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ON LOCATION

Saving the House Next Door



THE midcentury house that was recently renovated by the writer Douglas Coupland in Vancouver, British Columbia, could technically be called a second home, though it doesn't really provide much of a scenery change. The commute from his main residence takes all of 25 seconds.

The two-story house, which he bought for about \$1.32 million in March 2008, adjoins his property. When it came on the market, Mr. Coupland saw a chance to preserve an architecture style he says is disappearing and being replaced with what he calls "Carmelo Soprano meets Arts and Crafts," referring to the slew of McMansions that have gone up.

In novels like "Generation X," "Microserfs" and his new novel, "Generation A," out this November, he's explored the cultural cutting edge, and he tackled the renovation with a similar edginess.

According to Mr. Coupland, 47, there wasn't much worth restoring. "It was just a mess," he said. "There was dog effluvia, nicotine dripping down the walls, water damage. The only surfaces intact were the beams, the ceiling and the flagstone in the entryway — and even that was under a skim coat of concrete."

Working with a contractor, Mr. Coupland did what all good writers and renovators do: he edited.

Down came a wall that ran the length of the stairway, flooding the space with light and air. Off went the skim coat of concrete. Upstairs, three of the four cramped bedrooms that Mr. Coupland likened, in typically vivid language, to “rooms where hopes and dreams go to crawl into a corner and die” were turned into a large flexible space and painted a sterile gallery white.

The house’s best features were left alone, including the exposed cedar-paneled ceiling downstairs and the modular pattern of rooms that make up the floor plan.

With a second house to furnish, Mr. Coupland shuttled pieces from his main residence, another post-and-beam that has become a bit cluttered in the 14 years he’s lived there. He installed a number of art works, including many of his own creations (he was an artist before his writing career took off).

“I’m suspicious of places that look decorated,” he said. “I can understand why people do it, but you see too many cushions or a piece of fabric hanging and it’s, like, ‘Ugh!’ A good house with good art will always work, no matter what.”



The works reflect the inventive point of view Mr. Coupland brings to his writing, like an installation he created in the entry hall by placing, on a ledged wall, pieces of various shapes and colors taken from vintage building kits, or the oversize detergent bottle in the hallway, his own work, titled appropriately, “Downy Fabric Softener.”

The colorful plastic piece on the dining room table, meanwhile, will be familiar to anyone who played the children’s game Mousetrap. “It becomes this amazing sculpture you can get for \$3 at a flea market,” he said.

The art is all the more visible because of the open floor plan. “I hate to use this word but there’s a wonderful flow,” Mr. Coupland said, sounding like a decorator despite himself. “Even though there are two floors, it feels as one. There’s no way for a teenager to hide in this house.”

Not that there are any lurking about. Since the house was completed six months ago, it's "been used nonstop as a studio and for filming video projects," Mr. Coupland said, adding that guests have also stayed there. Meanwhile, Mr. Coupland still lives in his longtime residence next door, with his partner, David Weir.

Mr. Coupland has been sneaking over to the new house, reveling in its open spaces, its "almost Scandinavian sense of social transparency," as he put it.

Mr. Coupland was asked if he feels a little guilty spending so much time in the new house, considering his longtime home is just a few steps down the hill.

"Do I feel like I'm cheating on my main house?" he said. "A little bit."



Mr. Coupland applies white Lego building blocks to a post in his upstairs gallery, where his "Target Stack" installation hangs on a wall.