

THE STAR

Scarborough reno brings the outside in



It's rare to enter a newly renovated home and be immediately whisked outside into the backyard. But if you drop by Lee Van Steinburg and Amy Tuomaala's Scarborough home, that's likely what will happen.

The spacious front foyer opens onto a dining room and then a few steps leading down into the open kitchen and living room. It's here that guests realize they've arrived at a suburban retreat in the Highland Creek neighbourhood, on the outskirts of the Scarborough Bluffs.



“When you enter our house, it tapers you down visually five different levels. We wanted to draw people into the house and right into the yard. That’s where we spend most of our time,” said Van Steinburg, 38, of the home they share with Henley, their five-year-old golden retriever.

A 16-by-eight-foot window at the back of the house provides an enormous frame for an outdoor oasis complete with two decks, two garages and a miniature ravine running through the backyard.

A professional landscaper, Van Steinburg admits that while the inside renos of the 1949-built house is not quite finished, the yard is fully equipped with lights, landscaping stones and outdoor furniture, including a bar. Tuomaala, 39, a dental hygienist, is equally proud of their new outdoor living space, right down to the crown jewel of the backyard: a garage/workshop at the edge of the property.

The garage’s 24 windows elevate its appearance and flood the interior with light. They also allow Van Steinburg to keep an eye on his treasures within: He’s currently rebuilding the engine in a 1976 Porsche 911, and the garage is also home to a 1940 Ford Deluxe that belonged to his late grandfather.

His 2007 Porsche 911 GT3 and Tuomaala’s 2004 Porsche Boxster are



housed in the everyday garage attached to the driveway, along with a brand new Harley Davidson. Van Steinburg designed a thruway between the garages so cars could be swapped back and forth. “Having two garages was the plan from the beginning. I always find myself working on something and didn’t want to clutter up the front garage. Projects can sit out of the way and (the rear garage) looks cool with the glass doors,” he said.

Nestled beside the glass-doored, working garage — and behind the leafy ravine — is a private retreat that’s part nightclub, part cabana. Cedar deck floors, a fire table, lounging furniture and a fully stocked bar make the hideaway ideal for both entertaining and quiet hours in the serene spot.

“That area was a total afterthought but it’s one of our favourite places. On hot summer days it feels like you’re in a tree fort — it’s cool and shady. We always fall asleep back there,” said Van Steinburg.

He bought the original 1,400-square-foot bungalow for \$300,000 in 2008

before he met Tuomaala. While the house had good bones, “calling it a three-bedroom was a bit of a stretch.” At the top of an extremely steep stairway was a sloped-ceiling half-storey, with sagging floors, split into two rooms.

The couple turned the space into a loft, but the precipitous stairs were a problem. Van Steinburg’s visiting grandfather had to crawl up to get a look and Tuomaala regularly fell on the stairs, usually with an armful of laundry.



After years of patchwork fixes, they decided in 2016 to rebuild their home. Van Steinburg acted as the project’s general contractor during the 11-month construction, and the couple lived in a house they rented next door.

Rebuilt and with more than three times the living space at 3,900 sq. ft., the house has a U-shaped staircase with glass panels to the second floor where there are three full bedrooms. The master suite features a balcony with glass rails and an ensuite with a massive soaking tub — both overlook the backyard. “We like to feel like we’re out there even when we’re inside,” said Van Steinburg.

On the main floor, the kitchen and living area with a large gas fireplace



While the bulk of the renovation is complete, Tuomaala and Van Steinburg are still agonizing over interior light fixture selections and finishing details — the kind of stress that a little chill time in the backyard can fix.





THE NUMBERS

15: Light fixtures bought and returned

1949: Year the original house was built

\$300,000: Budget for the rebuild

\$600,000: Actual cost of the rebuild



Heather Hudson is a Toronto-based writer and a freelance contributor for the Star. Reach her at heather@heatherhudson.ca