace, the psychological benefit of hearth and home can be achieved with new electric designs that look like wall art,” said Scott, who noted McKenster was a pioneer client.

“As we got deeper into the project, his expectations expanded, and he stayed committed to the vision and to very high standards and degree of detail.

“Living in a place like this is a paradigm shift. It shows how people can move into smaller spaces, live downtown, move forward, not backward, in lifestyle.

“And it’s a designer’s job to show new ways of living.”

Scott notes the unit is located in a character neighbourhood, in the art and design district of Victoria, which has been inhabited since the Gold Rush in 1860.

“These narrow alleys and vertical homes have become a model of urban density.”

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