

GREAT SPACES

# Divine Inspiration

There's nothing sacrilegious about this city's appetite for loft conversions, even when the raw space is a deconsecrated church.

Here, four places of worship, born again

BY ALEX BOZIKOVIC

**Who:** Sean Claessen, a creative director at Merge, a marketing agency, and Eva Burany, an account director at Maritz, also a marketing agency

**What:** A 1906 building formerly home to the Centennial Japanese United Church

**Where:** Bloor and Dovercourt

Claessen's first apartment was in the Argyle Lofts on Dovercourt. He loved the building, but the industrial charm of the exterior didn't extend into the generic, boxy condos within. When he heard about this old church being converted, he snagged the best of the 28 proposed units: a two-storey, 1,250-square-foot loft. Before he signed, though, he wanted to make sure the details he loved—wood beams, brick walls, stained glass windows—would be preserved by the developer. "He took me up in the rafters with a flashlight, crawling over insulation to show me which beams and walls would still be visible," he says. Claessen was convinced. He and Burany (they met shortly after his attic excursion) moved into the new place in 2009, and they both love living in a piece of Toronto's history. Their living room is at the top of what was the vaulted ceiling, and their favourite spot is just up the spiral staircase on their private deck—one of only two in the building. "You can see the steeples of nine other churches from the deck," says Claessen. "I'm fascinated by the concentration of them in the neighbourhood. Many of the church congregations have moved on, but the buildings remain."







1 Claessen needed something to animate the 24-foot-high walls, so he devised this graphic **plant display** with shelves from IKEA and West Elm. He chose cacti because they're low maintenance: "It's a real pain in the ass to climb up there and water."

2 The narrow **table** came from Phil'z on Queen East. It was made from an old Kentucky porch: the legs were crafted from the posts, the top is made of floorboards, and the edging used to be soffits.

3 The **sofa** is from West Elm. "We would never have gone looking for an orange couch," says Claessen. "But as soon as we saw this one we realized how good it would look with the brickwork."

4 The two 1960s floral **chairs** were used for a TV commercial that Claessen made for the youth channel BBC-K. His team built a series of "really tacky old basements," and he kept these two props. The upholstery is original.

5 The **coffee table** is an old cedar joist that Claessen found in a parking lot near his office at King and Portland (he stealthily pilfered it one evening). The castors are from Lee Valley.

6 Most of the **crates** came from the St. Lawrence antique market, and one bears the Eaton's logo. "My family worked for Eaton's forever, so that one is special," Claessen says. They act as a shelving unit for the TV and other electronics.

7 Claessen bought the **cardboard deer head** on veer.com, a site where he used to buy stock photography, fonts and design merchandise earlier in his career.

8 Claessen salvaged the **pew** from the church during its conversion. "The developer found another church to buy about 70 per cent of the pews," he says. "I asked him what he was doing with the rest. He said, 'You want one? Give me \$50, get it out of here this afternoon, and it's yours.' So I rented a pickup truck and took it."

9 The couple loves the **stained glass windows** (like this giant skylight in what is now the building's atrium). "Before I finally saw them, I envisioned crazy religious iconography," says Burary. "But they're neutral and easy to live with."