

POST HOMES

PH1

NATIONAL POST, SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 2007 ★

Much of Toronto's graceful old residential architecture has been buried under decades of bad renovation. A new series, What Lies Beneath, looks at ways to restore the original façades.

PH3



ILLUSTRATION BY SCOTT WEIR

REDISCOVERING THE BEAUTY OF OUR OLD HOMES

The Georgian style, above, is one of Toronto's most popular house types, but is rarely renovated accurately. It's just one house period this series will cover, as architectural conservationist Scott Weir defines the authentic details.

BOOK EXCERPT

BUYING BEFORE BETROTHING



Single women aren't waiting for marriage to buy a house, they're going it alone. HomeGirl, *PH11*

FOR SALE

An agent's right hand

The Internet helps buyers visit dozens of homes, but it's still the agent who helps them sort the online wheat from the chaff.

Kelvin Browne, PH6

FOR SALE

Beach beauty on the market



Queen Anne home features a turret, a private driveway, a wraparound porch and a spa-like ensuite; yours for just over \$1M. *PH12*



With a few appropriate style choices, discreet touches of colour and subtle accessories, our old houses can be revitalized to regain the gracious appearance of their youth

WHAT LIES BENEATH



COLIN O'CONNOR FOR NATIONAL POST

Scott Weir bought a house that has everything wrong with it, but he's determined to bring it back to its former glory. Below: Toronto has many blocks of quaint houses, like this row of well-kept cottages.

Restoring the façades of Toronto's oldest houses to their original state is worth the effort

Beauty in disguise

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 will examine several Toronto house types and delve beneath the layers to reveal the original façade. This week: The overview.

BY SCOTT WEIR

I recently bought a small tear-down on a tiny, narrow street that is peaceful yet in the centre of town, edged with small gardens and well-loved worn-brick façades. The street is only one block long — beautiful and perfect. As for the house, everything is wrong with it, and though I should know better, I plan to live here and make it work.

As cities go, Toronto has been fairly lucky architecturally, inheriting districts renowned for their charm and distinctiveness. All over the city there are blocks of quaint houses that, though not individually stunning, have evolved in response to planning and environmental issues, and thus become part of a typical Toronto streetscape. The forces that shaped these buildings are not dissimilar to many of those currently pressing on society. And that makes these houses appealing once again.

Toronto houses were built according to architectural types — Gothic cottage, Georgian, bay-and-gable. These functional, pleasing forms suited the requirements of their day. Depending on the era, location and social stratum, certain houses were constructed to serve particular needs. Rows of urban brick town-houses (now called Georgian) defined the city in the early- to mid-19th century. Small Gothic workers' cottages were built in clusters near factory sites so labourers could get to work on foot. Later on, bay-and-gable row houses served the working and middle classes, and, similarly, were clustered for ease of travel by foot. Second Empire cottages drew on the pretensions of Parisian architecture, while, practically, they provided attic space for large, working families.

We look back at these types as charming, and are shocked at their mistreatment by more recent generations, who stripped the gables of carved woodwork and clad all surfaces in white aluminum.

Long before these humble structures were the subjects of price wars, then gutted and pretentiously made over, they did the job to which they had been assigned, allowing groups of people to comfortably co-exist in a harsh climate with minimum effort under adverse circumstances.

By current standards, these houses were not large. In the era of the \$1-million tear-down, contemplating raising a family of eight in a house of 1,300 square feet (and no washroom) is shocking. However, moving back to a manageable downtown neighbourhood has become a must for many of us. And current real estate values often mean people are camped out in a handyman's special that has seen decades of bad decisions layered on to a foundation of questionable construction methods.

But it can all be brought back to its original state. While it's easy to look at a house's exterior and decide that something is not right — it's not quite that simple to fix it. If you want to get to that point with your own little disaster, you need to understand the house intimately, and be able to read what is, or was, going on in its design, to discern the underlying principals that organize the façade and the interior.

Study the house. Live in it for a while. What do you like about it? What makes you feel good? In my house, it's the large, spherical caps on the newel posts that I can cup my hand around at the top and bottom of the narrow stair; they're at the precise position I want them to be to guide me into a 180-degree turn. They're perfect in size, texture and position. The wood windows that open from top or bottom with their counterweighted pulley systems function today as the refined air-conditioning mechanisms they were before the era of Freon. And from the front porch I can watch the world go down my street. Think about what points you like, and keep them — even if your contractor tells you not to.

Then think about what you don't like. Look for clues as to how the house



COURTESY OF SCOTT WEIR

has been changed. Does the vinyl siding covering your mansard roof leave you a trifle cold? Does the house appear to have underlying symmetries or proportions that don't fit the picture window cut across the ground-floor wall? Some things are obvious; others might become apparent only after you consider the context.

Also, look at the neighbourhood. Many Toronto neighbourhoods are made up of similar houses that were constructed within a particular time period. Are there other houses around that are similar to yours, with subtle differences that make them look better? Be careful of falling into granny's gingerbread trap or mounting decorative but imported gadgets or decor ideas. Look for elements that seem right in the structure, that seem at home in the façade. Then look for those that do not.

Hit the library. Books such as *Toronto, No Mean City* by Eric Arthur and *Toronto Architecture* by Patricia McHugh, are the backbone of understanding how the city developed and what architectural ideas were current during the time your house was constructed. Goad's fire insurance

maps at the Toronto Reference Library will show your wee house coloured in pink or yellow, depending on the construction materials. Check out the city directories. There you'll learn when the building appeared and who the early inhabitants of your house were.

Look at the city and Ontario archives' photography collections, portions of which can be searched and viewed online. Among the building records at City Hall, you can find previous building permits on your house, including, if you're lucky, architectural drawings.

Our generation is not without its own disasters-in-the-making. All those projects you're doing to get your house ready for sale? They may be future fix-it projects for new owners. Laminate flooring, pop-out-for-easy-cleaning mullions and painted brick are all the vinyl siding of our generation, elements for which future generations will despise us.

Granted, these old houses were less than perfect even when new. Most older houses were not designed by architects and many were not even well-built.

Much of what is now prized in beautiful city-centre neighbourhoods was initially erected by developers as speculative tract housing, using cheap mass-produced materials, questionable construction methods and with a revolving door of inhabitants.

The fact that these houses have survived 125 years has less to do with the quality of construction than the sheer will of the owners to make them last. If you make the right decisions, the fine qualities can resurface. This series will cover the major house types built in Toronto over the years, and identify the correct features for each type.

The jury is still out as to the wisdom of bartering my social life and financial future to be shackled to a wreck of a building with only faint glimmers of potential. But I love my house and I want it to be its best.

Next instalment: The Georgian myth. Scott Weir is an associate at Toronto architectural conservationists ERA Architects Inc.

National Post