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## WHAT LIES BENEATH



*Second Empire cottages gave a touch of grandeur to the 19th-century working family*

# Mansard made easy

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 facades.

BY SCOTT WEIR

If pressed, I would have to say that the series of events that led to us buying our current house unfolded because a friend, Aziz, had bought the adjacent mansard-roofed cottage the year before. There are worse things than living next to a generous friend while your house is under renovation, but in addition to that, the more time we spent at his commodious cottage with friendly round-headed dormers, the further the hard edges of our “before picture” next door blurred. Lulled into this pleasant state of denial, when the house came up for sale, we jumped.

It's not easy to describe a Second Empire cottage, except to say it looks happy. Like the Gothic cottage, there is a cheeriness apparent in its simplicity, and the hand of the builder is evident.

In Toronto, a range of Second Empire buildings emerged toward the end of the 19th century, everything from grand mansions in Rosedale to simple workers' cottages in south Riverdale, Cabbagetown and on the western edges of the city.

As for the cottage version of

the type, the single architectural gesture it presents publicly is its façade — usually a single storey of brickwork capped by a short expanse of multi-coloured slate. In its simplest form, this could include a single dormer on the roof, a line of iron cresting where the roof meets the sky, a single window below, a handful of eave brackets and an entry door. With a building type so simplified and pared down, it is these individual elements that carry the weight of composing the façade. Removal or alteration of any one of them can greatly detract from the building's appearance.

But the most memorable characteristic of the Second Empire style is the mansard roof, with its two distinct slopes — an almost flat upper slope and a lower one that's steeper. Dormer windows are another consistent feature.

The design of the roof is ascribed to 17th-century French architect François Mansart, but it was revived in the 19th century during the mad rebuilding of Paris under Napoleon III. For that reason, buildings with mansard roofs are often referred to as Second Empire.

Throughout the 1870s, North Americans with pretensions to greatness constructed mansard-

style mansions as monuments to themselves. However, by the 1950s many of these homes became signifiers of dynasties gone wrong, exemplified in popular culture by odd-duck inhabitants such as the Addams Family, the Munsters and Norman Bates in the movie *Psycho* — all that creepiness and kookiness associated with a simple and practical dual-sloped roof.

In the late 19th century, this approximation of grandeur made the style popular with the working and middle classes, which, of course, led to its falling out of fashion among the elite, as rows and rows of mansarded cottages arose near factories as housing for the working poor.

As a method of construction, mansarded cottages were exceptionally successful because usable living quarters could be placed in the attic. Many North American buildings originally erected with standard sloped roofs had mansard roofs added in the 1870s, both to update their style and to gain additional living space.

Second Empire cottages could be produced cheaply, while still retaining an appearance of grandeur. Mass production and the fact that the essential elements were available in kits made it possible to arrange these houses in a decorative manner. Perhaps it's their human scale that appeals to me — they're understandable. The walls are composites of many small, hand-size bricks, whose jointing permitted a textured and patterned form. Built identically in rows with shared party walls so that wasted space was kept to a minimum, many of these homes featured cast-iron cresting and wooden brackets that were repeated along the row.



An example of a Second Empire cottage that has been poorly renovated, above, and one that retains its 19th-century look.



PHOTOS AND SKETCH BY SCOTT WEIR

The mansard roofs were made of slate, a material renowned for its longevity. The slate was designed in a variety of shapes — hexagon, diamond and fishscale — that came in various shades. But a system is only as strong as its weakest element, and in this case, often the slates were hung on iron nails, which rust. After a century of weather, the slate had for the most part fallen off or been removed, and many of the roofs were covered with asphalt shingles, or worse, aluminum siding.

The city's remaining Second Empire row houses are always at risk of becoming victims of fairly shocking renovations. Because half the building is roof, and a sizeable portion is window and door, many '60s renovations left many of these homes with just a smidgen of brick beneath a hulking aluminum-sided roof. The aesthetic of their façades was destroyed, with decorative trim removed and cheap materials

covering everything that once made them interesting. Much of the metalwork disappeared in the early part of the 20th century as part of the war effort; iron cresting and fences were melted down to make weapons, denuding the homes they had previously garnished.

But because these cottages have small visible frontage, they only require bite-size amounts of material to repair. As a result, today's owner can do a high-impact, aesthetically pleasing restoration. Without undertaking too much work, you can get a lot of bang for your buck.

Admittedly, the smallest of these row houses are often not much larger than a condo, but they make a great entry-level home for a would-be restorer. When it comes to architectural conservation on a budget, small equals good. If your house is part of a row, it's often adjacent to or nearby identical buildings that

retain their architectural detail, thus providing a reference for any missing elements.

Toronto has a number of narrow streets with beautiful rows of these homes. Most, you've never heard of because they start somewhere you've never been and lead nowhere you were planning to go. But streets such as Percy, Alpha and Spruce (near Sword) are evidence of the heart-tugging potential that lies in these small cottages. And at the base of my recommendation is the knowledge that on tiny narrow streets like mine, you come to know and care about the people pressed in around you. When given the opportunity, people look after each other — making this daunting process a pleasure.

■ Scott Weir is an associate with architectural conservationists ERA Architects Inc.

■ Next instalment: the Annex home

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