



The life aquatic



In-between Rembrandt and Van Gogh, you can now hang Nemo.

One of the hottest trends in home décor is "living art," customized aquariums that display marine life from oceans and lakes around the world.

From a \$60 starter kit for a basic aquarium of guppies, mollies and platies that will keep children (and cats) amused for hours, to a \$100,000 tank with black-tipped sharks, designers say that fish can create a masterpiece within the home.

"It's a work of art that is constantly changing, always growing and moving. It's beautiful," said Mike Merovitz, a Toronto aquarist and custom aquarium designer.

"You could have a 10-gallon tank or a 10,000-gallon tank. It's still going to have the same effect, if it is designed properly. It is the light of the room."

When Sandy and Jodi Winick

rebuild their north Toronto home, they turned to Merovitz for help in designing an aquarium for their downstairs family room.

Sandy's initial plan for a glass wall enclosing salt-water fish and coral reefs gave way to practicality — they couldn't find a glass-maker with an oven large enough to make a 4.2-metre glass sheet, so they worked out a solution.

Two tanks — one salt water and one fresh — separated by a bubble wall (a tank of constantly moving water) were built into a wooden cabinet along the wall. In the salt-water tank, they created a living coral reef, with the same fish that would make it

rebuild their north Toronto home, they turned to Merovitz for help in designing an aquarium for their downstairs family room.

ecosystem, such as puffer fish, blue tangs and the round, bubble-eyed clown fish made famous in the animated film, *Finding Nemo*.

In the fresh-water tank, they placed African cichlids, a popular fish native to the central African great lakes of Victoria, Malawi and Tanganyika. Cichlids are now common in North American aquariums because they come in bright colours such as yellow, green and red. Also, they're lower maintenance compared to the vibrant salt-water fish.

"People find it very calming, and soothing," said Sandy Winick, who has had aquariums for 17 years. "When we entertain downstairs, everyone sits

around it. That is the reason why most people get aquariums, for peace and tranquility."

For some aquarium owners, like one discrete Toronto businessman who had a 10,000-gallon tank with three prowling sharks built into his kitchen, it's also statement of personal style.

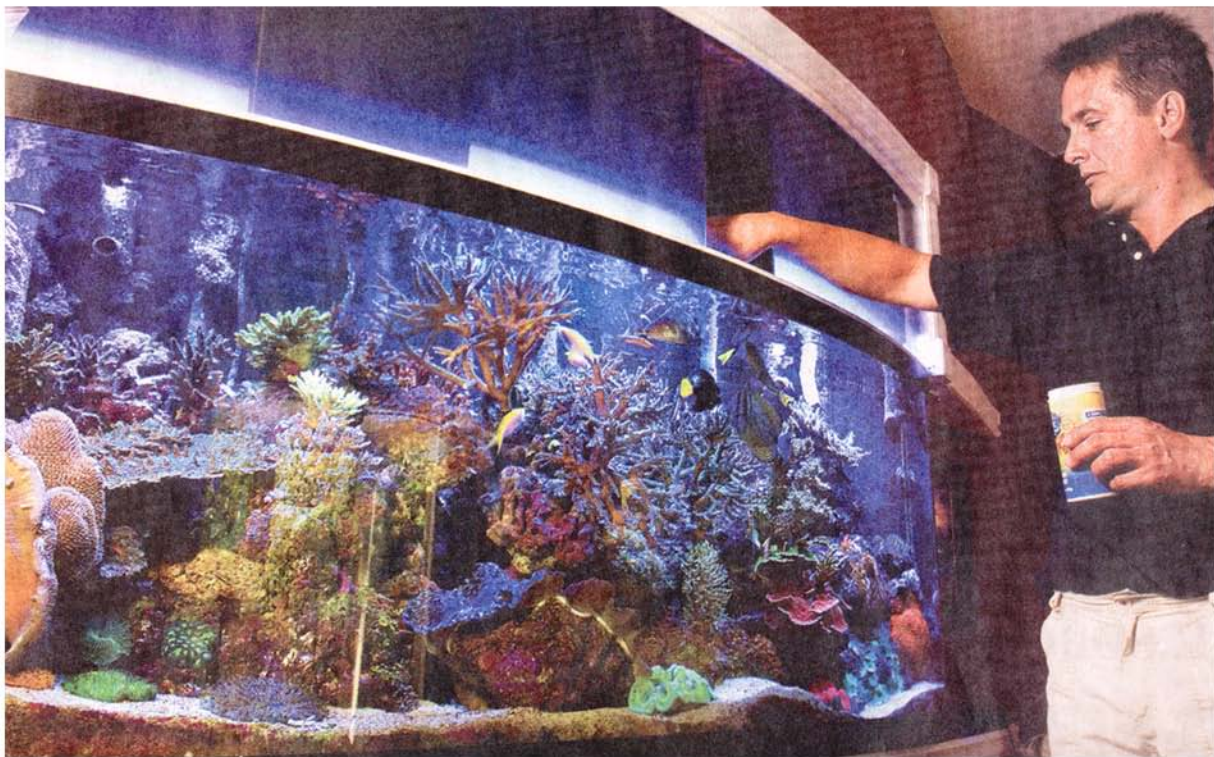
"It was just water, sharks, and some crushed coral on the floor of the tank," said Merovitz, owner of Aqua Sculpture Aquarium Services and CNC Aquarium in Thornhill. "He likes the minimalist style of decorating and wanted to design his aquarium the same way."

Common predator fish, such as the piranha, are popular with some families, but young children are happy to sit in front of a

tank and watch any of its inhabitants swim around, said Eric Wong, a Toronto aquarium designer with Fish Kingdom (www.aqua88.com).

"Personally, I like to raise the fish from the time they are very tiny, so my children and I can see them go through the process of growing up," Wong said.

"My daughter is three years old. She is always sitting in front of the big aquarium, just sitting there, telling stories, pretending the fish are characters, talking. She has named every fish in the tank. I'd



Martin Howells feeds the residents of the 2-metre long salt water aquarium in his living room wall. The hobby requires work and research, he says.

Recreating ecosystems

rather have her doing that than watching television."

Whether the aquarium is for a family, or a minimalist predator lover, aquarium designers can create a tank to fit most requests — with a few caveats. For example, if a large, heavy tank is requested for an upper level, Merovitz suggests getting an engineer to make sure that the floor is strong enough to hold it. As well, putting an aquarium in direct sunlight can increase the levels of unsightly algae in the tank.

When it comes to design, a lot of clients have very vivid ideas, said David Vieira of Fins, Gills & Scales, an aquarium service in Milton.

Vieira has had requests for aquariums in the shape of coffins, coffee tables, bed headboards (nixed because it was too risky), towers, archways, and treasure chests.

"People are looking for something to beautify their home," Vieira said. "They like to do themes. Say someone is really into colours and plants, they would like to set up a tank with an Amazon theme, with wood and beautiful fish. It adds a different dimension within an aquarium. To the room, it adds life."

Wong, the designer, said that some clients want to use the tanks to bring a feng shui balance to their homes.

"They put the tank in a place decided by a feng shui master. They ask for more golden colours in the aquarium, golden fish, to bring prosperity into the home."

But Bob James, president of the Marine Aquarium Society of Toronto, said aquariums should draw the eye to the reef life, and not just to the unusual tank.

"The idea is not to highlight the aquarium as a fancy table, or dresser, but as a piece of ocean you are looking at. You want to highlight the nature," said James, a physicist by training.

"One of the things I like about the hobby, is that a good aquarium can replicate an actual environment. You can duplicate an ecosystem. You can keep cats and dogs as pets, but they aren't living as they do in the wild. With an aquarium, you are seeing nature.

"You are seeing the interaction between the corals. At night, they put out tentacles or chemicals to deter other things from growing over them. It's a crowded place," he said. "There is something growing in every nook and cranny. They are battling for space in the ocean and they are battling for space in people's tanks."

For aquarium rookies anxious to keep fish from going belly up, there's a lot to learn about the intricacies of feeding aquatic life and maintaining an entire ecosystem. Some people find service companies to do the work for them.

And buying some aquarium peace of mind doesn't come cheap.

For Winick, it was a commitment both in the cost to build, which was around \$25,000 and the cost of having the tanks serviced every week by Merovitz, who runs a fish store and a tank cleaning service.

It can cost up to \$100 a week for tank cleaning, water testing (especially in the delicate salt water systems) and rearranging of aquarium decor.

Many aquarium stores and designers offer cleaning services, although Martin Howells, also a member of the Marine Aquarium Society of Toronto, said that technological advances are



Thornhill aquarium designer Mike Merovitz, in front of one of his hanging tanks, once installed three sharks in a client's minimalist kitchen.

making it easier to learn how to care for your own tanks.

But taking on that responsibility requires a serious commitment and a lot of research, Howells said.

"Do a lot of reading, figure out is you want to go for salt or fresh water. Join a group."

Membership in aquarium societies offer quick answers, from which fish will co-exist or kill when placed in the same tank, to the best aquarium designers, he said.

With most custom aquariums starting at several thousand dollars, why do homeowners want the expense and responsibility?

Wong doesn't hesitate with the answer.

"I would consider aquarium as a mental escape. Especially in Canada. Winter is long, we are sitting in the rooms watching TV. It is so boring. If you are watching aquarium for two hours, it never feels long. It is a mental escape. You forget your troubles."



Merovitz created the freshwater-marine combo divided by a bubble tank for Sandy Winick, left. The salt-water tank has a coral reef with the same fish that could inhabit in the ocean.