A dairy tale

Wherein three Yugoslavian émigrés buy a one-time Victorian milk factory on the edge of Little Italy, add a sweeping galleria and a crystal boardroom, and call it home

OLGA MIHAILOVICH IS SITTING IN HER RADI-ant boardroom quoting Rodin. Her long legs crossed under a glass table, she invokes the French sculptor to explain how she and her partners converted a turn-of-the-20th-century dairy into a turn-of-the-21st-century design studio. "That which we commonly call ugly in nature," she recites, "can be beautiful in art."

OK, the straight-ahead brick building they transformed was not exactly nature, but Olga and her partners in the Element Group—Milosh Pavlovicz and Sasha Josipovicz—are Serbs, poetic types who wield metaphors as deftly as slide rules. And there's no denying that their one-time Victorian milk factory on Markham Street just south of College, now recast as workspaces and apartments, is a smashing makeover.

The skinny rectangle, whose first floor peels away to reveal the glassy boardroom, is named the Element Building, after the design company founded by the three partners. Their clients include Goldfish restaurant on Bloor, Cha Cha Cha supper club on Duncan Street, Jamieson Laboratories' head office at Yonge and St. Clair, and a faculty of economics building in the Russian Arctic. Part of what allows the Element Group to function comfortably in many different worlds is that its principals share, in Olga's words, a collective memory. It incorporates old European cities that accommodate the new as a matter of course, houses where modern furnishings keep company with heirlooms, and an egalitarian Soviet discipline grafted onto an Eastern European penchant for high spirits and the good life.

Born on the Danube, in the old Austro-Hungarian city of Novi Sad, Olga grew up in a "post-baroque" house with elaborate plasterwork. "Well," she allows in her sonorous accent, almost reluctantly, "it was very pretty." Her taste has evolved away from pretty toward minimalist, but, believing firmly that "your first three years form you," she credits her childhood house with her lifelong interest in the visual. In 1969, after graduating from art college in Yugoslavia, she decided to visit her brother, who had emigrated to Canada. On the plane, she met another Yugoslavian émigré, fell in love, married and moved to Toronto. When her son was two, she enrolled in Ryerson's interior design program and later launched a business that specialized in law offices and trust companies.

As she talks about her past, the floor-to-ceiling glass exterior door swings open, and Milosh arrives for work. Olga has just returned from a holiday, and he welcomes her back with kisses, right cheek first, then left, then right again. "Three times for Serbs," he explains, "four for friends." With his grey hair brushed straight away from his square face, Milosh looks like a benign Eastern European statesman. ("He was born older," Sasha will tell me later.) The son and grandson of architects, Milosh is the firm's only partner who ended up in Toronto by design rather than by accident. He wanted to study the high-rise building in its native habitat, so he came to North America in 1980, enrolling in the University of Toronto's graduate program in architecture.

The door opens once more, and this time Sasha, wearing a crisp lavender shirt and a shining morning face, bounds in. Again the three kisses, and a warmly appraising "Olga, you look like million bucks." I ask Olga how she sees herself vis-à-vis her two male partners. "I'm the one that never gets disturbed," she says.

"But *I* never get disturbed!" Sasha retorts, looking astonished and more than a little disturbable.

If Olga comes across as the artist and Milosh as the intellectual, Sasha presents himself as the sexy party boy who majored in shoes, discos and '70s-era chanteuses. (*National Post* editor Ken Whyte, whose

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Boardroom with a view: from the street, it looks as if someone scooped out the first floor and filled half the void with a glass box

DESIGN continued

house and newspaper office were designed by Sasha, warns, "Don't ever get him going on Grace Jones.") When, at age 22, he followed his friend Milosh to Toronto, all he knew about Canada was Margaret Trudeau and Toller Cranston, so he expected everyone to be "wild and crazy and fancy and glamorous." By coincidence, the first person he met was Cranston's coach, Ellen Burka. As he tells it, she said to him, "You're good-looking, well educated, and you have money. Run!"

Mentally, his bags are still packed. Sasha deplores the Canadian "I don't want to be happy" attitude while improbably claiming, "I'm as Canadian as you can get, but the European keeps creeping in." Meanwhile, his list of establishment clients grows, from Ken Whyte to Linda Frum to the Windsor Arms. Behind the lightweight persona is a high achiever Whyte likens to the kids in high school who hide their brains: "The non-linear conversation style comes around in the end, and all the problems get resolved."

WHEN THE THREESOME BEGAN HUNTING for a studio for their new enterprise—they had joined forces in 1998, after Milosh and Olga met while browsing at a kitchen showroom—they favoured Little Italy, with its European flavour and mix of houses, shops, cafés and old industrial buildings. One night, as Milosh and Olga walked along College Street, he took her to see Latvian House, whose grandiose classical portal he admired. In an alley behind it, boarded up and decorated with graffiti, they found something much humbler: the rear of an old brick building that faced Markham Street. Some weeks later, by coincidence, a friend in real estate called them up and told them that the very same derelict property was for sale.

An elongated shoebox topped with a half-hearted little pediment, its main appeal to the Element Group was its location on the cusp of commercial and residential zoning. From an 18-foot-wide front, similar in scale to the neighbouring houses, a single room stretched back 135 feet, half the length of the block.

For $300,000, the place was theirs. It sounds like a steal, but Olga remembers the black-painted brick, the conveyor belt that ran between the first and second floors, and the friend who came to inspect and said, aghast, "Why did you do this?" Nevertheless, seeing the dowdy building's possibilities, and with the Continental model of mixed use in mind, the partners petitioned city hall and obtained permission for a combination of residential and commercial space. The first floor

would serve as their studio; the second would be converted into another, which they would later rent out to the design firm Dinnick & Howells; and the third would hold two apartments.

Wanting to preserve the original footprint (three times the size the current bylaw allows), they confined most of their exterior modifications to the first floor. When they took possession, the front was dominated by a garage door and loading dock. They removed them, and to the southeast they installed their crystal boardroom. The rest of the front, to the north, they opened to form what Milosh calls the galleria, with one entrance to the Element Group's atelier and another to the upstairs tenants'. From the street, it looks as if someone scooped out the first floor and filled half the void with a glass box. The result is knowing, disconcerting and a showstopper. To complete the metamorphosis, and because street-front parking pads send an anti-urban message, they did away with their allotment and planted a small formal garden.

On the inside, they stripped every surface back to its wooden bones, poured a concrete floor on the first storey and added reinforcing steel beams. Placing the main staircase in the tenants' entrance meant most of the first floor was left unobstructed. A narrow corridor on the south side accentuates the building's length and reminds Milosh sometimes of an Amsterdam canal house, sometimes of a train. From the corridor, which ends at a tiny bamboo garden in back, you enter various "compartments"—bathroom, kitchen, a second boardroom and, finally, the studio.

Milosh explains the building's history as we sit in the second boardroom, an intimate space with a Le Corbusier glass table on an aqua base and Plank chairs in warm zebra wood. This is the place for clients who prefer something less exposed than the main boardroom, and for talks about money or other sensitive issues. (Sasha passes by and shoots his head in: "You're interviewing him here because he's introvert. I am extrovert, so you and I will go to the front meeting room." Is it true? Could be, says Milosh, smiling, and goes on with his story.)

The year-long renovation was finished in 2000, and Olga still has weary memories of picking up drywall at Home Depot at midnight. She doubts that doing their own contracting saved much money, but the $600,000 they spent making over a 7,000-square-foot building, with kitchens and bathrooms on each floor, was deployed with sagacity.

Conscious of, in Milosh's words, "the little things that make a space," the Element Group wanted their building to serve as a calling card without being overwhelming. All three are self-described perfectionists, and it shows. The elegantly quiet railing on one side of the galleria, custom designed using stainless steel marine cable and brawny black-painted steel supports, is one example. The interior wall, where a woven effect is conjured by narrow concrete blocks arranged to protrude slightly from a background of wider ones, is another. As Milosh says, "it speaks about our attitude to details and the little interventions that sometimes make an interesting gesture."

When it came time to decorate the offices, they opted for simplicity. Milosh describes their look as spare and international. Olga declares herself against "the frilly dilly—a dress with 10 bows doesn't need any." And Sasha inveighs against "design terrorists....We try for longevity."

Longevity, minimalism, no frills. It sounds tasteful, and possibly boring. But the Element Group's version comes with more than a dash of brio. In their pièce de résistance, the front boardroom, the juxtaposition of Louis XIV chairs loosely slipcovered in white with the British architect Norman Foster's severe Nomos table (a piece Milosh had coveted for years) is not the most obvious combination. And that's before you factor in the Piranesi copper engraving of a column in six parts, hung sideways to play with the building's length.

It's an angular, audacious room, white and silver except for a kelly green table in the corner. But along with the rigour, there's something soothing about the repeated rectangles of the Piranesi, the table, the milky glass dividing screen, the windows, even the steel track that holds the halogen lights. Sasha rhapsodizes about the room's winter look; he sees it as a cozy Siberian cocoon with overtones of *Doctor Zhivago*. (Memo to Ken Whyte: don't get Sasha going on Julie Christie and Omar Sharif.) Its combination of antique and contemporary reminds Milosh of his parents' living room in Belgrade, and Olga strokes the sinuous arm of the 17th-century chair and speculates about her first memories of furniture. Sasha likes the way their place—slightly outlandish but neighbourly—has almost become a character on the street. Even more, he relishes the moment when designer Glenn Pushelberg, noting all the attention the Element Group was getting, asked him who did their publicity. "The building!" crows Sasha, opening his arms to take in all of 298 Markham. ▬

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