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The King of the Megamansion

By **STEVEN KURUTZ** FEB. 18, 2015

Sometimes Richard Landry can't believe how well his life and career have turned out.

After all, what if he had stayed in Quebec and accepted the teaching job he was offered after architecture school? What if Alberta hadn't hit a recession, prompting him to leave the small commercial firm where he spent his early professional years and strike out for Los Angeles, a city he chose based on the climate and the fact that it was 1984 and everyone was talking about the Summer Olympics? And what if, when he arrived in town a stranger and began looking up architects in the phone book, Frank Gehry had returned his call?

Mr. Gehry did not return Mr. Landry's call. Instead, he was hired at the firm R. Duell & Associates, which specialized in designing theme parks like Magic Mountain, a job he described as "pure fun, pure fantasy." Bright and eager to please, he went on to work for a small firm doing residential projects in a new gated community called Beverly Park that overlooks Beverly Hills. Then a treeless bowl of dirt, Beverly Park would come to epitomize the sealed-off, rich person's bubble in a city full of them, a smog-free haven for private-equity billionaires, superstar athletes and Sylvester Stallone, a client.

So when Mr. Landry shakes his head now and says, "I have a hard time when I reflect on it and ask, 'How did I end up here?'" you can almost believe that it was fate that brought him west and gave him the temperament and skill set to design dream homes for an age of economic exuberance.



Thirty years after arriving with all of his possessions stuffed in his Honda, Mr. Landry, 57, is one of the most sought-after high-end residential architects in Southern California and beyond. His clients are the super-rich, the super-famous and, frequently, both.

His homes would give feudal-age rulers property envy. There's the 12,500-square-foot French-inspired home in Brentwood that he designed for Tom Brady and Gisele Bündchen, with what *Architectural Digest* described as an actual moat around it. The 28-bedroom, 32-bath, glass, steel and stone compound tumbling down a Bel-Air hillside was named the *Robb Report's* "Ultimate Home" in 2011.

And the 30,000-square-foot European manor, with a basketball court and two Jacuzzis, where the actor Mark Wahlberg just took up residence in Beverly Park?

"When he called me, he said: 'Richard, I've been following you for years. I'm so glad now you can do my house,'" Mr. Landry said. "What a nice guy. We had so much fun."

Mr. Landry is something of a court architect for the hilltop fief, having designed several homes in Beverly Park, including a sprawling villa currently owned by a handbag mogul (now on the market for \$25 million) and a 15,000-square-foot chateau once owned by the "Real Housewives" star Lisa Vanderpump (since leveled to make room for a larger house being designed by Mr. Landry).

By servicing the prosperous, Mr. Landry has himself prospered. His firm, Landry Design Group, employs close to 50 people who work in an office building that he bought last year, and it has dozens of projects in various stages around the globe.

"I could retire today and be fine the rest of my life," he said. "It's such a great place to be."

Of course, life isn't a total cruise. Mr. Landry can no longer get replacement parts for his \$100,000 electric sports car, because the company that made it went bankrupt. More troubling is the criticism that has come with being the favored architect of the 1 percent. He has been called the "mansion architect," the "king of the tasteless megamansion" and, as one online commenter dubbed him, a purveyor of the "gigamansion."

The real estate blog *Curbed* has been his most relentless critic, calling Mr. Landry's houses "unnecessarily over the top" and "ugly," and suggesting that "if the plebs knew more about what he was up to," it could "spark America's populist revolution."

The homes he designs are, indeed, overt displays of wealth, expressed in loggias and porte cochères; home theaters and double-height foyers; Italian marble and specially aged, acid-washed limestone. Even the two books he published to showcase them are as thick as marble slabs.

But Mr. Landry, who had a plebeian childhood as the son of a carpenter in rural Quebec (and didn't learn English until he was 20), isn't interested in class warfare. Whether the haves should practice self-restraint for the betterment of society is a matter for sociologists. "Is it right or wrong for somebody to build a big home?" he said. "I'm not the one to answer that question."

Mr. Landry's approach isn't to tell his clients that a sustainable vegetable garden behind a ginormous house is a little ridiculous. Or to impose on them his singular vision, Frank Lloyd Wright-style. Above all, he wants to make them happy. To design homes suited to their individual needs and whims. "There are a million things *I* could do," he said. "This is about *you*. Let's talk about what you need."

If the hedge fund you manage is bringing killer returns and you want an indoor pool for the five days a year in Southern California when it's too chilly to swim in your outdoor pool, Mr. Landry will add it to the program. If you and your much younger third wife had a special vacation in Italy

and want to bring that Old World charm back to Calabasas, Mr. Landry will design a villa with a monastery's worth of reclaimed wood. If the family sitcom you created was sold into syndication for big bucks and you're all about having an in-home squash court, your architect has it covered: "I will start playing squash," Mr. Landry said, laughing.

James Magni, a Los Angeles-based interior designer who works with Mr. Landry frequently, said he is unlike any other architect in his chameleon-like ability to design to the client's wishes. "Most architects have one stylistic philosophy they work in," Mr. Magni said. "His style changes from project to project and client to client."

Although Mr. Landry is known primarily for faux-European piles, he does not have a signature look — or size. His firm has done plenty of gigantic chateaus of the Loire Valley, but also relatively modest Spanish-style beach homes, mid-century-inspired houses, vernacular barns, swooping modern dwellings, austere architecture and remodels of existing homes.

The people who call him king of the megamansion and focus on ballooning square footage aren't aware of the full breadth of his work, Mr. Landry said. And the label is costing him: "Clients read this and think we only do mansions. They want a 5,000- or 10,000-square-foot house and think it's too small. A 10,000-square-foot house is a big house."

Mr. Landry described himself as averse to media attention, and uninterested in fame. ("I've been asked to be on TV. It's not my thing.") But to illustrate the range of his work, he offered to show a reporter several homes he had designed. He referred to them in terms of size: "small, medium, large and extra-large."

Asked what connects his diverse projects, Mr. Landry thought a moment. "There's something a sensibility in the house in terms of the quality, the details," he said finally. "Because it's not about the size. It's not about whether it's formal or casual or modern. I think there's something about it you can't put a finger on. *A je ne sais quoi.*"

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Cruising down the Pacific Coast Highway in his electric sports car, Mr. Landry turned onto Malibu Road and parked across from a white-stucco Spanish colonial. Dressed in crisp black pants and a white dress shirt, as tall and slender as a sapling, he bounded across the street to show off his work.

The home, Mr. Landry said, was the third of four he had designed for the same client, a businessman who seemed to be trying out traditional architecture (Tuscan villa, French country, now Spanish) the way one might sample assorted chocolates. From the street, a heavy wood door opened onto a landscaped courtyard, from which you looked ahead to the main house. The ocean was visible just beyond it.

At 7,500 square feet, the house qualified as medium-size in Mr. Landry's world. Walking through the rooms, he noted the considerable effort to make the new house look as if it were very old. "You cannot recreate this — this is real stuff," he said, pointing to reclaimed boards, some bearing ax marks, in the kitchen.

On an outdoor walkway connecting two guest suites, Mr. Landry touched his hand to one of several rough-surfaced stone columns: "These are brand new. We were beating them up with hammers and nails to make it look like it's eroded over time." For the home's interior, the "best plaster guy in L.A." was hired to make undulations in the walls, as if timeworn imperfections.

True luxury, it seems, is the manipulation of reality. "It's Old World character," Mr. Landry said. "Those old villas in Europe — my God, they feel so good."

He smiled. “You have no idea how many times a client has said, ‘Richard, we just moved in, but I feel like we’ve always lived here.’ They say it with tears in their eyes. That means a lot to me.”

The following morning, he drove to another house he designed, this one in the flats of Beverly Hills and, at 23,000 square feet, the “large” example on the tour. The home’s exterior was clad in French limestone, which, along with the symmetrical design and graceful landscaping, gave it a formal classicism.

From the gate, Mr. Landry called the house manager, who came out and ushered him inside. And behind the huge iron door was — sorry, haters — a beautiful house.

O.K., the finished basement was designed to resemble the deck of a ship. But the rest of the rooms were well proportioned, with elegant finishes: travertine floors, exotic African woods, a handrail made of Italian portoro marble with cream veining. To achieve an Art Deco feel, Mr. Landry did scallop moldings. Rather than looking ersatz, the house felt authentically old Hollywood; a visitor half-expected Marlene Dietrich to descend the spiral staircase.

Lee Samson, the owner, who is a health care executive, said he and his wife initially had trepidation about hiring Mr. Landry because of his “mega” reputation. But when they spoke by phone and later met, “I got such a warm vibe and such a congenial feeling from him.”

Mr. Landry encouraged collaboration, and the result is “an absolute pleasure,” Mr. Samson said. “Every time I walk into the house, I just feel so good and so blessed that I’m surrounded not just by the art, but the house itself.”

Mr. Landry, for his part, said he admires singular visionaries like Zaha Hadid, but his method for success has been different. “We’re going to create something very unique for you, very special,” he said, channeling his sales rap. “I want my clients to have fun.”

Fun is a word he uses a lot. As in, “I’m having so much fun doing this.” Or “instead of an ugly side yard, we made it really fun.” Or “I love sketching. I can have fun designing a chair.”

And the fun never stops, regardless of the economy. During the financial crisis, when construction ground to a halt here, he astutely shifted his focus to Asia, specifically China. Now that China’s economy has slowed, he said, “California for us is getting stronger and stronger.”

Wasn’t the financial crisis and the great national humbling that followed supposed to render extinct suburban palaces like the ones he designs?

Large homes have existed in America since the Vanderbilts, Mr. Landry countered, and they will always exist: “I feel fortunate to be able to have a part.”

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The small house he wanted to show? His own: 4,300 square feet spread over three stories, right on the beach in northern Malibu.

Small, like the term luxury, is relative. And Mr. Landry also owns a ski chalet in Northern California and a lake house in Quebec.

The Malibu beach house had peachy-pink marble floors, was poorly designed and once belonged to Hugh Hefner, Mr. Landry said. He took it down to the studs and built a modern box, with contemporary furniture and milk-white surfaces. The interior is a bit Miami Beach nightclub: mirrors; lights that change from orange

to purple to blue; a bathroom fixture shaped like a joystick; and, in the master bedroom, a cabernet leather headboard.

“Very soothing, very cleansing,” he said of the house, adding: “The ocean is the star.”

The architect lives here by himself, except when he has custody of his teenage daughter, Samantha. Mr. Landry’s life can seem lonely in that successful-person, L.A. way. He spends evenings at the gym across from his office, and eats at the gym’s restaurant. The bar and outdoor entertaining area he built on his third floor rarely sees party guests.

“I’m mainly about friends and family,” he said, but his parents and siblings are back in Quebec, and he and his longtime partner, Robert Carolla, split three years ago. Last summer, he sold the vernacular barn home they had built together and lived in for 16 years because “there were too many memories of us there.”

From Mr. Landry’s first days in Southern California, his focus has been work. When he started his own firm at 30, he said, he worked out of his apartment and took any job offered. His first break came when he was asked to design a fence for a condo project.

“I said, ‘Yeah, absolutely.’ I was going to do the best possible fence I could,” he said. “Everywhere I would go, I would bring my portfolio.”

Through that job, he was hired to design a 10,000-square-foot spec house in Beverly Hills that drew attention. More commissions for high-end custom homes followed, including his first for a celebrity, an English manor for the smooth-jazz musician Kenny G. Next came Sugar Ray Leonard, Wayne Gretzky and Bruce and Kris Jenner, among others.

Mr. Landry learned how to design for the special needs of the rich and famous. Two kitchens, one for family and one for staff. Large, open foyers with direct flow to give fund-raiser crowds easy access to the backyard. Wings that could be closed off, so that a large house becomes a series of smaller ones, inhabited by the owners, extended family and houseguests. And amenities like home theaters and spas that account for all that square footage — and, more important, make interaction with the public avoidable.

Some may say it’s isolating and disorienting for people to cocoon themselves. But to Mr. Landry, there are no rights or wrongs, only what the client wants.

“Some of the celebrity clients we work with don’t have any privacy outside of their home,” he said. “So let them have a home theater or a bowling alley. It’s not about justifying that somebody needs a 30,000-square-foot home.”

Or 40,000. Which is the size of the French country estate that represents the final, extra-large portion of the tour. The house has a mansard roof topped with what looks like an entire quarry of slate. It has a guesthouse larger than many Americans' homes. And running between that guesthouse and the main residence is a full-on "old" cobblestone street, like in Europe.

Although Mr. Landry wants to make it clear that he isn't the megamansion guy — that he does all styles and sizes — standing before this enormous house, his eyes sparkled. "This is great," he couldn't help saying.

Your eyes might sparkle, too, if you were an architect given some of the most prime land in the country, two acres atop the lush hills of west Los Angeles, and from thin air conjured a castle.

No doubt Mr. Landry's critics would look at the place and find it lacking. And you know what? He agrees.

"I honestly believe we haven't done our best work yet," he said in his sports car, driving back to the office. "As an architect, I'm maturing with every project. Like a special wine that's going to get better with age."

http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/19/garden/the-king-of-the-megamansion.html?_r=0