



DESIGNERS AT WORK: Camal Pirbhai, owner of La Beaute Designs, consults with staff at the company's Mt. Pleasant quarters. Photos by Deirdre Macdonald

North Toronto landmark takes on new look and life

Former Cruickshank's site now a design centre

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Just south of Sherwood Ave., on the east side of Mt. Pleasant Rd., an unusual building has got people talking. Known until December 2000 as Cruickshank's, a catalogue and retail business that specialized in high quality bulbs from Holland, 1015 Mt. Pleasant has recently undergone a dramatic transformation.

The building, with its charcoal-grey façade and rusty beams that extend at roof height over a garden courtyard, has been the home and workplace of Camal Pirbhai, owner of La Beaute Designs custom made window treatments and Reid & Lyons decorative trimmings and hardware accessories, since July 2001. Long gone are the pale green tiles of the Cruickshank's façade.

Standing in the courtyard on a late fall day, the 32-year-old Pirbhai talks exuberantly about the changes he's made in the four years since he bought the building. He's tried to do most of the work himself and to preserve or recycle some of the original materials so that "a bit of soul remains."

"Everything's a work in progress," he says. The rusty beams, which currently look raw, will weather to a deep brown in a few years.

Pirbhai has designed the courtyard with a sense of movement, texture, light and harmony. Six vertical wooden posts plus the seventh vertical of the building's front façade represent the musical notes of a major scale. A Ginko tree on the garden side represents the bebop note in jazz. Pirbhai has a long-standing interest in jazz and has recently

started to study the tenor sax, one of the few luxuries he allows himself in his hectic schedule.

Vines cover the north wall of the courtyard. At the base of the wall stands a glass-topped table, which shimmers at night with light reflected from an arched lamp overhead. On the other side of the pathway leading to the stainless steel clad entranceway, is a fountain — a black urn on a concrete cube in a small pond. Underwater lighting turns the cube into a glowing opaque surface when night falls.

Longtime residents of North Toronto and avid gardeners will remember Cruickshank's well. In 1946, Clarence W. Cruickshank bought the land on Mt. Pleasant and shortly after erected a building for the growing business he'd started in 1925 in the family home and garage at 365 Glengrove Ave. Over the years, Cruickshank made several additions to the original building, including a warehouse that Pirbhai now uses as his workroom.

In March 2000, Heather Reisman of Indigo bought the Cruickshank business and property from Laura Rapp, Linda Ledgett, and Annette McCoubrey, owners since 1988. Reisman, however, soon sold it to a speculator after closing the store abruptly in December 2000. When the speculator was unable to get the city's approval for his proposed development, he sold to Pirbhai.

Pirbhai, who simultaneously conveys incisiveness, high energy and

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BEFORE AND AFTER: Exterior of Cruickshank's (left) and part of the building as it now houses La Beaute Designs.

New building design echoes the past

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calm, bought 1015 Mt. Pleasant with a leap of faith when he fell in love with its glass skylights and the wide-boarded spruce subfloor in the workroom. The leaking skylights, faulty wiring and asbestos in the basement had scared off other buyers. Pirbhai hadn't counted on carpenter ants as well. Two years after he purchased the building, it was ant-free.

Pirbhai saw magic where others saw disaster. This magic, won through hard work, is evident when you step into the workroom of La Beaute Designs.

He's stained the spruce floor a soft terra cotta, while well-worn, but warmly coloured oriental carpets punctuate the entranceway. Bolts of fabric and jewelled tassels line one wall; against another are collections of antique irons, thimbles and hand sewing machines.

On a recent morning, Adilia Peres, the manager of the workroom, and her assistants are busy laying out fabric, cutting and piecing on three large worktables. Nina Simone's "After Hours" is playing. In the room next door, Randi Weiner, the manager of Reid & Lyons and an old hand in the design business, is busy with paperwork. Everyone banter like family.

At 8:30 a.m., Pirbhai comes down from his bedroom to iron his shirt

at one of the worktables and to talk over current projects with Adilia before heading off to see clients. The Dude and The Dudette, Pirbhai's black and white cats, follow him into the workroom, then settle comfortably into a chair.

La Beaute Designs creates handmade window treatments and soft furnishings for approximately 15 designers and architects; Reid & Lyons provides decorative trimmings and hardware to 700 clients in the design business.

Although La Beaute Designs has expanded dramatically since Pirbhai started it 11 years ago in a one-bedroom apartment, regularly working 20-hour days to get his business off the ground, he's determined to keep the artisan quality of his work. He says, "I need to be involved. I need to be 'in the kitchen.'"

Pirbhai learned his trade in England at Kara Interiors just outside London. Although he'd always been creative — he sculpts, paints and draws for his own pleasure — he had never used a sewing machine in his life. He took to it immediately and to the hand crafting of window treatments. After an 18-month apprenticeship, he was back in Toronto to find a niche for this "lost art."

Pirbhai has transformed the ground floor of the old Cruickshank store into a living space, which includes

a kitchen, living room and dining room. The space, richly coloured in shades of ochre, terra cotta and deep blue, is peaceful — a space that invites conversation and reflection. There's a generous dining room table where the staff of La Beaute Designs often gather for meals, comfortable sofas and, in one corner, a dramatic ebony carving that stands in front of a gilt mirror.

In the early days at 1015 Mt. Pleasant, the second floor apartment often housed members of the Cruickshank family. Pirbhai modified this space by removing the kitchen and designing an expanded guest bedroom.

He also added a third floor where he has his own loft-style bedroom. From here, he looks out through floor-to-ceiling windows on a breathtaking "million dollar view" of the well-treed backyards of Sherwood and Keewatin Aves.

Cruickshank's catalogue for spring 2000 encourages "the development of private, enclosed, restful spaces in the city." Standing in Pirbhai's courtyard, just a few metres from the street, the urgency of the world seems far removed.

Thanks to Pirbhai's vision, North Toronto can, once again, celebrate a flourishing business at 1015 Mt. Pleasant — and a reinvented landmark that echoes the past.