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Arts and Crafts in the Beach

Renovating in historic neighbourhood involves the painstaking art of matching style and period

Maintaining the architectural distinction of the Arts and Crafts cottage overlooking Lake Ontario, while creating more space for the homeowners — and keeping the neighbours happy — was the enormous task facing architect Sharon McKenzie.

She also had to take on city hall, which she decided would be her first challenge.

McKenzie arranged a meeting with a city planner to find out what would be allowed without involving the committee of adjustment. "I asked what I could build 'as of right,' i.e., what complies with the bylaws."

But with Lake Ontario as the "front yard," it was challenging. "Bylaws are meant for a standard situation, and this wasn't standard. We had a few discussions with the city about what the front yard could be."

In the end, they blocked out how much could be built and where, then McKenzie hit the drawing board.

"Physically drawing out the details always gives me a concrete sense of the house. I then play around with designs — it's like working out a puzzle."

Her major design challenge was the roofline. "It looks so simple when you first see it," she says. "But all kinds of things are happening in a roof, especially with the peaked dormers and gables of Arts and Crafts and late Victorian homes. These houses appear to hang together well, but they're idiosyncratic; rooflines you'd expect to line up, don't. They were built intentionally like that, it's part of what makes them charming."

Arts and Crafts was a late 19th-century movement to revive handicrafts as a reaction to the alienating aspects of the industrial machine age. Architecturally, the style was popular in the early 1900s, and with the housing boom of the 1920s, it was common to see them in Toronto's Beach area.

Known as Craftsman bungalows, even though they usually have a second floor, you can spot them easily — a low-pitched roof, wide eaves with exposed roof rafters, gabled dormers, porches with square columns and built-in-cabinets, shelves and seating.

The site constraints and challenges set the design, McKenzie says, like the series of triangles created by gable ends and the sun porch columns which needed replication elsewhere.

Contractor George DiGirolamo of G. Colucci & Sons Ltd., experienced the "charm" first hand. "Adding on to old houses," he sighs, "matching the new to the old is always a challenge. Those rooflines were very hard to tie in especially on the front porch."

McKenzie describes the interior and exterior as a relationship. "Everything outside reflects the space inside, the window location, the big sloping roof, the headroom you get by dormers."

Matching up the exterior rooflines meant the new addition — and its garage — had to be somewhat lower than

the kitchen but not a full storey below. It wreaked havoc in floor levels, which was especially challenging as the home's staircase was located at the rear as well.

To ameliorate the floor level changes, McKenzie reconfigured the access staircase and ran an entry hall between the existing house and the addition. Even with the basic structure mapped out, adjustments continued.

Interior designer David Powell also found the project challenging. "Not just spindles, newel posts, and general trim had to match, but there were subtle, less visible changes, like changing the way the staircase enters into the kitchen area, which in turn involved some redoing of the kitchen — doorways blocked in and others opened up."

The addition "implicated an enormous change in the rest of the house," Powell says. "I felt strongly about integration of woodwork, so it wouldn't feel like a room over a garage. Thanks to the addition, the house now has a decent entrance rather than entering off the kitchen, which wasn't ideal. Suddenly it became a better, more functional house."

The aim of all involved — including landscape designer John Thompson — was to create a consistent and seamless transition. Special order siding, custom fibreglass columns on the exterior, and the 13 different trim colours, match exactly.

While the exterior is about replication, the inside is more about laying a modern skin over the older one. Hand-milled doorframes and baseboards leading into the large family room addition may echo those in the main part of the house, but the cabinetry within is strictly modern.

The built-ins, including a queen-size Murphy bed, really packs in the storage, allowing the room to incorporate many purposes — entertainment, family room and guest suite.

Extra high ceilings provide a loft-like expansive feel, while a glazed glass feature high on the interior walls allows in light from the hallway's skylights.

The decor — contemporary sectional sofa in textured neutral — and the buttery warm palette also increases this

sense of space. Colour is introduced in a lounge chair upholstered in a strong stripe, four leather cubes, and a multi-coloured custom carpet.

The overall effect is of space, comfort and leisure. The homeowners are thrilled and the neighbours are happy too.

McKenzie's primary aim was to avoid altercations with neighbours, so she was mindful of their concerns.

"There's a bigger picture," she says. "The Beach has so many old Arts and Crafts homes. Because property values are so high, there's a danger that these smaller homes will be torn down and replaced by bigger things."

Neighbour Bill Guest didn't have "severe" objections, but knows some neighbours did. Though the current addition is on a larger scale than the first plan, he says he's satisfied. "The architect did a good job and the building is in keeping with the neighbourhood."

McKenzie, too, is pleased.

"The house is now being touted as an example in the neighbourhood of how you can add something pretty substantial to a house in a way that's compatible with both existing house and the scale of the neighbourhood."

