

I associate Dutch colonials with dignified, intelligent elderly ladies, winding streets tightly planted with chestnuts and elms, ample lawns and generous supplies of Scotch mints and humbugs doled out for scraped-knee emergencies.'



WHAT LIES BENEATH

Dignified colonial house

The grace of a small elegant house is a wonderful thing. The pressures placed on a house by dense populations in and around it are enormous and constant; materials erode and finishes wear away. Over a lifetime, a house can lose everything that once made it elegant and interesting, as homeowner after homeowner tries to make it larger, warmer, easier to maintain and brighter. After a century or more of this piecemeal — albeit well-intentioned — alteration, what began as a beautiful exterior is often left shrouded under a thick disguise. This series examines several Toronto house types and describes their original façades.

BY SCOTT WEIR

Following the crazed architectural sampling of the late 19th century, a shift occurred in architectural taste toward one more focused on local roots. In the United States, Williamsburg, Va., Charleston, W. Va., and the Pennsylvania heartland were emerging in the public's consciousness as the places in which a newly legitimate architecture took root that could be called North American. In the period between the American centennial in 1876 and the end of the First World War, the continent began to look to itself for architectural inspiration and to consider its own history as valid and worthy of preservation.

Colonial architecture, which, until this period, was thought to be impractical and inferior to European-style architecture, was suddenly being re-examined and revived.

Although neo-Georgian buildings formed the backbone of this revivalist movement, the Dutch colonial house occupied a special place within the category — its name derived from the houses built by the Dutch in 18th-century New England. To avoid the tax levied on two-storey houses, colonists constructed single-storey buildings with high barn-shaped roofs and large shed dormers, thus gaining as much space in the upper level of the house as a true two-storey house would provide, while, technically, retaining its classification as a single-storey dwelling.

Like the mansard roof discussed earlier in this series, the roof of the Dutch colonial is called a gambrel roof, composed of two pitches, the lower one steeper than the upper. The house is usually one and a half storeys with the gambrel roof containing almost a full second storey. In earlier examples of the type, the end gable often faced the street, displaying decorative Victorian details, woodwork and shingling. In later versions of the type, built on larger lots, the side of the gambrel roof faced the street, usually with a long shed dormer and understated classical details.

The walls of the Dutch colonial were typically clapboard below and wood shingle above, though many examples in Toronto combine brick or stone in the lower storey with shingles in the upper storey, sometimes with half-timbering. In later examples of the type, chimneys were positioned at the gable ends, with quarter round or elliptical sunburst windows in the attic storey. The front porch could be expansive and deep on the end-gable models, or fairly diminutive under small bracketed overhangs on the side gambrel models. Early versions of the house bulged with bay windows and sun porches, while later the façade was organized into tidy symmetrical forms with multi-paned wood sash windows that evoked its colonial roots.

However, the Dutch colonial house is not without its psychological baggage. Thanks to Hollywood, many people see a fine gambrel-roofed house with delicate attic quarter-ellipse windows on a moonlit night and immediately begin to hear the raspy voice of an Amityville horror, somehow linking a practical architectural device with cloven-hooved evil.

Conversely, my mind leaps to the memory of my great aunt's side-gambrel-roofed house in the historic Palmer Park district of Detroit. It was Aunt Nell, lawyer and powerhouse social activist in an era when women were meant to keep silent, who strongly encouraged my burgeoning architectural career when I was a four-year-old. As a result, I associate Dutch colonials with dignified, intelligent elderly ladies, sunlit book-lined rooms, winding streets tightly planted with chestnuts and elms, ample lawns and generous supplies of Scotch mints and humbugs doled out



GRAPHIC BY SCOTT WEIR

for scraped-knee emergencies.

The problem for gambrel-roofed houses in Toronto is that people here often have an over-enthusiasm for renovation. In an effort to make an old house tidy and efficient, we will often destroy all the things we initially liked about it. Houses meant to be of shingle, clapboard or stucco were often renovated in the '70s to make them more energy-efficient and less cumbersome to maintain. The downside of some of Ontario's energy programs is that a lot of woodwork got covered with aluminum or new brick, and multi-paned windows were replaced with metal casements.

Of course, much of this tightening up is necessary. In an age of spiralling heating costs and destructive greenhouse gases, buildings need to perform more efficiently than they did in the past. But do your research before starting this process — you can often get great results by installing a high-efficiency furnace, reinsulating your attic and systematically caulking and weatherstripping your building.

I suggest you consider deeply the "embodied energy" of a building, i.e., the effort it took to mine the materials, carve the stone, grow the trees, cut the wood and manufacture the metal, before you start replacing windows, demolishing plasterwork or tearing down and rebuilding. While completely overhauling a house can provide savings in the amount of fuel required to heat it, the cost of manufacturing the aluminum, glass and brick required for such renovations is rarely taken into consideration, except, perhaps, from a monetary perspective. The cultural and environmental destruction that we have wrought in this effort is mind-boggling.

The last time I saw Aunt Nell's house, I was pleased to discover that its symmetries and soaring gambrel roof still moved me. Although the house had long been abandoned, it had never suffered the indignity of an ill-advised retrofit, and the classically detailed materials that comprised its façade retained their strength of design despite the building's decrepitude. Many gambrel-roofed houses in Toronto share a similar strength of character, though specific elements have been nearly obliterated by well-intentioned, maintenance-free alterations. The fun and challenge of restoring a house like this lies in the discovery of its inherent beauty and in returning it to its former dignity.

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