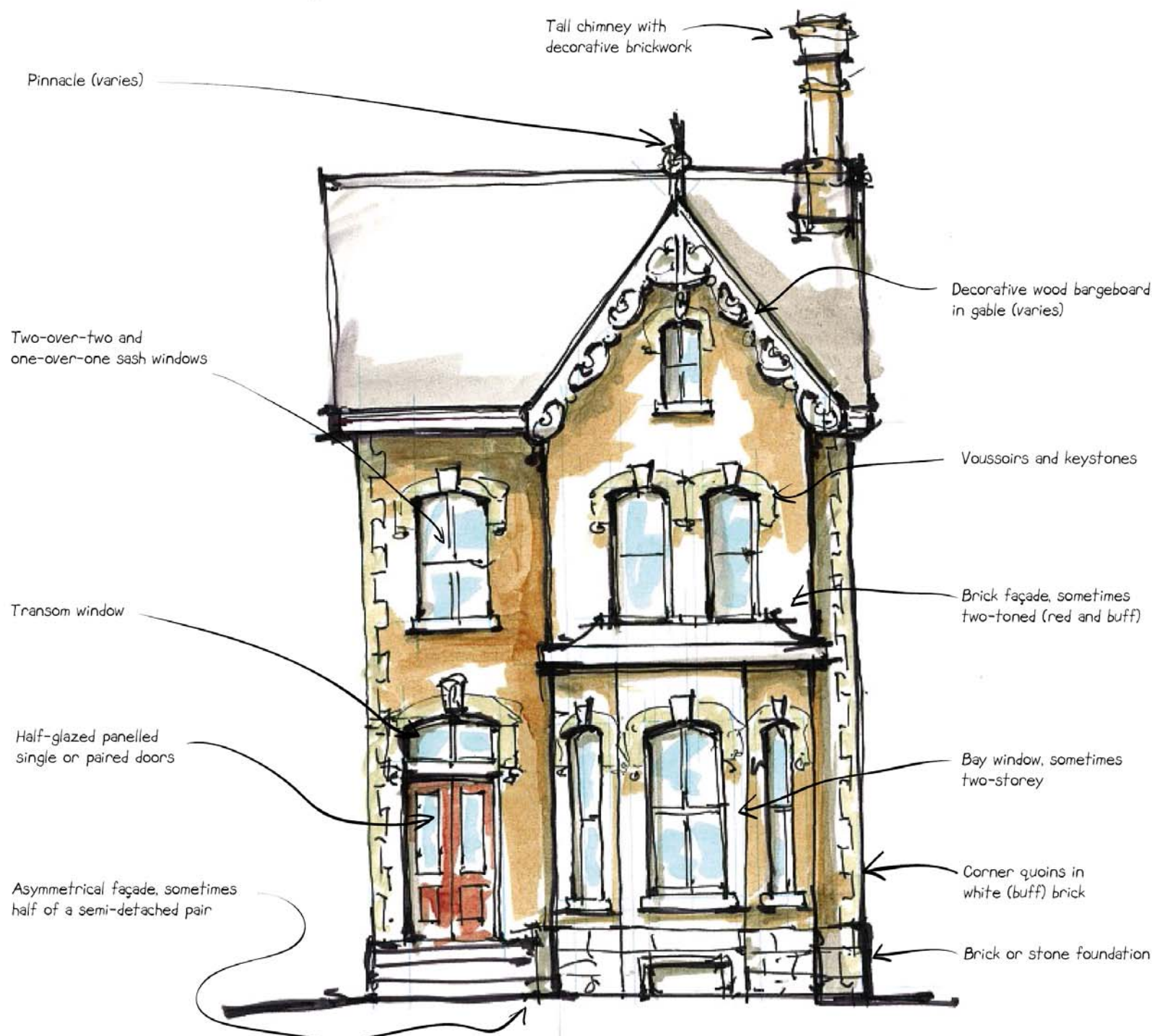


Early versions of the bay and gable were organized in roughly symmetrical semi-detached pairs with entrances in the centre flanked by one- or two-storey bay windows under steeply pitched peaks



WHAT LIES BENEATH



Toronto's house next door

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

No house form is as recognizably Toronto as the bay and gable. Our neighbourhoods are full of them, ranging from simple semi-detached versions from the late 1870s to elaborate confections ornamented with carved wood and stained glass in rows or fully detached toward the turn of the century. Despite their presence throughout the downtown core, there are lively variations because elements and materials could be substituted at will. I can attest to their success: My house is a fairly simple but commodious version sometimes unkindly referred to as a “fake and gable” — like the others but without the bay window.

Less a style than a morphology, the bay-and-gable type emerged as a result of economic forces and technological innovation. Early versions of these buildings were organized in roughly symmetrical semi-detached pairs with entrances in the centre flanked by one- or two-storey bay windows under steeply pitched peaks, mimicking the appearance of large

gothic mansions favoured by the pious Victorians of the 1850s. Later examples abandoned the symmetrical form and were constructed either in rows or completely detached, once the type became more common.

As Toronto grew in the latter part of the 19th century, urban real estate could only be bought at a premium. Areas that had once been considered the outer suburbs — such as Cabbagetown and the lower Annex — became sites of development, with speculators constructing multiple dwellings to similar plans with the expectation of renting or selling them upon completion. Rapid development coupled with slow means of transportation (building materials delivered by horse-drawn cart or on foot) meant that the cost of real estate was high, so, naturally, lots greatly diminished in width. As a result, the city was laid out on a scale meant for pedestrians.

Because of the narrow lots, the buildings tend to be skinny and tall: a lot width of 13 to 20 feet often had a two- or two-and-a-half-storey building. Thirteen feet is not a lot of width for a house when it has to accommodate an entrance from a snowy climate, closets, stairs between

three floors and a basement as well as private bedrooms with hallways, and access to light and air. But these narrow houses extended well back into the lots, some of which were as much as 150 feet deep.

In an era when chamber pots, coal-burning fireplaces and stables were the rule throughout the middle class, access to light and air were a necessity, not just for enjoyment of one's life but even to survive into one's 40s. So ceilings were high and windows on the front were maximized, with one- or two-storey bay windows to let as much light and air into the buildings as possible.

Inner-city blocks were laid out with lanes behind, so houses were constructed in continuous rows. To let light in from the rear, kitchen wings were narrower than the front dimension. In this way, windows could be placed at the rear of the public rooms as well — usually the dining room — providing light as well as cross-ventilation in summer. Similarly, sliding doors between the living/dining rooms and storm windows broke up the spaces into insulated “compartments” that could be individually heated while the rest of the building was not.

Glass production had become cheaper so windows no longer had to be made up of numerous tiny panes. Now they could be two over two or even one over one. And even lower-quality windows had become complex mechanisms with upper and lower sliding sashes hung on ropes over pulleys built into the window frames, with counterweights matched to the weight of the window sash embedded in

the wall inside the frames.

Because both top and bottom sashes could slide, cool air could enter through the opened lower sash while lighter warm air could escape the room through the upper sash. Although many of these sashes have been discarded, many of these mechanisms are still in place inside the walls, the ropes long having broken.

Most of these homes were fronted in brick; either “white” (buff coloured) or red bricks, the latter more common in these buildings because local clay produced that colour of brick. White brick was brought in from southern Ontario, tended to be more expensive, and so was often used only as accent elements, in corner quoins (the large stepped block shapes at the vertical edges of a building) or voussairs (the arched hoods above the windows).

Victorians weren't afraid to be garish. The use of “polychromy” (multiple colours of building materials in one building) was encouraged by such architectural theorists as John Ruskin in mid-19th-century treatises that attempted to develop a new architecture appropriate to the age. In an era when the coal furnaces of industrialization coated the world in grey soot, the use of bright colours in architecture was an attempt to combat the gloom.

The expense was laid on for the brick façade, with the wood-framed side walls either buried within the row or exposed and covered in stucco or wood siding. These walls were later often covered with a fake brick siding called Insulbrick. Similarly, the rear of the houses were



SKETCH AND PHOTO BY SCOTT WEIR
The bay and gable is seen throughout Toronto, usually as semi-detached, but also as wider, single-family homes.

often clad in cheap materials, given that guests would never be brought to the rear service areas, home to the outhouse, stable and washing lines.

Many of these homes have survived remarkably well. New bay-and-gable houses are found in many recent infill neighbourhoods because the design works in an urban environment. Nevertheless, a beautiful polychromatic grouping representing the best of this type has sat abandoned on Glen Road near Sherbourne Street for years, inhabited only by the some very lucky raccoons.

Because of its simplicity, it is difficult to wreck a bay-and-gable house. Generally, windows have been replaced with poor substitutes and decorative woodwork removed, with eaves

covered in low-maintenance aluminum. Some brick fronts have been badly sandblasted or covered by siding, but even then, the strength of the architecture is apparent. Usually, poor design decisions on the exterior can be repaired or disguised.

My red brick fake-and-gable leans a bit to the left. And if you want to be petty, its nether regions are technically clad in more Insulbrick than real brick. But, ultimately, the underlying strength of the design outweighs these detractions. And returning home to it, whatever its state of decrepitude, feels quintessentially Toronto.

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■ Next instalment: Second Empire
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