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WHAT LIES BENEATH

The Georgian myth

The grace of a small, elegant house is a wonderful thing. The pressures placed on a house by dense population 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 sort of 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

Pseudo-Georgian is probably the most overused architectural term in many parts of Toronto. Scan any paper's real estate section and you'll see it attached to a somewhat dull property. Although most buildings referred to as Georgian weren't even a twinkle in their builder's eye during the reigns of British kings George I to IV (1714 to 1830), the reference hung on and is used to refer to vaguely neoclassical structures built throughout the British Empire. Georgian has come to mean dour respectability, cleanliness, a boat that will not rock. Oddly, it has become the language of choice for developers wanting to appeal to a nostalgic population — without spending a lot on construction.

Toronto's first phase of residential construction was in the late-Georgian period, and some rare good architectural examples, such as the Grange and Campbell House, remain. Toronto (then called the Town of York) meant east of Berkeley and south of Queen streets, around the mouth of the Don River. This site proved less than ideal, situated as it was directly adjacent to the marshy flatlands of Ashbridges Bay. A lack of adequate sewage systems and the great flocks of mosquitoes unhindered by window screens (a later invention) brought wave after wave of illness to the city. Fairly quickly, the city fled westward away from the marsh, with the prominent buildings of the mid-19th century being constructed toward Yonge Street and later, northward.

The neoclassical architecture that flourished during the Georgian period and into the mid-19th century is based on the Greek and Roman orders, whose component parts are made up of a pedestal, column and entablature. Different orders followed different systems of proportion and were used in specific ways to convey meaning to a populace versed in interpreting these architectural elements. In rough terms, Ionic buildings were girly and delightful, Doric buildings were manly and dark.

Renaissance architects took great pains to understand these systems and their use. Educated Europeans, particularly architects, were expected to tour Athens and Rome to absorb what was considered the root of perfect form, and be able to recreate classically informed buildings back in their own countries.

With Toronto being a deep backwater at that time, its architecture was much more simplified. The refinement of early to mid-19th-century buildings in Toronto had more to do with pleasing symmetries, regularized forms, solid materials and harmonic proportions. In its grander form, early villas, such as the Grange, housed symmetrically organized plans behind oversize multi-paned sash windows. More common throughout the city were row or terraced houses, such as Mackenzie House, and Walnut Hall (at Shuter and George streets), with towering symmetrically arranged chimney stacks piled atop raised brick parapets that divided the rows into individual houses. By the 1850s, this type filled the city.

At a time when architectural variation was minimal, refinements in Georgian style emerged to distinguish the great villa from the worker's row house.

The focal point of the house was the entrance, which ranged from refined porticos with pedestal, column and entablature strictly following the classical orders to simple six-panelled doors set into plain brick walls. More common, however, were wood six-panelled doors with a transom window and sidelights providing light into the hall behind.

Windows were perhaps the defining elements of the neoclassical building. Large sash windows held rectangular glass panes divided by delicate wooden muntin bars into patterns of six over six, nine over nine or 12 over 12 panes. These in turn were arranged in symmetrical rhythm across the façade, with minimally decorated cut-stone lintels on finer buildings, flat or arched brick lintels on mid-range structures and wood beams on lesser buildings.

These openings were equipped with functional shutters that served the purpose of securing the building against inclement weather or keeping the interior cool. The functional shutter was an ingenious invention. Louvres could be arranged to control air flow. The external mounting of the shutters (as opposed to internally mounted shutters or drapes) meant that the sun's rays did not penetrate. Solid internal panel shutters folded into the window frame and provided a level of security and heat retention.

Doors, windows were the defining elements

While most brick houses in the Town of York were constructed using common bond (five rows of stretchers — bricks laid parallel to the wall surface — alternated with one row of headers — bricks laid perpendicular to the wall to tie the thickness of the wall together), some were laid employing a more refined Flemish bond (bricks alternating between header and stretcher), often with the more-expensive Flemish bond appearing only on the front façade, with common bond on side walls.

Gestures toward cornices and individual elements such as dentils found expression in most houses. Speculative buildings employed a standardized eave line, while architects of the period developed signatures. Architect John Tully used corbelled patterned brick (which steps away from the wall the higher it goes), while Frederick Cumberland brought his buildings closer to the Italianate with bracketed eaves.

The layout of interior spaces followed from the symmetries of the exterior. The rooms of larger villas were organized around a centre hall with a staircase leading up to a well-lit landing, often featuring a decorative window. Smaller row houses also used this main hall, with the large rooms opening off to one side.

The simplicity of Georgian architecture has made it a prime tool of developers and decorators who sample forms randomly to achieve an effect. Crown mouldings, for example, which once would have been part of a full system of proportions that provided a sense of scale, are now simply used to make a room more fancy. Multi-paned windows that emerged through necessity because of the great cost of glass and the difficulty of making and shipping it in large sizes, are now gestured at with pop-out aluminum muntin bars. Six-panelled doors of hollow-core plastic are now sold at big-box stores. Across the city, there are small buildings that ascribe to this type, either from the first half of the 19th century or of later construction. Many have lost key elements that make their architecture palatable, most commonly the windows, doors and eave woodwork. But unlike later, more ornamental works, these are buildings whose integrity can be tightened up with a relatively low level of intervention.

▮ Next instalment: The Regency Picturesque Cottage.

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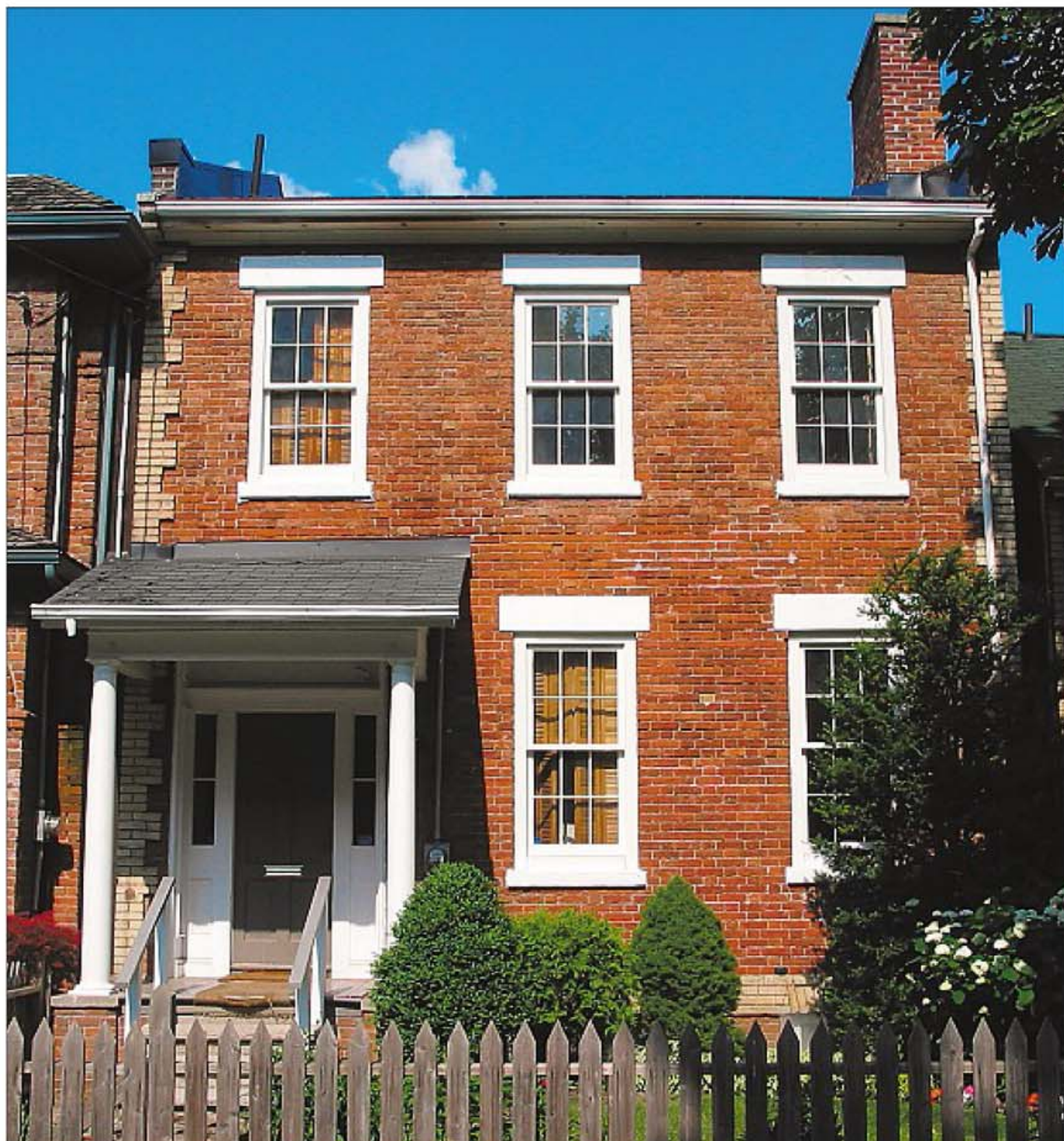

PHOTO AND GRAPHIC BY SCOTT WEIR

This Toronto home, above, is a good example of simple Georgian architecture. Below, some of the details a Georgian home should have.