

## TWO SOLITUDES

# Tale of two Beach Houses

House takes its cue from movie home in “Something's Gotta Give”

ALEX NEWMAN - Mar 31, 2007 04:30 AM

When you have a dog, you take a lot of walks. And that's how I came to observe, over a few months, the razing of a large, brick house on the lake, and the construction of a new one.

Its proportions were on the scale of a small French chateau and I imagined balustrades, Palladian windows – possibly even a buttress or two.

As time wore on, and the sloping roofs, shingle siding, transom windows and long deep porch took shape, it seemed this might be a house that actually fit with the landscape.

As architect Sharon McKenzie says, the vision from the very beginning had "always been about the lake."

The homeowners had a dream house in mind – the rambling seaside home of the Diane Keaton character in the movie *Something's Gotta Give*. And they'd seen examples of McKenzie's work nearby – notably an arts and crafts-style home two doors away. So working with movie stills, supplemented by the ideas of Robert Stern. Yale University's dean of architecture, McKenzie drew up plans.

But transplanting the Hamptons to the Lake Ontario shoreline wasn't as easy as first imagined. There had been initial talk of renovating the existing house, a former tuberculosis sanatorium whose original charm had been erased by numerous renos.

Having sat on a number of heritage committees and having restored her own arts and crafts home, the last thing McKenzie wanted to see was a "beautiful, or architecturally significant house torn down," she said. "But this had none of the charm of the buildings to the east of it, and not all history is worth keeping."

Because the house was a presence on the Beach, the Toronto historical board weighed in.

"Never in my life did I think I'd be doing a turret," McKenzie recalls. "The one thing they wanted to see was a turret, because the existing building had one. So I agreed to consider it, and started drawing turrets."

The turret, as it turns out, not only affords the best views from within but also helped the design – the sweeping rooflines the homeowners so wanted were possible only with a rambling house on an equally rambling lot. The compromise position was to allow for sweep on one side, anchored on the other with the turret.

Construction was not thoroughly straightforward, either; McKenzie says they were still fine-tuning the design after the walls were up.

And only the best materials were used, from the wood windows (when aluminum clad would do) to cedar shingles hand-dipped by contractor **George DiGirolamo of G. COLUCCI & SONS LTD.**, every evening in his basement. Stain was necessary because elements in Toronto would turn the shingles black and blotchy, whereas East Coast salt air weathers them to a beautiful silver.

But does a Hamptons house belong in Toronto – home of solid brick Victorians, Craftsman bungalows and 1960s infill?

Don Loucks, the architect commissioned by the city to conduct the 2003 Beach heritage district study, thinks so.

"It has an authentic character; it's not pastiche or poorly researched, but really well thought out," he says with a nod. "I love the style, the transom lights, the historic character, and yet it's modern on that one ridge," he adds, pointing to a part of the sloping roof.

"It's sited perfectly for the topography and it keeps the relationship between all the buildings on the lakeshore."

One thing that distinguishes a house that "belongs" is whether it encompasses the values a community holds dear, he says. "Because houses aren't just about who lives in them – they're part of the public realm – they have an inherent character and evoke a response."

Those values a building needs to express are fundamental characteristics of our culture, such as openness, health, safety.

That doesn't mean all new homes in the Beach should look like this one.

In fact, Loucks points out another new home in the area that couldn't be more different. The result of Chris and Caroline Pappagados's three-year dream – and produced from blueprints by architect Paul Syme of Third Uncle. It's a minimalist structure nestled amidst the tall trees and steep grades of Silver Birch Ave.

Some neighbours weren't happy with the couple's vision – some still aren't – but Caroline defends their choices: "We wanted to create a place of calm, a modern interpretation of the Beach, a place to decompress, but in a minimalist sense, not a cottage sense."

When the original bungalow came on the market in 2000, it had everything the couple was looking for: a wide, deep lot and an existing bungalow that could be added onto.

Others – developers especially – were eyeing the property, too. What saved them from a bidding war, Caroline recalls, was the tree in the front yard. Smack dab in the centre of the lot, and large enough for a reprieve from the chainsaw, the tree prevented severing the lot in two.

The site also reined in the vision.

Syme remembers that the Pappagadoses "were looking at the modern minimalists, hugely reductive both structurally and spatially, with highly refined materials. But spatially, the bungalow was too complicated to allow it. We couldn't produce a house of that stark purity when building on that existing bungalow."

Keeping part of the original bungalow – some of its walls still lie within the new structure, and the footprint is the same except for porches and roof overhangs – was a challenge. But Syme was undaunted: "The more constraints there are, the more the imagination is challenged, and you can come up with unique solutions."

By incorporating the garage at the rear of the house and building up a storey, the new house has a sizable footprint. With the south wall being about 20 feet from the lot line – giving enough space to satisfy city bylaws regarding neighbours' privacy – they could incorporate a massive bank of windows where an enclosed porch once was.

The lot, sloping steeply from north to south, made it possible for a south-facing basement walkout, and raised the first floor high enough off the ground for good views. But the bedrooms one floor up have spectacular views across the treetops to the lake.

For all its large modern presence, the home fits well in this settled enclave of mixed, mostly older houses. Syme says that the original idea may not have fit quite so well. "That abstract minimalism – plus the foreign materials common to the style – would have contrasted more with the context of the neighbourhood."

While the stucco, dark wood, Douglas fir windows and stained cedar sides of the house are "not all that different than some of the bigger, taller houses on the street," with three storeys and a flat roof, it's also not exactly like the other houses, either. Why it fits has to do partly with the blend of materials – wood, stucco, stone – that echo the neighbourhood.

As Caroline notes, "it's important to recognize the neighbours – they have wood windows, we have wood windows, they have stone, we'll have stone."

And finally, the idiosyncratic nature of Beach architecture allows for more latitude in design. As Syme points out, "the context is not homogenous. On some of the sites, you have to build weird, and in imaginative ways, because of the topography with hills and ravines. But there are still qualities that everyone recognizes as distinctly Beach qualities, and this house respects those."

This non-homogeneity makes it both easier and more difficult to determine what constitutes appropriate building. The city's heritage study, Loucks says, was "never about preserving or fossilizing, but about guiding change. As we put new buildings in place, there has to be some relationship, whether intellectual, materiality, or simple volumes and height, to the context of other buildings.

There has to be a proper fusion of new and old, where new doesn't denigrate or subordinate the old, and (there has to be) a balance between the two, because the future and the past are equally strong."