

# New in Homes

M SECTION » TORONTO STAR » SATURDAY, JUNE 21, 2003 » thestar.com



## The orange house

As the taxi pulled up to Jose and Selma Oliveira's Willowdale home, snow smothered the front steps. They cuddled their two mini schnauzers, whose paws weren't used to an icy carpet underfoot. Nearly a half-metre of snow had fallen by Dec. 16, 2000, the day they joined their adoptive country for good.

It was a heartless welcome, as the cabbie refused to carry their luggage up the unshovelled sidewalk.

What had they done, uprooting their happy family from Sao Paulo, Brazil, and a life of sun and sand, beaches and barbecues where the temperature rarely drops below 10C?

Both left thriving business careers — she's an architect, he's an economist who was chief financial officer for the largest real estate company in the country — and sold everything to establish a small custom-home building business with an eye to giving their children, Priscila and Luiz, a better future.

Jose never had to do his own banking in Brazil (he had an assistant to do it); here, he stood in line with everyone else. They had chauffeurs, a housekeeper and a gaggle of friends they regularly invited for impromptu barbecues.

Selma's work spoke for itself; clients knocked on her door, wanting her to recreate her

Jose and Selma Oliveira brought their native Brazil with them to build custom homes in Canada. Brilliant colours, rich mosaics and airy spaces are their hallmarks, *by Donna Laporte*



Brilliant colours, like the rich blue on the wall between the living and dining rooms, define the Oliveira's approach to design, above. Right, Jose and Selma placed an art niche next to the circular maple staircase to house a bronze statue from Brazil, a legacy from Selma's father.

Here, they knew no one, save the Portuguese-speaking real estate agent whom they call their "guardian angel."

But Anabela Bernardino was stranded half a continent away

Daughter Priscila, now 18, cried every day.

"What am I doing here?" Jose wondered at the time. "Am I crazy?"

It was a question he would ask

next few years as they struggled to learn English, shop and cook for themselves and learn the ins and outs of the Toronto home-building market.





# A house that makes a splash

► **House** From M1

The warm and gregarious 48-year-old can laugh about it now, as they sit in the dining room of their stunning home, a few blocks and a world away from their first.

A wild, Italian-designed chandelier is a focal point. Large windows, a recurring theme in the house, let light spill into the room.

Jose's English has improved and the words gush like water from a fountain, so eager is he to explain how pleased they are in Canada, despite the many hurdles they've had to jump.

"We are very happy with our decision to move," he says.

Selma beams, her liquid brown eyes speaking volumes. She is hesitant to say much in English because, as her husband says, she is a perfectionist and isn't yet comfortable with her command of the language. (Bernardino translates for her.)

Married 23 years, he is proud of her accomplishments, ready to let her take the spotlight as an architect of signature homes, content to work behind the scenes, generating buzz and dealing with people and financial details, which are his forte.

"That's why we have a good partnership," he says, adding that he keeps his wife, also 48, grounded.

She is truly an artist, whose bold strokes are making a splash in her otherwise conservative Willowdale neighbourhood where the couple built a new infill home.

You can't miss the Princess Ave. house, in the Yonge-Sheppard area. Its orange stucco exterior is her way of marrying the two cultures, reminding her of Brazil's sun and Canada's autumn colours. She brought a colour sample from Brazil and had it matched here.

"The colours are so impor-

tant because we are from a tropical country," Jose says.

The front steps are made of rainbow stone, softened by a half-circle of double-layered stone, which acts as a boundary and softens the squareness of the house, explains Selma.

Halogen lights are hidden behind selected resin fronts at ground level, which blend in with the stone. The walk is subtly lit for night.

Selma had an area lighting company modify two standing fixtures so the shades are tulip-shaped; the bases painted a cream colour.

A front-lawn fire hydrant's top and wings were painted with a fluorescent paint, so they appear to light up as darkness falls.

The triple garage is at the side, unobtrusive — something city planners seem to have difficulty accepting in their next project. (See accompanying sidebar.)

The backyard has no grass, as interlocking brick is more conducive to their busy lifestyle. A deck, hot tub, barbecue and pine fence complete the scene.

Once inside the 4,000-square-foot home (5,300 square feet including the fully finished lower level), the preponderance of natural light is striking. High ceilings and large windows accentuate it.

A second-floor balcony overlooks the front door; Jose says that's so Priscila can see who has come over.

The living-room entryway is almost 12 feet by eight feet, with the ceiling rising to nine feet. A mustard couch complements a Monet blue wall. Blue is opposite orange on the colour wheel, Selma explains. Blue appears throughout the house on walls and in furniture, such as the unusual, convertible family-room sofas.

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## The Orange House

### Learning the language of bylaws and building rules

Among all the adjustments Brazilian immigrants Selma and Jose Oliveira have had to make since moving here, learning the rules for building housing in Toronto — both written and unwritten — has been a challenge.

Not only do they have to master English, they have to understand bylaws that are inconsistent throughout the amalgamated city.

In North York, for example, lots with frontage over 45 feet cannot have a garage below grade. The Oliveiras' next project, on Kingsdale Ave., is on an interior lot 50 feet wide by 122 feet deep. Selma had originally designed a below-grade side entrance. She was turned down at the municipal Committee of Adjustment, as the design didn't meet the bylaw.

She redrew plans to put the garage at grade level, but still at the side. She again was turned down. In the end, she scrapped the plans and redesigned the house to have a grade-level garage in front.

Anabela Bernardino, a Portuguese-speaking real estate agent who has acted as a translator for the Oliveiras at all of their Committee of Adjustment meetings, says they were told garages need to be in front of the house because that's where kids play basketball.

Says Royal LePage's Bernardino: "Selma, as an artist, has a hard time with that; I have a hard time with that as a realtor because I hear people comment when I show them houses. The garage in front of the house is dated. People don't want to look at garages."

Jose says he wants to follow the law; he just wants to be sure what it is. He has seen below-grade garages across the city.

Tony Evangelista, manager of Committee of Adjustment Services for Midtown and North York, says the city is working on harmonizing its bylaws but admits that it's still a few years

off.

Bylaws have sometimes been enacted in one of the former municipalities to deal with a problem. In North York, for example, no matter what the size of the lot, if there are no storm sewers on the street, you cannot have a back-sloping driveway.

Evangelista says even when all bylaws are met, anyone can object and present arguments at public hearings of the five-person committee, which is made up of lay people who meet once every two or three weeks.

As their official advisor, he says he makes sure the committee has as much graphic and written documentation as possible to guide their decisions.

Evangelista says if garages are tucked away (also known as invisible garages), "we would welcome them; they get bonus marks for those ones."

Nevertheless, the Oliveiras have moved on. Time is money. The cost is \$1,183.06 for each application, Evangelista says. The Oliveiras had to pay twice in this case.

As North York also doesn't allow three-storey houses, the couple wondered whether Selma's unique design — which has the master bedroom on its own separate level, four steps up from the main floor, but below the second floor — would pass muster.

The design was approved June 12 and Selma was complimented on her "beautiful" design, Bernardino phoned to say afterward.

Jose says although they are three months behind schedule and need to get the foundation dug, he is confident his contractors will be able to get the help they need.

Once Jose is more comfortable with the way things are done here, he plans to bring investment money from Brazil.

DONNA LAPORTE



# Touched by two countries

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The orange theme is also carried inside, in a "tozetto" diamond-shaped design on the "crema marfil" marble floors.

Kitchen walls have glass mosaic detail of Italian design, purchased in Brazil. Even the roll top bread "garage" has mosaic detailing inside. Floors are bleached maple.

None of the rooms is overly big, but they have an airiness created by large openings rather than doors. Bernardino says people don't feel overwhelmed by the inside. "They're family homes. They're not show homes."

Jose's office, though small, appears larger because of a two-tiered ceiling: eight feet in one area, rising to 13 feet, with three slim windows in cupola-like feature. Built-in shelving is bleached maple with fine line detailing and little windows inserted.

In the downstairs powder room, the mirror is framed with tiles. Wood louvered shutters allow privacy and light.

A circular maple staircase leads from the basement to the upper floors, with a skylight above it. A niche in one wall houses a bronze Indian statue, one of only two that were made in Brazil. Jose says the statue, passed down from Selma's late father, watches over the house.

Upstairs bathrooms have terra cotta tiles whose theme is carried into the shower.

Two of the closets have skylights, so clothes can be seen in natural light. The master bedroom's walk-in closet has a window overlooking the backyard.

In each bedroom, the wall behind the headboard is painted in strong tones to make a visual statement to those entering the room, but looking out from the bed, colours are soothing.

Priscila's walls are covered in posters of her soccer heroes and dozens of snapshots of her friends. In another room, originally Luiz's, Selma designed two dowels which hold his prized



CHARLA JONES/TORONTO STAR

Jose de Oliveira's office appears larger than it is because of a two-tiered ceiling with three windows in cupola-like feature. Built-in shelving is bleached maple with fine line detailing and little windows.

collection of about 500 ball caps, with his favourites on top. Luiz, 19, now prefers to sleep downstairs, with his other collection — hundreds of beer bottles and cans from around the world.

A nephew, Andrei Barbieri, 23, also lives with them and has his own room, with subtle colours of light brown and cream.

The master bedroom has a double-sided fireplace and design panels cut from MDF and painted a mustard colour and mounted on an angled wall.

Downstairs on the finished lower level with walls insulated for sound, there's a wet bar, an entertainment room with a home theatre and a wall of soccer and tennis trophies belonging to Jose and Luiz.

(The house is smart-wired and speakers are positioned around it. A floor-level central vacuum system is also installed.)

All-glass French doors lead to an outside landing and steps, al-

lowing natural light to pour in.

Full-length windows descend about four feet below grade, with window wells fenced in for safety.

As the house was being constructed, neighbours, strangers and even area tradesmen would knock on the door, asking where the windows or doors came from, or trying to sneak a peak inside. Just who were the people in the orange house?

Jose explains that, in Brazil, once the roof is on a house, a barbecue is held to celebrate. So once the house was finished, the Oliveiras decided to throw a party or two: one to thank neighbours for their tolerance of the construction and another for friends and tradespeople and their families.

They've gained a loyal work group eager to participate in the next project. However, the Oliveiras won't put up with workers who disrespect a property by leaving garbage, cigarette butts

or food residue lying around during construction, a long-standing problem many condo and new home buyers in the GTA know all too well.

Their home is not only their sanctuary; it is their calling card. It has been appraised at \$1.25 million, a figure realtor Bernardino calls conservative.

Jose and Selma plan to build two to three custom homes a year, choosing colours and design features as they see fit. They are already enrolled with the Ontario New Home Warranty Program. Their company is called Studium T Building Inc.

Jose says Toronto's multicultural community is ready for them.

"We think Toronto is a very cosmopolitan city," he says. "I think we can bring some different style, some different colours" to the marketplace.

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