

## Slow design: How to create the perfect condo in just six years [Carolyn Ireland](#)

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The first thing visitors see as they enter

Niv Fichman's Toronto penthouse is a distant alcove holding a prized statue of Buddha. The icon stands at the end of a long, wood-lined hallway.

As they move toward it, guests may not be aware that they are continuously reoriented on a diagonal path toward the light. Even the ceiling slopes subtly downward to keep people moving forward.

"The way the hallway curves, it tells a story. It's like a film." explains Mr. Fichman, a producer of film and television and founding partner of Rhombus Media whose credits include *The Red Violin*, *Last Night* and *Thirty Two Short Films About Glenn Gould*.

To build anticipation before visitors encounter the view, Mr. Fichman intentionally had the hallway made 15 or 20 feet longer than necessary. Its length is punctuated by alcoves, each containing a statue.

Suddenly and dramatically, visitors arrive in the main living area and its floor-to-ceiling windows reveal breathtaking city vistas.

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All photos by Terence Tourangeau



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“It’s a process of discovery as you walk through the corridor,” says the filmmaker.

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In fact, the entire penthouse, 34 floors above King Street West in Toronto, represents the convergence of Mr. Fichman's film background and his immersion in cultures around the world.

To realize his vision, Mr. Fichman turned to Drew Sinclair, principal at regionalArchitects.

Mr. Sinclair had just returned from a year in Europe after winning the Canada Council for the Arts' Prix de Rome, which recognizes emerging practitioners in architecture.

"He had such a pure vision," says Mr. Fichman, who was introduced to Mr. Sinclair's work by a colleague.

It was 2008, and while Mr. Sinclair's career was ramping up, the global financial markets were in free-fall. The M5V project, where Mr. Fichman had purchased a penthouse unit, went through a couple of developers and long delays.

Still, he had purchased his unit – just around the corner from Rhombus Media's head office – with the intention of making it the last home he would ever buy. The vagaries of the real estate market didn't worry him.

"I really wanted to make it as perfect as I could because it was not designed for resale," he says.

At the time, the unit was under construction so Mr. Fichman could only imagine the view. He asked the construction crew to take a few snapshots from the girders.

"In the absence of a site to walk around, we did a lot of drawing," Mr. Sinclair says. He calls the process "slow architecture," which values careful crafting in the context of a rapidly-evolving city. In this case, the process took six years.

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Between each iteration of design, there is a purposeful pause to consider the implications of the decisions we've made, the architect explains.

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Everything was drawn three or four times, most often by hand, to test variations of any idea and to study the broader spatial implications of the design, Mr. Sinclair says.

The raw, vigorous early sketches were slowly refined into plans, Mr. Fichman adds. As a filmmaker, he had no trouble envisioning the result. “I often see designs for film sets. I’m used to looking at plans.”

The inspiration would come from Mr. Fichman’s travels. He recalls standing in the I.M. Pei-designed Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, Qatar when it was newly opened and madly e-mailing Mr. Sinclair about his love for the simplicity of the display cases. On another occasion, he might jot down notes during a stay in a ryokan in Japan.



“I’d send him photographs from wherever I was in the world.”

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Mr. Fichman has travelled to Japan more than 80 times and that country's influence is stronger than any other in the penthouse – especially in the careful use of space.

In the bedroom, Mr. Fichman sleeps on a futon atop Tatami mats – to the astonishment of his visitors from Japan, where, increasingly, people have given up the traditional floor covering. “They can't believe it and they think it's the funniest thing ever.”

Rolling the futon and placing it in a designated nook behind a sliding door is a valued ceremony, he says. “I love it. I love the ritual of it.”



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The focal point of the entire living space is a white bath tub, custom fabricated for Mr. Fichman.

It's a sculpture as well as a bath tub that can accommodate at least two people, points out the architect. There's a recess that can hold enough ice to keep a bottle of wine chilled and a niche shaped to the curves of a pair of wineglasses.

Mr. Fichman flips through the photos on his phone to find an image of a third purpose and comes up with a photo of actor Dustin Hoffman standing on the edge of the tub to deliver a speech during TIFF. "So as you can see, it's also a stage," he says.

The living room is a place for gathering and for looking out over the city. The full height of the CN Tower fills one part of the view. During the day, the view extends to Lake Ontario and planes landing and taking off from Billy Bishop airport. At night, city lights shimmer into the distance.



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Mr. Sinclair points to the bar area in the living room as an example of the practice of slow architecture.



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With the luxury of time, he says, they studied a huge range of geometries and functional arrangements. They worked out how the sink and tap would relate to the bar surface and the bottles, and how the bar would merge with the vertical niche that was to house one of Mr. Fichman's sculptures.

The kitchen centres around a large island where Mr. Fichman loves to cook surrounded by guests. During a TIFF party, he brought in chef Hiro Yoshida who molded his sushi by hand. "We made this a sushi counter."

Throughout the penthouse, light and its qualities were an obsession, Mr. Sinclair says.

"He has a particular pre-occupation with light and its relationship to spaces," he says of Mr. Fichman.

"I'm very, very sensitive to colour temperature and light. That's my film background. It had to be unified," agrees Mr. Fichman.

Core lighting, enhanced lighting and highlighting were carefully considered.

In the living room, pendant lights by Ingo Maurer can be reshaped endlessly, says Mr. Fichman, who admits to adjusting them constantly. When the actor and director Don McKellar visits, he rearranges them every time Mr. Fichman's back is turned.

For Mr. Fichman, the luxury in the penthouse comes from the sparseness. "It's a very rigorous apartment."

The intent is not to show off but to use every inch of space. "It's 1,200-squared square feet but it could be thousands more."

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The filmmaker admits to “driving them all nuts” when it came to planning the space with such precision. But he and Mr. Sinclair agree that the planet needs to be sparing in its use of resources. People – particularly in cities – can live in much smaller spaces than many North Americans are accustomed to.

“We went on this journey together. It was an amazing relationship,” Mr. Fichman says. “It had a lot to do with my aesthetic but he made it all happen.”

Now that he’s living in the penthouse, he loves the clarity. In a way, the space is a refinement of all of the places he has lived before. “You’re living in this piece of art and it’s functional,” he says. “I still marvel every day I walk in.”

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