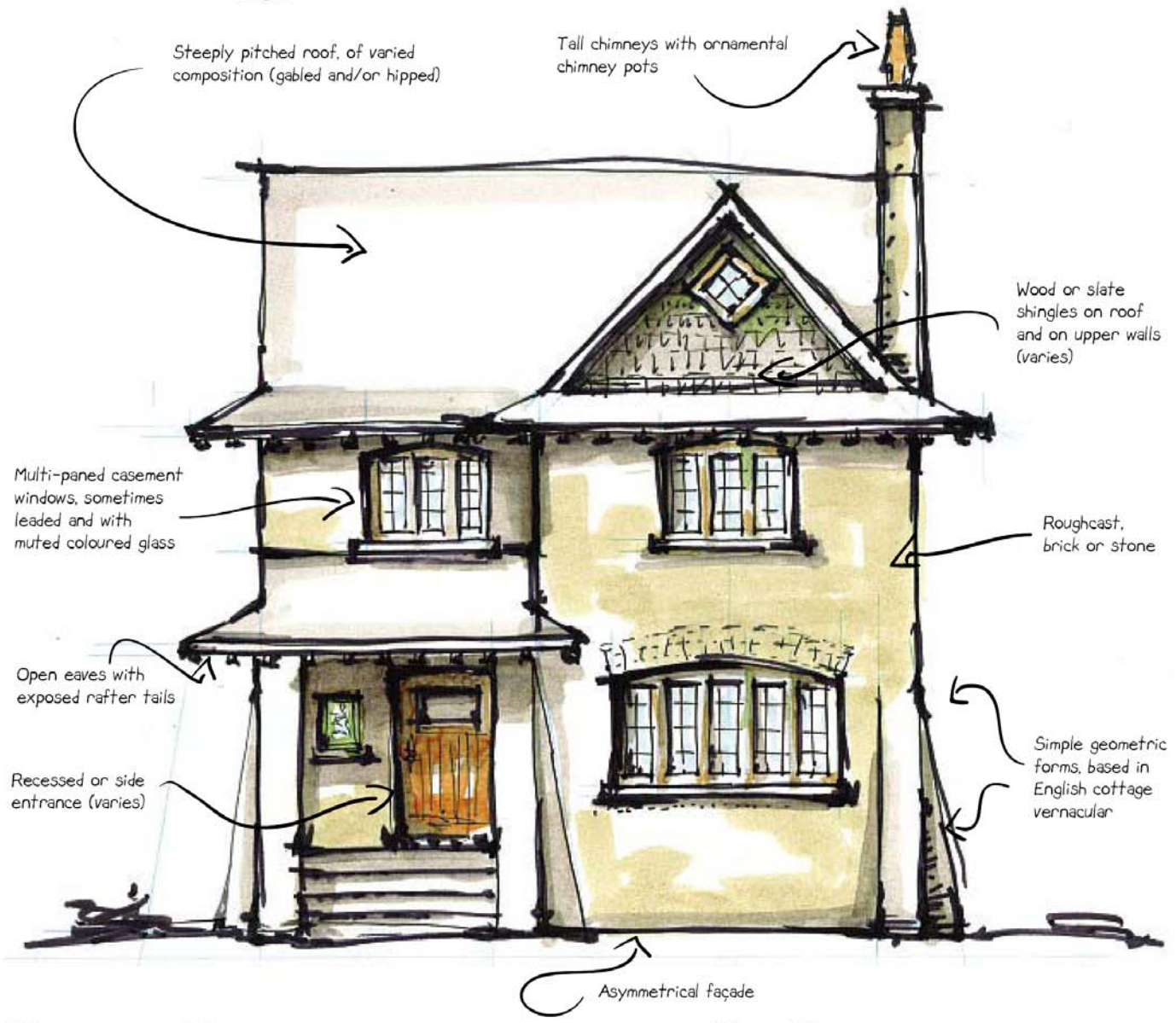
Emerging out of the loud Victorian era when symphonies in architecture often had too many notes, the buildings of the Arts and Crafts masters celebrated style-less functionality over ostentation

WHAT LIES BENEATH



The beauty of function

The Arts and Crafts movement focused on nature, workmanship and quality materials

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

Understated older architecture can be a hard sell in a city obsessed with generating and quantifying wealth. It is difficult to show how far up the beanstalk one has climbed when the appearance of one's house is based on simple forms derived from peasant architecture, no matter how well considered and commodious. Without festoons of decoration or recognizable classical detailing, one's position in society may not be immediately evident to the casual observer. It is precisely this issue that is at the root of the demolition of a great number of fine Arts and Crafts buildings in Toronto.

The houses designed by Toronto's Arts and Crafts master, Eden Smith, appear to be suffering more fallout than most. Viewed by some as oppressively dour, these houses were, at the time, groundbreaking, radical improvements to our way of life in Canada.

The early 20th century was the era of the Group of Seven who fostered the emergence of a strong Canadian identity. Toronto's Arts and Letters Club, which still functions in the same fantastic building on Elm Street, was the forum through which these painters and the city's Arts and Crafts architects exchanged ideas and planned ways to overhaul the country's arts to reflect Canadian experience.

The plan for this architectural overhaul was based on the principle that "the beauty of function" trumped style and ornament. For these architects, buildings were meant to be interwoven with their sites, eschewing local domestic traditions, which they felt were no longer important. Buildings were stripped down to the simplest materials, handcrafted and detailed. Their approach to spatial organization was considered radical at the time: Side entrances allowed for more usable space on the street façade and access to more light; rooms were oriented to take advantage of the movement of the sun (even if this meant placement at the rear of the house, an area normally reserved for the service areas); and the relationship of the house to its gardens was paramount.

I had the mixed blessing of documenting three Eden Smith buildings — each of them subtly delightful — prior to their demolition, and from them I learned a great deal about spatial organization and light. Though I mourned their loss, I recognized that they'd been utterly displaced in their densifying neighbourhoods. Indeed, one was demolished to make way for a condo tower that I have since come to love.

Steep hipped roofs and tall chimneys were characteristic of many of Eden Smith's houses, the brickwork and chimneypots often being the only decorative elements. The "program" of the house was expressed in the design of its façade, which depended on the skilful use of "honest" materials (stucco, smooth unornamented brick and wood or slate shingles), exposed structural elements such as rafter tails and beams; and a careful proportioning of geometric forms to express beauty, rather than referencing past styles. Windows were, for the most part, casements, whose working parts could be hand-wrought in textured forms meant to be seen and touched by the user. Muted colours and leaded glass drew attention to the relationship between interior spaces and the sun. Fireplaces abounded, with inglenooks creating areas of intimacy within large principal rooms. Other local architects followed similar methods, drawing on English cottage features for their designs. (W. Douglas Brown's book *Eden Smith: Toronto's Arts and Crafts Architect* is an excellent reference.)

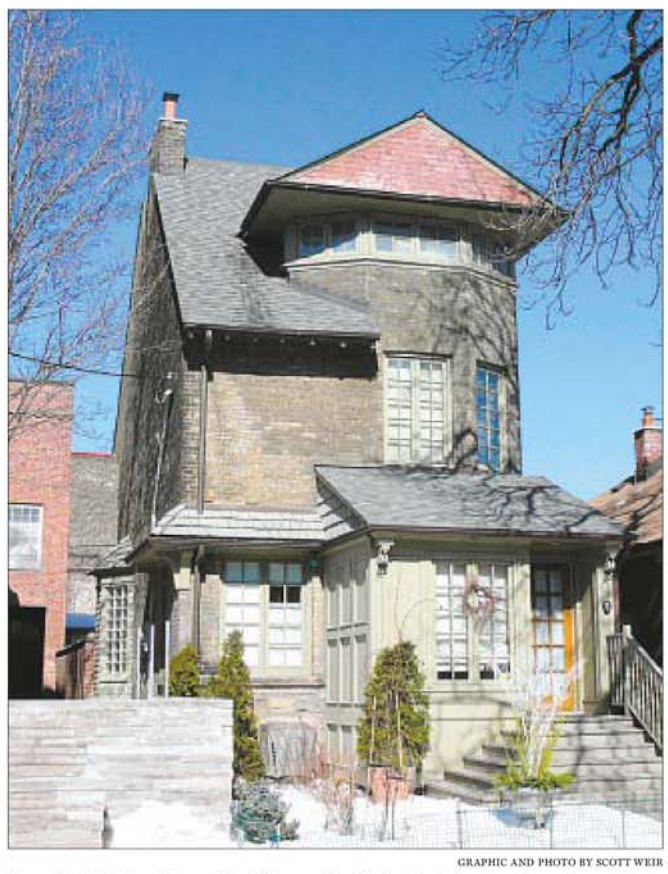
Emerging out of the loud Victorian era when symphonies in architecture often had too many notes, the buildings of the Arts and Crafts masters, such as England's Charles Voysey and Scotland's Charles Rennie Mackintosh, celebrated style-less functionality over ostentation. They developed an architectural language based on a house's relationship to its local environment and the climate rather than its value as a decorative signifier of power and wealth. The very modern architecture that they collectively developed was rooted in traditional building methods, giving weight to the builder as craftsman and valuing simple, quality materials.

Those who like Arts and Crafts architecture have had great success working with these buildings. The gardens of many High Park homes — madly bursting with perennials — tie the informal and friendly character of these buildings to their village and country origins. Arts and Crafts homes in Wychwood Park and on Indian Road near High Park are excellent examples of the best of this house type.

It may be that their very lack of ostentation has been their undoing, if the rapid succession of recent Arts and Crafts teardowns is anything to go by. In quieter neighbourhoods, many of these finely crafted, quirky and understated houses are being replaced with new monster Georgians. In other cases, their once tranquil locations have now become busy city streets, ideal for densification.

The losses were of such concern that the City of Toronto recently gave historical designation to a number of Arts and Crafts houses in the prestigious Forest Hill and Poplar Plains areas, so that buyers looking to "build new" would opt for lesser properties.

Torontonians concerned about teardowns in their area are now able to voice their concerns in neighbourhood district studies that seek to identify buildings they value and put in place planning guidelines so that future development occurs in a collectively agreed upon manner. In Rosedale, for example, properties have been classed from A to D, allowing those most valued by the neighbourhood to be protected, while other sites can be redeveloped. In a city densifying as rapidly as Toronto, this ongoing evaluation and preservation of certain buildings of interest is essential if we want to preserve the city's unique architectural roots for future generations.



GRAPHIC AND PHOTO BY SCOTT WEIR

It may be that the Arts and Craft house's lack of ostentation has been its undoing.

I recall certain professors teaching us that, as architects, we should feel comfortable demolishing anything, as long as what we construct in its place is better and gives more to the street. While I greatly respect the drive to leave one's surroundings better than one found them, I also believe architects should seek out and replace the least interesting elements of our city and strive to preserve well-crafted architecture (and if such well-crafted buildings no longer serve their original purpose, we should look for creative ways to adapt them). The rapidity of Toronto's boom and, of course, the complexity of variables that must be weighed in deciding a building's fate make this a challenging feat, but one that, I think, future generations will thank us for.

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

▮ Next week: the Craftsman bungalow

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