A relaxing 'forever home' atop the Scarborough Bluffs

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TORONTO
SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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The Scarborough home of Jesleen Rana and Jihad Abouali.
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About four years ago, Jesleen Rana and Jihad Abouali, both doctors, started thinking about having a family and wanted more space to raise kids than their 1,000-square-foot downtown Toronto condo. At the time, their wish-list for a residential upgrade was different than many new buyers. They didn't dream of a newly renovated kitchen or an open-concept floor plan or lots of storage. Their dream was a wreck.

"We were looking for something that we wouldn't feel bad about replacing," Ms. Rana says.

"A tear down made sense for us so we could build something entirely our own," Mr. Abouali adds. "We wanted to make a forever home while we were young and had many years ahead of us to enjoy it."

One thing they were particular about: they were determined to be by Lake Ontario, somewhere quiet with views of the water. After years of living at one of the city's busiest intersections – Queen Street West and University Avenue, which is endlessly packed with cars and people – they longed for a lot that would be the opposite. Serene and still, a hideaway to decompress from their demanding jobs.

Finding a vacant, lake-side property to build a single-family home is nearly impossible to do in Toronto. The shoreline seems to be all condos and warehouses, industrial remnants of the city's past as a shipping port. But the east end, in Scarborough's Cliffside neighbourhood, offered Ms. Rana and Mr. Abouali what they were looking for: wide, leafy lots on the top of the Scarborough bluffs with panoramic vistas of the water. Many of the existing homes are small, mid-century bungalows that are currently being replaced by larger, contemporary piles.

Ms. Rana and Mr. Abouali wanted a property with a view of Lake Ontario.
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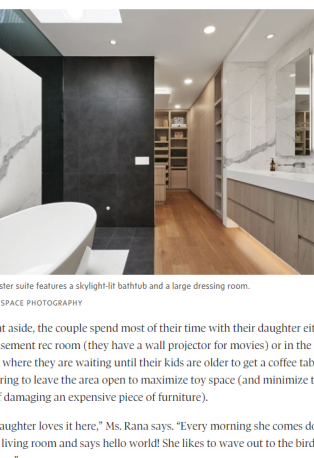
Thanks to an enterprising real estate agent – someone who went door-to-door, asking residents if they were interested in selling – Ms. Rana and Mr. Abouali bought a site that wasn't even for sale. The structure met their ideal level of dereliction. It had a series of suspect, leaky additions on the back that weren't done to code and appeared to be falling down of their own accord.

"But when we walked to the backyard and saw the lake right there, we knew we were home," Ms. Rana says.

For the rebuild, Ms. Rana and Mr. Abouali chose Taylor Smyth Architects. "We drove by another house they designed in the area, also on the Bluffs, and really loved the clean, modern style," Mr. Abouali says. "So we did some research to figure out who designed it."

"We basically called them up and said they didn't have a choice but to work with us," Ms. Rana jokes.



Double-height windows on the south-facing end of the house offer views of the lake.
DOUBLESPACE PHOTOGRAPHY

Much of the resulting, 4,600-square-foot design is set up to capture the natural beauty of the context. Right from the front foyer, there are clear-site lines south, through a series of double-height windows, out to the lake. All the principal rooms face the water, including the living area, dining space and kitchen on the ground floor, the master bedroom on the second level and the sheltered patio on the roof ("it's a great place for sunsets," Mr. Abouali says).

The sheltered rooftop patio also looks toward the lake.
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A similar palette of materials, including white walls and slats of wood, continue from the exterior in, blurring the inside-outside boundary. (That said, the exterior wood is actually a Dutch laminate product Trespa. "Maintaining real wood outside takes a lot work and dedication," says Michael Taylor, co-founder of Taylor Smyth Architects. "Not a lot of homeowners are interested in refinishing their exterior every couple of years.")

White walls and wood slats give the interior a natural feel.
DOUBLESPACE PHOTOGRAPHY

Although Ms. Rana now has a slightly longer commute to work, one benefit of moving from condo-land to the suburbs is that the couple have more access to the sun, as there no shade-casting buildings around. "We tried to bring in as much light as possible," says Marco Bonatti, an associate architect at Taylor Smyth who oversaw the project. "There are big windows facing the lake, as well as a long skylight and a clerestory over the living room. During the day, it's incredibly bright."

The show-stopping surrounds don't eclipse the true purpose of the house, though. "Both Jihad and I have big families," Ms. Rana says. "Part of why we wanted a big space was for the sheer joy of having our families over. We love to entertain our relatives." Recently, the couple comfortably hosted about 30 people, including cousins, nieces and nephews.

The architects aimed to bring in as much natural light as possible.
DOUBLESPACE PHOTOGRAPHY

Since purchasing the property, they also started a family of their own. Their first daughter, now 2, was 1 when the house was being finished in December, 2018. Their second daughter, on the way, is expected later in 2020. Each has their own bedrooms on the second level, both decked in whimsical wallpaper (think giant flowers, but with feathers not pedals).

The couple have a serene master bedroom for whenever they want kid-free peace and privacy. The space has a spa-like sense of luxury, with bathtub under a skylight, a shower with views of the lake, and a dressing room that's almost as large as many downtown urban condos. "We tried to make a really sexy en suite," Mr. Taylor says, pointing out LEDs inset into the walls that create a calming, soothing glow.

The master suite features a skylight-lit bathtub and a large dressing room.
DOUBLESPACE PHOTOGRAPHY

Retreat aside, the couple spend most of their time with their daughter either in the basement rec room (they have a wall projector for movies) or in the living room, where they are waiting until their kids are older to get a coffee table, preferring to leave the area open to maximize toy space (and minimize the risk of damaging an expensive piece of furniture).

"My daughter loves it here," Ms. Rana says. "Every morning she comes down to the living room and says hello world! She likes to wave out to the bird and the trees."

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