



ASHLEY HUTCHESON/TORONTO STAR

Mona Bhamani, president of the Castle Group, rides the elevator up to inspect progress on a new condo building in Mississauga. Bhamani learned a lot from her architect father back in Pakistan.

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## Though often in subtle ways, the building industry increasingly reflects the GTA's cosmopolitan reality

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Even on a sweltering Toronto day, the home designer Rohan Walters created for himself at the corner of College St. and Lansdowne Ave. remains strangely cool inside, despite no air conditioning.

The secret? A clear memory of the way housing in his native Jamaica was built to allow for the maximum use of natural air and light. He calls it a passive cooling system.

"I always remembered the fresh air that would move through the house," Walters says as we sit around his kitchen table. "That cool breeze stuck with me."

Walters says that a large window on the third storey acts as a chimney to his house. "As the warm air is expelled from the third level, it is

replaced with the cooler air from the shaded garden at the first level, drawn in through windows that open onto this garden."

(During the cooler months, Walters uses hot water radiant floor heating, which heats his house longer and at a cheaper cost than conventional heating, he says.)

For Mona Bhamani, president of development company Castle Group Ventures, located in Mississauga, it is the lessons in architecture – to build strong buildings with delicate designs – that she learned at the knee of her late father, a renowned architect in Pakistan, that have stuck with her.

"It comes from my childhood for sure. It has been ingrained," she says, noting that her continued use of (and affinity for) heavy steel and concrete are carryovers from the strong walls and foundations of homes in Karachi.

"That is what our people from Pakistan like."

There are easier ways to build homes. Ones that might be considered more North American, but both Walters and Bhamani believe there are lessons in the values they grew up with that can – and should – be transferred to their work in Toronto.

"Everyone wants to make money, sure; you're in the business to make money," Bhamani says. "But this is something that will stand for a long, long time. People live in it. You have to put yourself in it and think, if you were living in it what would you look for."

Their stories aren't unique. In a place as cosmopolitan as Toronto has become, cultural immigrant experiences can't help but factor into the city's architectural fabric.

Sometimes the translation is as direct or practical as the introduction of feng shui design in the Asian community or the inclusion of a Sabbath elevator in a Jewish community; but sometimes it is a much more subtle result of the immigrant experience itself.

Walters sees expressions of his heritage in everything from his inclusion of gardens in his home designs to his yen for natural heating technologies to his ability to work with whatever location and budget he's given. The result has been some of the most unique and colourful homes in the city, including one on Coxwell Ave. that has turned a piece of swampland into a local icon.

"These are things I've taken from that (immigrant) experience," Walters says. "I value people. I use things. These are the things that are directly translatable from my culture."

Walters says he looked to the Canadian landscape as inspiration for the Coxwell home, which was completed in May 2003.

The home's exterior and interior are made of wood, iron and copper and colours were inspired by those found in the Group of Seven's landscape paintings displayed at the AGO, including reds, mustards and greens.

While the building industry isn't unique in its multicultural makeup, there is some suggestion that it may be more open to immigrant experience than other sectors.

Hugh Heron, who emigrated from Scotland in 1967, notes that long before he arrived, Scottish stonemasons were making their mark on city housing. And his Tudor-style homes with their external dental moulding detailing are also reminiscent of his native land.

But the creative energy that is beginning to take over the city as more immigrants from places such as Asia and the Middle East place stamps on the industry is exciting, he says.

"We in Toronto are very fortunate because of the cosmopolitan makeup of the city," Heron says.

"One of the great things that we have in Canada and particularly in Toronto is multiculturalism actually works. It certainly works in our industry."

Mazyar Mortazavi, principal of TAS DesignBuild agrees that the city's building climate and the cultural variety among purchasers allows developers to be more creative in their projects. His family is of Iranian heritage, but his parents' training in Iran, Paris and North America has led to a blending of ideas and designs.

"That begins to inform the diversity and the approach to the work that we do and that sensibility is something that comes through on all the properties we've worked on," Mortazavi says.

It also results in aspects of buildings that are immediately relatable across cultures. Courtyards – such as the prominent one at Dia condominiums in North York – are familiar not only to people who share Mortazavi's Persian roots, but to Italians who recall their

country's piazzas or anyone familiar with medieval bazaars. There is a shared immigrant familiarity that works well in the city.

"I think Toronto is the most incredible city in the world," Mortazavi says. "We're just at the infancy of our potential right now. We come from Anglo-Saxon roots as a city layered with a very, very definitive multicultural character. I think finally those things are beginning to mend together and find their way in the city. That is only going to nurture and mature more and more over the coming years."

On some levels the integration is automatic, Mortazavi says.

"We live and breathe it. And when you live and breathe it, you honestly don't think twice about it."

For the Jain family, who immigrated to Canada from India in the 1960s, core immigrant values have been at the forefront of their success.

Hans Jain, a principal with Toronto-based Atria Developments, says the basic entrepreneurial skills his parents and grandparents developed in order to survive continue to form the backbone of the company and is at the roots of their success with designs such as the Garment Factory and i-Zone loft projects.

"My grandfather believed that land was something they couldn't take from you. And so even though they didn't have a lot of savings, they invested in land," he explains. He points out that locals didn't view the buildings first purchased by his father as prizewinners, but his father had the foresight to see that they were solid structures that could be recycled.

"We were in an area when nobody wanted to be there," Jain says. "My father saw opportunity. He loved the buildings. He loved the structures. That's the immigrant background."

"There's always a sense of seeing something that's reusable," he says. "Back home in India ... they were middle class, but they always thought about reuse – taking something making it better."

And the fact that the business became a family endeavour with Jain and his siblings joining his parents and grandparents in their pursuits, also strikes him as a core immigrant trait.

Bhamani agrees. Much of her pride in her work, she says, comes from her desire to continue to live up to her father's name.

"I'm trying to come closer to his look of what he used to do and I'm keeping up that trend of my father's company and the way they used to do it," she says.

"At the same time I've travelled a lot and seen the architecture around the world. I like to be different. And when you come from an outer world you always see things differently."

The lessons to be learned from other countries go beyond the facades. Countries such as India and China that have dealt with booming populations and high-density housing have much to teach us as the need to intensify becomes increasingly apparent.

Alan Vihant, vice-president, development at Concord Adex Developments – the company responsible for the CityPlace development on the west downtown railway lands – says the company prides itself on having an internationally exposed group of development managers who can take bits and pieces of their experiences from around the world and bring them home to the design table.

"Fifty per cent of all the housing that's going to be built in the GTA is going to be highrise and high density," Vihant says. "We're bringing back ideas from around the world and bringing them back to Toronto."

Ideas on how to create more storage space, smaller units, communal spaces and compact appliances can be gleaned from countries already doing it.

"I don't think there's any one place or culture you can't take influence from," Vihant says. "We can learn from each other all over the world."

But developers say that while one architectural hand may have a firm grasp on the international scene, the other is carefully massaging how it is integrated with the local.

"At the end of the day, you're still doing a project or a home that is trying to fit into the Toronto marketplace so although they are trying to create things that are a little different you still have to fit that Toronto psyche," says Roy Varacalli, director of design and construction at Bazis International Inc.

The company's first Canadian project, Crystal Blu, is now complete, making Canada the latest on a long list of countries in which the Kazakhstan-based company has developed properties.

He says that if Bazis had focused solely on building highly definable "European" buildings, it might not have been as successful. As well as incorporating "European good design," Crystal Blu makes use of the idea of intimate lobby space, which is common in Europe, says Varacalli. "I think the goal is to design a building that is good design, good quality and understands how the city works," he says.

That characteristic, which is associated with European design, can be carried into work they do anywhere in the world without isolating the city in which they are building. The goal is to create a city that is uniquely its own and the best it can be, Mortazavi says.

"We're beginning to establish what our Toronto is and shed our New York complex," he says. "It's almost a matter of saying we don't want to be like New York. We're not New York. We're better and this is what makes us different. This is what makes us unique."