

Neighbourhoods like the Kingsway were truly remarkable. Though they might be similar in appearance to medieval England, they featured garages, electricity and four-piece bathrooms



WHAT LIES BENEATH

Academically rigorous and correct historical elements (like carving or ironwork) added to anchor appearance

Interior layout sometimes interchangeable under Tudor, Colonial, Mission exteriors

Nostalgic flourish at key points, like entrances

Decorative front door following general theme of other decorative elements

Gables and dormers break roofline to add variety

Faux elements associated with another place and time (like half-timbering and inoperable shutters)

Multi-paned windows used for effect

Varied combination of rustic stone, clapboard and decorative brick, on simple brick back



For the designers of the garden suburb, architectural rules were made to be broken

Land of dream homes

BY SCOTT WEIR

I fell in love a few times while driving through Etobicoke, just as I was supposed to. The Kingsway is the land of dream homes, a fantasy landscape of mini Norman châteaux, rigorous Georgians, rusticated English cottages, Cape Cod saltboxes and Regency villas. All on the same street, and with many following roughly a similar floor plan, these houses were available with interchangeable options so buyers could approximate their ideas of what home sweet home should be.

Storybook architecture swept North America, learning from the 19th century's careful study of everything from the Greek temple to the Austrian schloss, reinterpreting this distilled knowledge into a building well suited to the Brothers Grimm, comfortably sheltering three bedrooms, a modern kitchen and separate formal dining room.

House pattern books like *Small Homes of Architectural Distinction* (1929) demonstrated how the same plan could be interpreted with Olde England, New England, Georgian and Mediterranean-style façades. The plans could be ordered to suit a variety of lot types and sizes and they came complete with perspectives marketed with such heartwarming ditties as "the beautiful rests on the foundation of the necessary."

This was the emergence of the garden suburb, made possible by the invention of the automobile. A sharp change in lifestyle became available — men could live in the country and work at King and Bay, and women could raise a family and keep a tidy house without necessarily requiring the encumbrance of staff. Thus emerged a reinvented middle class, the land of the Cleavers and Hyacinth Bucket.

Neighbourhoods like the Kingsway were truly remarkable. These were buildings that showed off the refinement that could be achieved following a century of historical study and technological innovation in design and manufacturing. Though they might be similar in appearance to medieval



GRAPHIC AND PHOTO BY SCOTT WEIR

In many cases, the early suburban home was a fairly simple brick box with a variety of façade materials, window styles and dormer details.

England, they featured garages, electricity and four-piece bathrooms. The kitchens were modern wonders with drop-down ironing boards and electric stoves, all lightening the burden of the 20th-century housewife.

Though fantastical looking, in many cases, these buildings are founded on fairly simple brick boxes. By varying the façade materials, window styles and dormer details, the house could appear to be changed completely. Decorative architectural details were explored to determine the value that they could lend to this basic box. Better heating systems and security meant that shutters were no longer necessary, but non-functioning decorative versions were added to relieve simple brickwork. Downspouts from

eavestroughs gained decorative hoppers and mounting brackets. Small wrought iron balconies under windows reminded the viewer of Juliet before her love life took a turn for the worse. And extended slopes on asymmetrically arranged roofs included the viewer in on the droll Elizabethan chortle. I feel particular affection for the house in the photograph above. It is a simple brick building at its base, with a fabulous façade of wide clapboard and rustic stonework that provides delight in the play of materials. Its whiteness leaps off the craze at the time to paint everything white, to strip an ornamented building down to its cleanest, purest form, a sharp reaction to the tired colour crimes of the more indulgent Victor-

ian period. Ornamental shutters were part of a system of decorative forms that enlivened what could be a fairly interchangeable house type. The arrangement of the downspouts on the front elevation is a refined organizing device; copper gutters and downspouts with large square hoppers would really make this thing pop.

Architectural rules were made to be broken. Brick in these buildings was sometimes white-washed, and mortar could be squashed out for rustic effect. Brick structures could be fronted in stone or clapboard just to provide variety and interest. Roof shingles were encouraged to meander in their lines, and stucco was applied roughly, with bricks poking through haphazardly.

In Toronto, you can find clus-

ters of these in Lawrence Park and the Kingsway, the latter the vision of Robert Home Smith. His motto "Anglia pars Anglia procul" — a little bit of England far from England — was at the philosophical root of his neighbourhood: To anchor the quaintness, he centred this "Old Mill" community around a stabilized picturesque ruin housing a tea shop and his corporate headquarters. It met Toronto's yearnings to be a jewel in England's crown deliciously combining conservative stately architecture with design innovation and convenience. The Kingsway has remained a cohesive neighbourhood of gently meandering scale, larger stately homes on Kingsway itself and more modest but equally well-considered houses on the surrounding streets. This neighbourhood was an extraordinarily successful example of a consistent vision, and original homebuyers were asked to sign agreements that they not significantly change their buildings for at least 30 years.

Other than the occasional oversized McMansion that cracks the image, this neighbourhood has survived relatively intact, and the individual houses have retained their charm and wit. Other less complete neighbourhoods have not been so lucky. Much of the success of these buildings derives from the details that can disappear as they deteriorate. Elements like shutters with their decorative cutouts make no real contribution to the functioning of the building — if removed, the R-value is not affected and the roof will not leak. In fact, these elements were subject to scorn during the 1980s rebirth of modernism and were often removed because they were seen as extraneous. But the quaint rusticity that makes these houses unique — they are crucial episodes in the story being told.

That doesn't mean that buildings can't be reinvented under the hand of a careful architect. One of my favourite houses in Cabbagetown is a gothic cottage that was stripped down to its base form and rebuilt using completely modernist language. Architecture is just a language with a different set of vocabulary used to communicate different ideas.

It is important to make an effort to understand the particular tone of your house's architecture if you are embarking on a restoration or renovation. Look at your neighbourhood, study the houses that you like best and, most important, try to understand your own house and what makes it particularly strong. Remember why you bought your house and what first drew you to it; use the elements that you like as a base from which to work.

■ Scott Weir is an associate at architectural conservationist ERA Architects Inc.

■ Next week: Toronto Modern
National Post