

RENOVATION



A Cabbagetown classic, lovingly updated



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THE PERFECT HOUSE**

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The rescue of Cabbagetown from gradual ruin or devastating "urban renewal" has been one of Toronto real estate's best success stories, at least from an architectural point of view.

Fifty years ago, this east-side district of Victorian Gothic cottages and larger homes was a slum, a dangerous warren of dilapidated flophouses. It was ripe for levelling and replacement by the soulless, monofunctional social housing that was fashionable in the middle of the past century.

This fate was avoided, however, when, about 1970, "white painters" began buying up the houses and restoring their grace and beauty. The losers, of course, were the former residents, most poor and many

old, who had few places to go after they were turned out of their rooming houses. But thus did Cabbagetown become what it is today: a large and remarkable preserve of fine 19th-century workers' housing, with long, genteel streetscapes of Gothic façades and an atmosphere of retiring, old-fashioned elegance.

The original interior reconstructions of Cabbagetown properties were occasionally well done, but many were clumsy and amateur. That's the reason some new home owners in the area are stripping out the evidence of earlier overhauls and redoing their old houses from the walls in.

One such transformation worth noting has been carried through recently in an 1885 dwelling around the corner from Cabbagetown's pleasant Riverdale Park. Designed by Toronto architect Heather Dubbeldam, this modern, \$320,000 renovation has opened up the tall, narrow house to light and provided it, top to bottom, with clear sightlines and a gracious, casual air.

Among the few existing fea-

tures of the house Ms. Dubbeldam did not touch was the front façade: a red brick affair that draws the eye upward to its witch's hat peak – a vital ingredient in Cabbagetown's historic streetscape. Also saved were a few antique oddments in the living room, such as the plaster crown moulding, the fireplace mantle and the Victorian wood balusters and emphatic newel on the stair.

Apart from these traces of the past, everything from prow to stern is new. The floors have been levelled to counteract the sagging that afflicts many old Toronto houses. Ceiling heights were raised. The opaque façade at the rear, opposite a tiny garden and laneway – why Toronto's Victorian builders were willing to let light in at the front, but determined to give each of their homes a solid, blank rear wall is beyond me – has been replaced by a soaring two-storey expanse of glass that looks like curtain wall, but is actually off-the-shelf, aluminum-framed glazing. This south-facing feature allows the interior, which would be gloomy otherwise, to

be flooded with sunshine.

The owners like to entertain frequently, so Ms. Dubbeldam created a compact and economical but ample kitchen on the first level. IKEA cabinets for storage, a JennAir fridge and cook top, white marble countertops and a marble island for informal dining are efficiently, conveniently arranged. Off the kitchen through glass doors, there is a small deck for the barbecue and, after a small step-down, the little back garden, well provided with comfortable furniture, which serves as an outdoor living room in summer.

Nowhere in the scheme is Ms. Dubbeldam's command of design more evident, however, than in her layout of the top floor. This long zone, probably a small, dark garret in the beginning, is now the principal bedroom. The bed stands at the north end. Just south of it is a fire-pit, open on three sides, giving a centre of warmth and light to the ensemble. South of that is the bathroom, with a large, luxurious white sunken tub and wooden cabinetry. A heated stone wall parallel to

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the room's long axis carries the eye to the 160-square-foot deck, Ms. Dubbeldam's only substantial addition to the area of the house.

This continuous north-south flow of space, light and air is a small masterpiece of effective planning in tight circumstances, and of combining chic appointments with comfortable modern living.

But not all the budget for this thoroughgoing renovation was spent on beauty. In a bid to make the house more sustainable, the architect upgraded systems and appliances to high-efficiency models and replaced old windows with better insulated ones. The tall glass panels at the rear admit much natural warmth in the winter, while an operable skylight allows hot air to be vented in summer, thereby saving on air conditioning.

Ms. Dubbeldam has done a good job of making this house modern, attractive and liveable. The elderly Victorians of Cabbagetown deserve such devoted attention. They are, after all, part of the architectural heritage of all Torontonians.