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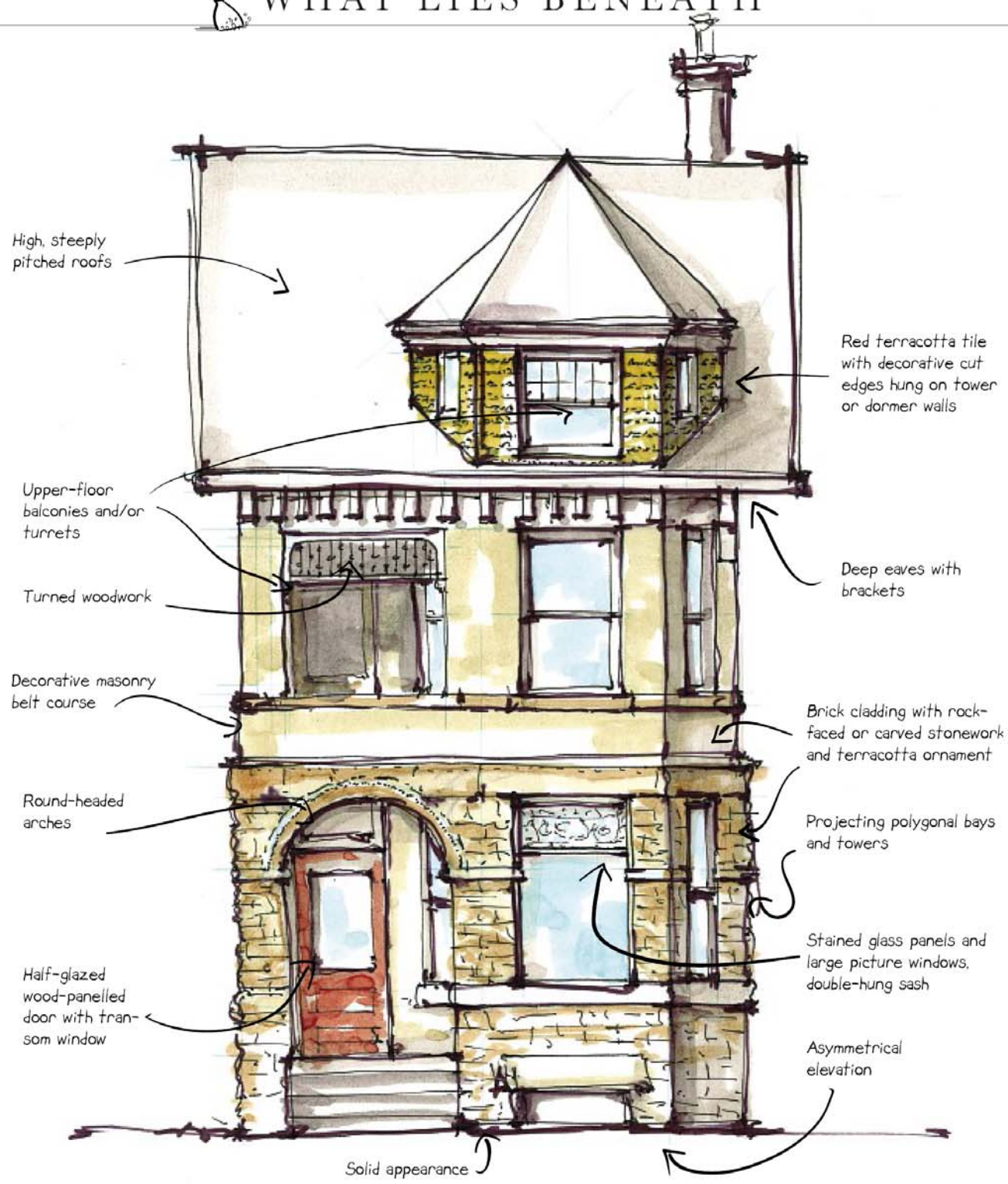
WHAT LIES BENEATH



Torontonian to the core

The dreams of an upwardly mobile yet nostalgic citizenry found expression in the Annex

The grace of a small, elegant house is a wonderful thing. But, over time, 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 alteration, what began as a beautiful home is often left shrouded under a thick disguise. This series, What Lies Beneath, examines a handful of Toronto house types and delves beneath the layers to reveal their origins. This week: the Annex house.

By Scott Weir

If you ask an urban middle-class Torontonian what sort of house they dream of owning, they're likely to point to a house in the Annex. Interesting, varied and a bit mysterious, many of these castle and manor house forms were built with quaint cottage elements that pluck at our tautly stretched urban heartstrings despite our best efforts. The results were often energetic, bright, large (but manageable) and unique. How could you go wrong — Jane Jacobs, the queen of neighbourhoods, chose a simple but beautiful Dutch-gabled version for her Annex seat.

But this is where my rather simplistic organization of complex and interwoven streams of architecture into neat, packaged categories begins to fall apart. Many late-19th-century houses are elaborate confections of materials, influences and principles, assembled for a population wanting to quantify their new wealth by the most direct means possible. Annex houses, in all their beautiful strangeness, are no exception.

Toronto's Annex house category generally refers to a body of houses that celebrate variation, a veritable smorgasbord of Richardsonian Romanesque, Queen Anne and local vernacular elements, and a wide range of exotic influences, served up on a grassy and, at the time, suburban platter. Early architectural magazines disseminated ideas to local builders, and mass production made inexpensive ornamental elements available at a time of civic expansion. Along with the bay-and-gable category, the Annex house would become an architectural symbol of this city.

Bursting with mysterious volumes and texture, these houses capture the imagination and lead you to wonder what's going on behind their façades. Sharply pitched slate roofs roll into turrets and dormers, sheltering elaborate turned balustrades of garret balconies. Wall surfaces are broken into layers of varied texture — rugged rock-faced pink sandstone melts into decorative brickwork with terra cotta ornament — and are surmounted by scalloped-tile-shingled gables and elaborate roof ridges. The curve of a stone or brick archway is echoed in the thrust of a leaded- and jewelled-glass oriel window above, contrasted with the now more affordable large expanse of glass. The consistency is found in the materials, the layering of texture.

The Annex house strikes a perfect balance between *gravitas* and delight. The weight of masonry confirms the integrity and respectability of the owner, while sensual bays, mysterious turrets and dramatic rooflines suggest eccentricities below the surface.

Like the gothic and Second Empire movements, this architecture was a reaction to the industrialization of the times, and looked back to an imagined sweeter past. Henry Hobson Richardson's buildings inspired a wave of neo-Romanesque architecture in North America — heavy buildings, solid with masonry encumbrance and carrying the burden of centuries of superstition in their carved stone. Concurrently, Queen Anne buildings, popularized by British architect Richard Norman Shaw, were reinventing 18th-century English and Flemish domestic architecture, bringing a brighter tone to this architecture, while using cheaper materials to decorative effect. Local architects such as E. J. Lennox and C. J. Gibson performed magic with a synthesis of these forms on such streets as Admiral, Madison and Spadina.

One of the things I love most about Toronto is the streetcars. With the emergence of electrically powered streetcars in 1892, a new ease of transport meant that, unlike the tightly packed houses in the city's core, houses in these new neighbourhoods could luxuriate in their ample settings. Here avenues were made for strolling, with broad sidewalks met by lawns unencumbered by the fussy wrought-iron fences typical of mid-19th-century houses or by the pressing in of industrial and commercial development at one's doorstep.

And this environment was ideal for strolling *fin-de-siècle flanneurs*. The Annex house is a populist architecture. There's a lot to look at, aspects to like and dislike, elements to notice and build a conversation around.

Previously, mannerist whimsy of this sort could only be afforded by the rich. But with the invention of balloon framing, using standard 2x4 wood studs, elaborate architectural forms — towers, deep overhangs, geometrically complex bay windows and rippling upper stories — were now within the reach of the middle class.

Annex houses may be the best known and most elaborate examples of the type, but a whole raft of similar, if less rambunctious, houses can be found throughout the city. And they've survived well, constructed with hard bricks, stonework and deep overhangs that shed the rain and keep the frost at bay.

SKETCH AND PHOTO BY SCOTT WEIR

A third-floor balcony tops the eye-catching façade of this Annex home.

Nevertheless, thoughtless renovation can cause this house form to fail if the textures of the house are smoothed over. Variegated shadows cast by the scalloped edge of a tiled gable are very different from those cast by siding. Metal-framed picture windows destroy the proportions and textures that are evident in the pairing of clear with stained glass sashes. Features vulnerable to the elements tend to get jettisoned; turrets are lopped off, fretwork of wood porches is obliterated, and those mysterious third-floor balconies are enclosed with aluminum sliding doors. The swell of volumes becomes far less interesting without the texture to meld them together.

I do feel somewhat duplicitous in writing about Annex houses in a series that purports to be about everyday houses of discreetly small proportions. But a strong and innovative success of this architecture was the creative attention paid to the upper level of a building's façade. The attic balconies and tower rooms of the Queen Anne house inspired generations of Rapunzels to crave third-floor master suites, with walkouts commanding extensive views, their golden hair protected from the nasty urban streets below. While it may have been one of the more indulgent architectural periods, these houses engaged the viewer and made us daydream about unprecedented spatial possibilities.

▮ Next instalment: Arts and Crafts

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