

Heritage Homes & Landscapes

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Restoring The Peers Residence

In this article, Trevor Wiebe documents his restoration project at The Peers Residence, a striking heritage home at 1450 Jones Avenue, North Vancouver.

Built in 1910 for lumberman and contractor Ross Rufus Peers (1879-1966) and his wife Elizabeth (1880-1966), since December of 2004 the Peers Residence has been home to Trevor Wiebe, Renee Umezuki and their daughter Angelina Umezuki.

This house underwent an extensive restoration and renovation from approximately September 2007 to July 2008, with further work done to the kitchen just recently. Why would anyone be so devoid of good sense as to undertake the restoration and renovation of a dilapidated heritage house? Love, I suppose — perhaps with a bit of a twisted love of pain thrown in for fun.

Here's the background: "Buy a house! Get a yard!" was the refrain, heard over and over again from some of the more "interventionist," but well-meaning of course, family members and friends after we became parents for the first time. We resisted at first, thinking that our condo in the West End of Vancouver was plenty of residence for a small family. But the germ of the idea stayed, until one day a

well-meaning co-worker pointed out a house she "just LOVED" in North Vancouver. So off my wife and I went to check it out — and to check out at least 20 other homes in North Vancouver -- before deciding that, yes, we too "just LOVED" the house, even in its then somewhat sad state.

There seems to be a growing yearning these days to "go back to a simpler time and lifestyle" and partly for that reason the history and "feel" of a heritage house was one of the things to which we were attracted. What is it about the house's aesthetic and design that contributed to this "feel"? Well, according to my research, the Peers Residence is a two-storey, wood-frame, Edwardian-era adaptation of the "Foursquare" style, a post-Victorian style that was a counter-reaction to more ornate styles that preceded it. Just what we were looking for.

The style is also sometimes called "Prairie Box," in recognition of the elements derived from the "Prairie" style made famous by Frank Lloyd Wright very early in his career. Incorporating Prairie (open plans, spacious rooms, natural mate-



rials) with elements from the American Arts and Crafts Movement (emphasis on handcraftsmanship, simplicity, function), the overall result is a fairly austere style that is deliberately plain and simple, yet unabashedly stout and sturdy, with only a modest amount of handcrafted ornamentation where deemed necessary.

One fun factoid I came across is that a lot of these boxy square houses dot the landscape along the railways stretching across the Canadian West — because companies like Eatons sold all of the pieces that went into to making these homes, which were delivered in a quasi-prefab fashion on railway cars.

Hallmarks of the Foursquare style in the Peers Residence include its basic square design, a wrap-around verandah, lathe-turned columns, wide staircases, and a bell-cast hipped roof. The original two-storey projecting bay on the north elevation is unusual in houses of this type.

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Peers Residence ...



1450 Jones, south side:
Before



... and after



The renovated
basement

Other distinctive heritage features of the house include: closed eaves with wooden tongue-and-groove soffits; Edwardian-era wood-frame construction with features such as narrow-lapped wooden siding, door and window trim, cornice details and frieze; covered balustrades on the verandah; glazed front door with transom; secondary door to the verandah, from the north bay side; and fenestration, such as double-hung wooden sash windows, and six-paned fixed sash window on the north side elevation.

All this probably sounds well and good but the state of the house was anything but good when we moved in during the winter of 2004/05.

Some of the problems were:

- antiquated heating system that took up a huge amount of space in the basement;
- basement with a maximum six-foot height -- even lower in places where ducts were present (previous owners had actually set up this basement as a secondary suite, with a rarely-used exterior door carved out on one side of the house);
- aging water heater;
- unusable basement bathroom;
- basement water leaks, necessitating three sump pumps;
- porch floor in terrible shape, with large hole at one end;
- antiquated electrical system;
- family room layout that had the wood-burning fireplace facing an exterior door;
- roof in dire need of replacement/repair;

- lack of light in the upper floor;
- a crumbling stucco and paint job on the exterior; and
- a number of other small, related issues too numerous to recall.

The solution we decided on for the problematic basement was to raise the house, and basically gut and rebuild it, making sure to use modern, more efficient, and space-saving technology wherever possible. While we were at it, we decided that the area underneath the west deck (originally just dirt) should be excavated to provide more square footage.

By the time the renovation was completed, more than 1,500 square feet of space had been added to the house without changing the footprint at all. This was a key factor in keeping City Hall staff happy, and they were extremely fair, helpful and encouraging.

Lessons Learned

If there is one thing that we learned during this process is that living in the house for a year or two before deciding on what should be changed is a great idea, if you can wait that long. The idea is to get to know the house intimately — very much like a person — so that you learn through experience just what works with the house, and what doesn't.

Perhaps the second most important lesson was patience. Just about anybody should expect everything to take longer and cost more

than you originally expect. Renovations, particularly those with a heavy restoration component, as you would find in the case of a heritage house, are expensive and somewhat stressful to undertake, and there's just no getting around that. In our case, our stress was lessened greatly by the good work of our renovation company, RJR Construction Management. No, we don't get any referral fees (of course), but any company that does such a good job — the house ended up winning a Georgie Award and a City of North Vancouver Heritage Commission award — deserves a mention or two.

Having a lot with some yard space was as important as having a heritage building. This was one area where there was a snafu. After about two months of planning and meetings, the original landscape designer came back with a plan that would have made the lot look like a parking lot. So, to put it politely, we didn't proceed with that plan.

It was then that we got to know Heather Schamehorn and her company Perennial Pleasures. Coming from a "sustainable" perspective, Heather was able to help us "go back in time" so that now we have a very rustic yard and garden with plenty of room to grow edible things, which is exactly what we wanted. I have taken to gardening with a vengeance and it's been a great pastime.

As for the fence, we are very happy with it but the com-

pany that built it never actually finished some of the minor parts of the job, which of course means that I have no interest in mentioning the company name, nor another company that did the staining. All I will say in that regard is: be suspicious of ultra-

competitive bids.

Despite what felt like an ordeal at times, the Peers Residence has truly become an integral part of our lifestyle.

We can only hope that it lives on for another hundred years

for future generations to enjoy!

Trevor Wiebe

Sources on history and architecture: City of North Vancouver Planning Department, Wikipedia

Don't Demolish Heritage Homes

The following article is based on a submission to the City of North Vancouver Council concerning the demolition of a heritage building in Ottawa Gardens, a designated Heritage Conservation Area. Council initially voted 5-2 to delay the demolition for 60 days, but then flipped a few weeks later to support demolition by 4-2.

Any decision to grant temporary protection to a property is a complex matter that balances respect for an owner's rights with the interests of the broader community. Councils may protect a property for 60 days to give time for staff and the property owner to work out a solution. If this does not work, councils have the option of involuntary designation — enforced legal protection — but may be obliged to pay compensation if this affects the property value.

Arguments against protection and in support demolition often focus on four areas:

- Private property rights versus community interests. Tensions between these arise periodically. But anyone buying a heritage property listed on a municipal heritage inventory — especially one located in a Heritage Conservation

Area — surely has ample notice that the building is valued by the community and cannot simply be demolished for convenience's sake. In buying such a property, an owner assumes a responsibility, effectively as the custodian of a piece of a community's history. Put simply, please don't buy a heritage home if you want to rebuild.

- Energy efficiency. This is a gray area. Given the large amounts of energy used in construction and materials when demolishing and rebuilding a house, it can take decades for a new building to start saving energy in net terms. Substantial reductions to greenhouse gas emissions can be made at existing buildings through insulation, windows and mechanical upgrades.

- Functionality and convenience. For sure, demolition and reconstruction would result in a more functional home, but this would apply to every heritage home on the North Shore. Many heritage homeowners are put in a similar position of spending large sums on renovation work, sometimes matching the cost of building anew. If this criterion were applied, where would it stop? The

local construction industry is often biased toward replacing old with new, and it can be important to work with an architect or contractor committed to heritage buildings. Such people are a minority, but they do exist, and are often represented on municipal heritage advisory committees. The North Shore Heritage Preservation Society also provides support to heritage homeowners.

- The status of a building. Some argue that a property ranked in a heritage inventory's lower tier is not worth a determined effort for preservation. But current practice in assessing significance has moved beyond categorization based on architectural criteria, to broader assessments that incorporate other values important to the community. Value may lie in the neighbourhood as a whole, especially if part of a cluster of heritage homes; a property's historical significance, such as its status as the former home of renowned artist, politician or other dignitary; or its significance as an example of a typical period home, whether a bungalow in the Craftsman style or a shipyard worker's home. Here, it is a property's very modesty that makes it worth saving.

**“Please don't
buy a heritage
home if you
want to
rebuild”**



North Shore Heritage board members visit Hollyburn Ski Lodge

**NEWSLETTER
OF THE
NORTH SHORE
HERITAGE
PRESERVATION
SOCIETY**

North Shore Heritage
Preservation Society
2695 Nelson Avenue
West Vancouver
V7V 2R8

Phone:
604-926-6096

Email:
info@northshoreheritage.org

Web:
www.northshoreheritage.org

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NORTH SHORE HERITAGE PRESERVATION SOCIETY

The North Shore Heritage Preservation Society was created in 2005 with a broad aim of promoting the restoration and preservation of heritage and distinctive buildings in North and West Vancouver, by raising awareness in the community through events and publications.

The society also provides resources for the preservation of such buildings, and advocates for the protection of buildings under threat.

It believes these buildings enhance the spirit and character of the community, embody a sense of history, preserve qualities of craftsmanship and provide aesthetic pleasure.

Membership is open to anyone interested in preserving historic and distinctive buildings in the area. The North Shore Heritage Preservation Society is registered as a not-for-profit society in British Columbia (# S-49292) and as a charity (# 83070 2478 RR0001).

Annual membership fees are: Individual \$20, Family \$30, Senior/Student \$15, Corporate \$100, Life \$200. To join, please send a cheque to the society's address, or visit www.northshoreheritage.org/membership for a membership form.

Photo Collection

An extensive photo collection of heritage buildings has been compiled by enthusiast Bob Hare on the Flickr website, including a large number from the North Shore.

Bob answered questions on his collection.

1. How long have you been interested in heritage buildings?

My interest started in 2006.

2. How long has it taken you to compile this collection?

Fall 2006 to present.

3. Why are you interested in heritage buildings?

It's a combination of my work in environmental investigations, where I research property history and have done that for 11 years, and a fascination with old downtown

churches. It all started with Christ Church Cathedral in downtown Vancouver. I found it very interesting seeing an old building like that dwarfed by high-rises in all directions and yet very little has changed on the church property.

4. Why did you decide to compile this collection?

When researching histories for the buildings, I found myself spending hours in libraries and numerous websites looking for the right information. Being an organized person, I thought it would be good to have all this information at one location, easy for people to find.

5. What are your next plans?

I still have hundreds of buildings placemarked on Google Earth to photograph. There

are still several buildings in all municipalities in Greater Vancouver and all across BC. When I travel, I research to find what heritage buildings are in that area before I head off.

6. What sources do you use for the photos and text?

The photos are 100% mine. The text is from a multitude of sources — usually indicated at the bottom of the text. Some of my sources include: Canada's Historic Places Website; municipal websites; Vancouver heritage plaques; and my own archival research.

Website: www.flickr.com/photos/bobkh/sets.