

Whimsical, eye-popping home has a view for rent

Designer seeks right tenant for distinctive house that's sure to be a conversation-starter

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A few weeks ago, I stood on a rooftop patio atop three 16-by-16 foot brightly coloured Rubik's Cubes that are perched on four concrete stilts anchored 47 feet deep (through two feet of top soil that sits on top of a marsh). Gazing over surrounding rooftops and treetops there is a view of the lake. What I'm describing may sound like a structure out of a children's book but it's actually the most unique and whimsical rental accommodation I've seen in this city – a real conversation-starter – which happens to be available right now.

"I planned it to be a rental," says Rohan Walters, the architect and designer who owns the property, which is tucked into a narrow, 23-foot site at 157 Coxwell Ave. in the east end. (Look at it on Walters' website: www3.sympatico.ca/spacesbyrohan/157coxwell.html.) "As part of my business I want to find out how people live in alternative spaces. The best way to do that is by renting."

The story behind 157 Coxwell is a fortuitous meeting between the original owners of the land and Walters, who was hired by a realtor to assess why it wasn't selling. Well, a five-foot-wide right-of-way sliced through the 200-foot length of the property (it ends at parkland and is described by Walters as "natural backyard forest-type setting"), a steep slope from street level would require serious excavation and some mature trees in awkward places would mean tough negotiations around tree bylaws. But that's the easy stuff.

With 20 inches of topsoil sitting on top of a marsh left over from the days when Lake Ontario covered this part of the east end, the foundation was profoundly unstable.

It was a site meant for Walters. Armed with degrees in architecture and environmental studies from the University of Waterloo, he runs Spaces by Rohan Inc., an independent design firm. In 2001 he paid \$50,000 for the property to put into practice his passion for the urban planning philosophy of "smart growth" – a sustainable approach to maximizing a city's potential, which includes urban infill, in which underused or obsolete buildings and properties are developed. (Walters designed his own studio house at the corner of Lansdowne and College on a small triangular site where a billboard had previously sat.) While "smart growth" is a solution for affordable homeownership, it's also a way of generating much-needed affordable rental units.

In the case of 157 Coxwell, his solution was inspired. He drove helical piles (steel shafts that work something like corkscrews) nearly 50 feet deep. Four concrete columns rest on top of them to support the cubes and raise them to the level of the street.

(Aside from lifting the structure off the damp land below, this also reduces the vibrations from the Coxwell streetcar that annoys many homeowners in the community.)

A 35-foot-long cedar bridge connects the sidewalk to the front door. To keep costs down, Walters worked within the standard four-by-eight sheet of plywood to construct the 16- by 16-foot cubes using resin-impregnated plywood, known as signmaker's board, that is so durable it's used to make concrete

forms and in marine construction.

The result: an economical, \$95-per-square-foot house that, with its red, blue and yellow-painted tiles – Walters has said he took inspiration from Group of Seven paintings, although Rubik's Cube is what struck me when I first saw the house – makes it the object of much attention. When it officially went on the rental market in 2003, it attracted 3,000 people over two days.

When I arrived, Walters, a powerfully built, dark-skinned man (he has Jamaican roots), was operating power tools and kicking up a lot of dust as he renovated the space for the next tenants. Walking with him through 157 Coxwell is like ascending a big tree house. The first cube has the kitchen appliances, including a European-style combination washer-dryer and a nine-foot ceiling. It's most often used as a living and dining area.

The second level, which also has a soaring nine-foot ceiling, contains a three-piece bathroom separated by a frosted Plexiglas wall from what could be a living room, small bedroom or studio space.

The third level struck me as the obvious master bedroom, with its small, Parisian-style balcony overlooking Coxwell. From there, the stairs ascend to the rooftop patio.

Like a huge chimney, air circulates up through the house, cooling it in the warm months. Another innovative feature is the concrete floors painted with epoxy. Walters explained that it's radiant in-floor heating.

Walk barefoot in the winter and it's warm; in summer it's cool. "It's the most comfortable and energy-efficient heating in the world," he said.

For \$1,400 plus utilities – Walters reports they're about \$100 a month – tenants get 803 square feet of unusual space (the rooftop patio adds another 120 square feet) and the opportunity to be the talk of the neighbourhood.

"It helps to be outgoing," said Walters. "Everyone, from children to seniors, stops and talks to you about it and take pictures."

Since putting it on the market two weeks ago, Walters has had about 30 phone calls and 18 viewings. Some prospective tenants were concerned, because they had young children, about the staircases and so much height.

Walters, who is the father of two young teenagers, said: "It would be tricky with small children. For kids, 10 and up, it would be fine."

Today he's biding his time, waiting for the right tenants.

"It's only valuable if someone's living in it who really wants to experiment with the space and participate in it."