

HOME OF THE WEEK

Festival Tower penthouse with an interior designer touch

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JOHN LEE/JOHN LEE/SOARE PRODUCTIONS

80 John St., Upper Penthouse 1, Toronto**Asking price:** \$4,195,000**Taxes:** \$15,724.06 (2023)**Monthly maintenance fee:** \$2,996.64**Agents:** Brayden Irwin and Carol Lome, Royal LePage Real Estate Services, Johnston & Daniel Division

The backstory

Gary Searle was running his own business in South Africa when he made his first visit to Toronto to attend the International Aids Conference in 2006.

When his partner suggested a move to Toronto in 2013, Mr. Searle had warm memories of Canada and the people he met.

“The compassion and lack of judgment was impressive.”

He decided to sell his business and his house to begin a new chapter in Toronto.

As they planned their move, Mr. Searle's partner suggested they purchase a condo, but Mr. Searle was unsure he would enjoy the lifestyle.

An acquaintance in Toronto let them know that a century-old stone house in Lawrence Park had just come up for sale.

The home with a slate roof and an interior trimmed in wood reminded Mr. Searle of the country houses designed by the English architect Sir Edwin Lutyens.

The couple decided to buy the house and undertake a renovation, which introduced Mr. Searle to the hazards of knob-and-tube wiring and other elements he'd never heard of before.

"We just took that on," says Mr. Searle, who works in textiles and design. "It was a lovely project and a great privilege to live in a house like that."

Caring for the garden surrounding the home also eased the transition from South Africa.

While the couple enjoyed their home over the next several years, Mr. Searle was frequently catching flights in and out of the Billy Bishop Toronto City Airport as he travelled on business.

He was also spending time downtown at Soho House and hopping over to the Toronto Islands to play tennis at the Royal Canadian Yacht Club.

The idea of leaving the staid Lawrence Park neighbourhood for a condo close to his favourite haunts was becoming more appealing.

"I've always liked the buzz of downtown," he says. "Living north of the city, it was a trek to get to them."

The couple learned upper penthouse 1 had come up for sale at the Festival Tower in the city's entertainment district, but the unit sold before they had a chance to buy it.

Two years later, the same penthouse landed back on the market, and the couple purchased it in 2020.

The penthouse today



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Part of the draw for Mr. Searle was that the residences of 80 John St. sit above the TIFF Lightbox, which is home to the Toronto International Film Festival.

The 46th-floor penthouse provided 11-foot-high ceilings and a close-up view of the CN Tower through floor-to-ceiling glass.

The 2,764-square-foot unit reflected the taste of the young owner, who favoured charcoal and aubergine walls and a large crystal chandelier.

“It was quite opulent and flashy,” Mr. Searle says. “Our style is a little more understated.”

Mr. Searle recalled visiting the condo of the late Sonja Bata while she lived at One Bedford and admiring her carefully curated collection of art and furniture in a very modern apartment.

“That was really an inspiration,” he says.

Mr. Searle had worked closely with Toronto-based interior designer Philip Mitchell over the years so the couple brought him in to reconfigure the unit and create a backdrop to better suit their art collection, family heirlooms and antiques.

The layout, with two-plus-one bedrooms and three bathrooms, needed some subtle adjustments.

In the foyer, Mr. Mitchell recommended removing a bulky coat closet and lowered the ceiling by one foot to emphasize the height of the 11-foot ceiling upon stepping into the living area.

“It creates a real sense of space,” Mr. Searle says.

In contrast to the abundance of wood in the couple’s house, the condo had walls of glass and very few architectural details.

The proportions of the living area were thrown off by an off-centre pillar in the 34- by- 30-foot space, so Mr. Mitchell suggested they disguise it with a modern fireplace clad in marble.

He also had white-lacquered book cases designed and built on the wall separating the living area from the kitchen.

The kitchen was reorganized to accommodate an integrated refrigerator and a dining table. The cabinets were in good shape so, rather than send them to a landfill, Mr. Searle had new ones added and the existing cabinets refaced.

“There’s an enormous amount of extra storage,” says Mr. Searle.

The existing island was a little bulky for the space so they had it narrowed.

“It allowed us to use the island as a sideboard,” says Mr. Searle. “It makes it easy for entertaining.”

Mr. Searle was inspired by the hotels he stayed in during business trips to New York to create a luxurious hotel-style bathroom in the primary suite.

Mr. Mitchell came up with a plan that created room for a double vanity and a larger shower.

In the bedroom, the couple added a custom-made bed.

Throughout the unit, Mr. Searle placed some cherished pieces handed down through his family and hung paintings by the couple’s friends in the arts.

A chair covered in the fabric of Los-Angeles-based interior designer Suzanne Rheinstein was the starting point for much of the décor, Mr. Searle says.

“There’s not very much pattern,” he says of the penthouse interior. “This is more about texture.”

The light streaming in during the day is wonderful, Mr. Searle says, and at night the couple sees the lights of the city and the cars passing by on the Gardiner Expressway below.

Mr. Searle and his partner often stay in and cook, he says, but they also enjoy the plentiful restaurants in the area. Often they invite friends for drinks in the condo, then head out for dinner.

Mr. Searle has long been a film buff, he says, and residents have regular movie nights at the Lightbox.

“There’s a private cinema any resident can book,” he says. “I’ve done that on several occasions for parties for friends.”

The Art Gallery of Ontario and Grange Park are nearby, and the Toronto Music Garden on the inner harbour is a favourite spot for the couple to stroll with their pug Blanche.

“In the summer we wake up early and walk down there,” says Mr. Searle.

Today Mr. Searle makes frequent trips to London as vice-president of the art and design house Christopher Farr Cloth, so being so close to Billy Bishop has made life easier, he adds.

During his leisure time he also enjoys walking 10 minutes to the harbour and jumping on a water taxi to the Toronto Islands.

“The views back to the city from the islands are some of the best in North America.”

The best feature



JOHN LEE/JOHN LEE/SOARE PRODUCTIONS

The 180-degree view from the penthouse is ever-changing, says Mr. Searle, who describes the panorama as “jaw-dropping.”

The kitchen and living areas open to a south-facing balcony while the primary suite and den lead to a balcony facing west.

In addition to the CN Tower’s nightly light show, Mr. Searle enjoys watching the city’s bustle below, streetcars trundling out to Humber Bay, and the planes and helicopters landing and taking off from the island airport.

On a clear day, the vistas extend across Lake Ontario to the mist rising from Niagara Falls.

“One of the things I love is watching the storms roll in.”

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