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The cherry wood library was hand-built. The hearth stone and surround on the fireplace (one of seven in the home) are made of nero assoluto granite.
Photo courtesy of Matthew Sapera

Matthew Sapera: A cutter above the rest

Suzanne Wintrob, *National Post* · December 3, 2010

Whether he is passing through the streets of tony Rosedale or strolling along the beach in historic Nantucket, Matthew Sapera never gets tired of hearing people murmur, “Is that a renovation or a new build?”

Those words are like gold to Mr. Sapera because they precisely capture his goal when he tackles a new project.

“One thing that drives me crazy is driving through a high-end neighbourhood and the past is obliterated and replaced with substandard houses,” says Mr. Sapera, the 48-

year-old founder of Matthew Sapera Fine Homes. “There’s no reference, there’s no past. But respect for the past is a distinguishing factor. Sometimes people hit the wrong mark. Either they try to repeat the past or they ignore the past. What you need to do is respect it -- you look back at it, you get inspired by it, you take pieces from it and then you incorporate it into what you’re doing now. That’s how to put a house together that feels like it’s connected and not just a replica.”

Blending past and present -- and building present to resemble past -- are Mr. Sapera’s specialties. He has worked in Rosedale, Forest Hill and North Toronto and is now reaching into King City, cottage country and New England.

Over the past three years, he and his spouse, Darren Sukonick, have meticulously infused the historical with the nautical to create a breathtaking colonial-style seaside haven on Nantucket Island that oozes warmth. The 6,000-square-foot “upside down house” (the living/dining room and kitchen are situated on the second floor to capture the ocean view) and 750-sq.-ft. poolhouse on 2.5 acres of land feature trim, crown mouldings and cabinetry shipped in from Toronto and installed by Toronto-based tradespeople because “the best materials and craftsmen come from Toronto,” Mr. Sapera says.

Considering his striking design work and discerning clients, it’s hard to believe that Mr. Sapera didn’t set out to be an architect or interior designer. He does not even have formal training in his chosen profession. Rather, in the late 1980s his mother, Ethel Sapera, a high-end real estate agent, fuelled his love of houses. One day he pulled on his Mom’s connections and approached famed Toronto design-builder Joe Brennan for a job (“I begged him to hire me, and I worked for free for months,” recalls Mr. Sapera of his days as a labourer). He was a quick study, and in 1991 he branched out on his own.

Today, Mr. Sapera is not just building but designing, too, working with sophisticated homeowners on everything from the initial design to what he calls “the soft stuff” such as paint colours, furniture and drapery. From there he takes to the garden, where attractive pools, cabanas and garages help to determine just the right combination of greenery (“If the outside doesn’t work out, the whole thing is a waste,” he quips). Mr. Sukonick, a lawyer, pitches in as the firm’s marketing guru and helps to organize clients and tradespeople.

Mr. Sapera’s secret is in the details. With all of his projects made to measure, he never settles for the easiest route. Instead, he spends considerable time thinking up creative ideas and being inspired, whether on travels to world-class places or by scouring architectural books and magazines, to add character and excitement to his clients’ homes.

One project currently underway is a case in point. The grand 7,000-sq.-ft. home, built in the 1920s, was typically Forest Hill with brick exterior and gumwood interior. The owners had become empty nesters but had no intention of downsizing to a condo. Instead, they moved out and let Mr. Sapera transform their abode into a “not quite modern, not quite traditional” transitional space where they could comfortably retire and entertain their grandkids and friends.

Mr. Sapera’s touch is in every room, from the one-of-a-kind two-piece casing/backband on the doorways and reflected in the custom-designed doors, to the dining room and hallway panelling with a slight gap to mimic wainscotting. A powder room tucked under the third floor staircase has an oval window to offset the linear feel (“There’s no round in the house, so this is a quirky type of thing you’d see in an older home. And it lends a charm from the outside, too,” he says). A breezeway connects the house to the garage, which has 12-ft. ceilings and French doors opening to the garden so it can be used as an entertaining space for parties. An office overlooks the pool and garden, with a vaulted ceiling and windows on all sides to feel like a treehouse.

“That’s how you build -- the house tells you what it wants and you listen,” says Mr. Sapera, who usually has half a dozen projects on the go. “And in this case, when looking from the outside the neighbours just think they painted. Well, maybe a bit more than that.”

Nearby, a 6,000-sq.-ft. home built five years ago showcases how Mr. Sapera blends new build into an established neighbourhood. The owners, a couple in their 30s with two young children, are casual people who wanted an open atmosphere. Mr. Sapera says he “created their imagination” with large rooms and high ceilings, chunky staircase railings and a neutral palette “so it feels grand but not overdone.”

“Because of the size of the lot we built the house first, and then once the landscaping was finished we built the garage,” he explains. “When the garage went up, the cedar roof on the garage looked brand new, but the cedar roof on the main house was a year old so it had oxidized. I took another client by and she said, ‘How old is the original house?’ I said it’s brand new. She couldn’t believe it because it looked like it had been on the street for 75 years. That’s a good thing.”

Next on Mr. Sapera’s wish list is to tackle a boutique condo development where he can let his creative juices go wild in a new direction.

“The clients motivate you to come up with great designs and ideas because they’re fairly involved and they’re bright, successful people,” he says. “The clients, the designers, the trades -- the collaboration of everybody makes this a fantastic business to be in.”