

Globe Real Estate

ARCHITECTURE



Above, two interior views, and, below, the exterior of Lakewood Residence, a Vancouver Special transformed by Heather Robb, pictured with partner Bill Pechet. Right, untouched Specials on a Kitsilano street.

Tried, tested and true

A house whose style was once labelled tacky is now on many buyers' must-have lists

BY KERRY GOLD

The Vancouver Special is proof that if you stick around long enough, somebody is bound to appreciate you.

After four decades of ridicule, the two-level boxy stucco-clad houses are officially getting their due. The Vancouver Heritage Foundation has recognized the Special as the most popular style of house design in the city's history.

It is believed there are tens of thousands of them. Although the official tally is not yet in, foundation spokeswoman Elana Zysblat believes the Vancouver Special outnumbers any Victorian, Craftsman, or 1950s-era bungalow or rancher.

Most important, unlike the other house styles, with their British and California influences, the Special is uniquely the city's.

To recognize its status, the foundation recently hosted a public discussion of the Special that pulled more than 100 fans through its doors. It was followed a few days later by a tour of Lakewood Residence, a Special that is considered the first to be extensively renovated by an architect.

Heritage Vancouver also plans to launch the first-ever Vancouver Special tour this fall. Ms. Zysblat already has a list of house participants.

Vancouverites might not have thought they'd live to see the day, but it has happened: The Special has become cool.

"It's inevitable," says Ms. Zysblat, the programming coordinator for the heritage foundation. "There is a group of people out there looking specifically for Vancouver Specials. People have started catching on to how workable they are – so they're not the cheapest house on the block any more."

The affordable houses were built between 1965 and 1985, an inexpensive, easy-to-build response to the needs of new immigrant families. With the

exception of a few neighbourhoods, the houses were built in almost every part of the city. They were designed to look like mini-Mediterranean mansions, with faux brick and stone cladding, wrought-iron balcony railings, and little lions or pineapple statues mounted on each side of the entrance gate.

"It's a vernacular building," says Ms. Zysblat. "It was not designed to be anyone's dream home. And no other buildings are so pure to our direct needs."

Many Specials have already been torn down, but part of the drive to protect them is rooted in the environmental movement. With so many of the houses still standing, Ms. Zysblat says it would be difficult to imagine the environmental impact of tossing them all in the landfill.

"The city has to take responsibility for this vast stock of buildings that we have, and find ways to encourage people to preserve them, and keep the general envelope."

Ms. Zysblat says the houses are not such a pox on the landscape, anyway. The design is unpretentious and straightforward in the way of modernist architecture, which makes it useful to a broad cross-section, she says.

"It's designed to be functional. It doesn't hide the materials it's made of. It's passed the test of time, because they were relevant at the beginning of the '60s, and they are still relevant today."

"I'm starting to appreciate how attractive they are and how easily they are personalized," Ms. Zysblat says. "You can paint the veranda, you can change the windows, you can do cosmetic, inexpensive things to the house."

"It fits in with the retro trend that we have now, and just by neutralizing the materials and taking away contrast and colour, it is very easily made current, and that's one of the attractive things about it.



NIC LEHOUX

Without hiring an architect or interior designer, people can make their own cosmetic updates."

Vancouver intern architect Stephanie Robb spotted the potential of her Special long before anybody else did.

Ms. Robb, who spoke at the Heritage Vancouver presentation, is considered a pioneer

within the circuit since she extensively renovated her home in 2001. It is now known as the Lakewood Residence, and Heritage Vancouver offered a tour of it recently.

Her house has expansive windows and sleeker, more contemporary lines than the traditional Special.

Ms. Robb specifically chose

her future home because it had sat on the market for months and was therefore good value. As well, she appreciated its simplicity.

"I thought, 'There is a good house that's easy to understand – it's solid and square and in good shape,'" she says.

They are practical because of their floor plan, which is nat-

[The Vancouver Special] was not designed to be anyone's dream home.
Elana Zysblat of the Vancouver Heritage Foundation

urally divided into upper and lower, self-enclosed living spaces. It is easy to convert the house into an informal duplex, or use one half for an office or in-law space.

"It's right on topic for the times that we're in," Ms. Robb says of their newfound status.

Nobody knows as much about the Vancouver Special as artist Keith Higgins, an arts administrator who is a serious proponent of the structures. Since 2001, he has maintained an unusual on-line taxonomy of the city's Specials that documents each house's characteristics. So far, he has photographed and documented 1,241 of them on his website, vancouverpecial.com.

"To a lot of people, they are a crime against humanity," he says. "A lot of very vocal people see them as the plague that will destroy your neighbourhood."

"But I think there is a certain amount of hipster interest in them," he notes. "One of the great things about them is ... if you have modernist furniture that you bought second hand or replicas or whatever, you can clear out all the walls and have the big open space where that stuff looks absolutely fabulous."

Aesthetics aside, he appreciates their cultural relevance, too. Unlike the Shaughnessy craftsman mansion, the Vancouver Special represents the working-class immigrant whose story is usually overlooked. "They contain a history of people who are normally not found in history books," Mr. Higgins says.

Special to The Globe and Mail

ON SITE » CONDOMINIUMS

A juxtaposition of old and new

Paris Annex

LOCATION: Gastown

DEVELOPER: Salient Group

PRICE: from the high \$300,000s

SIZE: 645 to 1,400 square feet

SALES CENTRE: by appointment

CONTACT: (604) 669-5536 or www.parisannex.com

BY THOMASINA BARNES

After last summer's one-day sellout at its Paris Block condominium – a renovated, century-old building in Vancouver's Gastown – Salient Group decided to expand the development with a modern addition.

While the unstable global economy may prevent the new development, called the Paris Annex, from selling as quickly as its precursor – seven units have been purchased since its release in October – Salient president Robert Fung says he is feeling confident.

The design of 16-unit Paris Annex will contrast with that of the Block building, but in general architectural terms, it also will complement it.

"The Paris Annex is envisioned as the natural and



complementary evolution of the Paris Block," Mr. Fung explains. "It is modern in form and materials, yet the essence of its rhythm, lines, and scale are all a progression of the Paris Block."

While Paris Block is a 100-year-old brick building, the Annex will be constructed of concrete and glass. But the developer hopes it will act as an extension of the Block.

"The Annex will enjoy the character and texture that the Paris Block masonry and materials bring, while the Paris Block will benefit from the energy and amenities that the Annex brings," Mr. Fung says.

"For Salient, it represents the coming together of the area's rich past, and its very bright future."

Paris Annex suites have nine- to 13-foot ceilings, floor-

to-ceiling windows, glass- and slate-tiled bathrooms, as well as private decks, balconies or rooftop patios with outdoor kitchens.

The project includes a shared rooftop deck with an outdoor fireplace and built-in barbecue. Two co-op cars are kept on site for residents to share.

The Paris projects are part of Salient Group's seven-building rehabilitation plan for Vancouver's historic district, which includes the \$20-million restoration of the Flack Block at Victory Square and the Woodward's project. But "there is no other project quite like the Paris Block and Annex in the city of Vancouver," Mr. Fung adds. "[They] are singularly representational of Vancouver architectural excellence at the turn of the 20th century, and of the 21st," he says.

"It is a physical metaphor for the evolution of our city, of our urban passion, and of the need for us to honour our past while ambitiously looking forward."

Mr. Fung thinks the city's "cooling" market will have little effect on the sales of his homes. "Our selling prices are less than 50 per cent of the cost for similar quality homes in Downtown South and Coal Harbour, so we feel that our buyers achieve exceptional value as well as very unique, individual homes," the developer says.

Special to The Globe and Mail

DONE DEAL » KITSILANO



3355 AND 3357 WEST 2ND AVE.

ASKING PRICE: \$1,450,000

SELLING PRICE: \$1,200,000

TAXES: \$6,410 (2007)

DAYS ON MARKET: 220

LISTING AGENT: Marty Pospischil, Dexter Realty

This 3,074-square-foot dwelling is really two houses: a legal duplex property with two separate units.

The front half has 1,509 square feet of living space, while the back half measures 1,565 square feet. Each unit has two storeys, two bedrooms, two bathrooms and its own private outdoor space.

The property has not been strata titled, however, and the previous owners had to sell the home as a whole rather than each unit separately.

"The home was a difficult sell as there are a limited number of buyers willing to pur-

chase as a group in order to take full advantage of this property's potential," agent Marty Pospischil says.

But after eight months and some "aggressive" marketing, Mr. Pospischil found the right match – two couples who agreed to go in on the venture together.

"They can go through the work of upgrading the property ... and apply to strata title the property," he explains. Doing this would, "increase its value and allow for two independent legal titles, one for each couple."

Both units have wood-burning fireplaces, vaulted ceilings and ensuite laundry spaces. The rooms have been freshly painted and carpeted.

The back unit includes a recently renovated kitchen, and provides mountain, water and city views from a rooftop patio.

DONE DEALS
BY THOMASINA BARNES