

Old house, new tricks

Stratified vintage homes give buyers a stylish alternative to the cookie-cutter condo

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Dave Coster is outnumbered. While Coster, owner of Coster Construction and 25-year veteran of the renovation and building business, works at transforming older homes into character conversions, the numbers show that he is in the minority. In 2005, the number of demolitions in the Capital region outpaced conversions 237 to 19. In Victoria, the region's core and heartland of vintage character homes, and where most permits for conversions are issued, the numbers are just as gloomy, with 138 demolition permits issued and 19 conversions.

Coster, 41, says that while city bylaws encourage conversion for pre-1931 homes, such projects are challenging.

"Due to the age, rehabilitation requires more labour and creative innovation compared to new construction," says Coster.

Derek, 40, and Sheila Smith, 39, agree. Their maiden project for their newly formed company, Pacific Island Constructors, has taken 30 months to complete, and it has been a nail-biting process for the couple.

Derek, an experienced builder and woodworking instructor at Camosun College, sized up the house on Chestnut Street and determined that while it was an ugly duckling, it had all the makings of a swan.

"The foundations looked solid," says Sheila. "But your (makeover) budget is a guess at best, because you never know what you're going to find underneath the walls."

"What we've seen is that there are well-built older homes, and then very poorly built older homes in Victoria," says Derek.

Coster lists off the community benefits of preserving character homes, even if their rehabilitation doesn't entail replicating the precise details of the house's original features.



CREDIT: Bruce Stotesbury, Times Colonist

Builder Dave Coster always thought the 12-suite flophouse in his area had potential to be a beautiful structure. He says his restoration of the house into four stylish suites has the neighbours rejoicing.



CREDIT: Bruce Stotesbury, Times Colonist

A restored period fireplace and vintage fir floors help to maintain the original charm, but the owner is free from the upkeep and maintenance that come with a century-old structure.

He argues that preserving vintage homes beautifies the city, upgrades older neighbourhoods, and provides prospective condo-buyers a pleasing, affordable option to the less stylistically personalized condominium option.

While buyers appreciate the low-maintenance requirements of a completely rebuilt home, heritage buffs worry that this will erode Victoria's historical home stock.

Mary Doody Jones, Hallmark Society member and local historian says, "These houses are completely stripped down, and replaced with new materials, so that there's nothing left of the heritage element."

While restoring an older home as a single-family unit can be cost-prohibitive -- Sheila Smith says, "You can be talking more than a million" -- converting them into multiple suites makes the venture profitable.

Both Coster and the Smiths point out that stratifying a unit brings with it some advantages.

Rainscreen technology is required, and any potential design problems in the original building are obliterated as the structure must be gutted to bring the house up to code.

That includes insulation depths, electrical, plumbing, fire and sound separation, thermal windows and new foundations.

"There won't be anything ugly hiding beneath the walls," says Sheila.

"People love character homes, but they're not so crazy about character kitchens," says Sheila Smith, nailing the essence of character conversion. While their conversion on Chestnut Street, a 110-year-old home, is replete with period style, the kitchens are decidedly modern.

"It's about creating that character feel, while filling out that modern wish-list," says Sheila.

New and old can meet: New thermal windows come in an old-fashioned single-sash style, state-of-the-art wiring for home theatre, computer, network and satellite TV are imbedded beneath walls trimmed with old-world mouldings and cornices. An original carved mantelpiece and sills was restored and fitted with a new gas fireplace.

"We were fortunate to be restoring this house in an escalating market," says Derek, "so we didn't have to scrimp." Fir mantels, solid handscraped oak floors and solid core doors echo the quality craftsmanship of older homes.

The pitted russett-brick walkways bordering the home are laid with bricks salvaged from the house's original chimneys which had to be replaced.

While the exterior is sided in cement boards, it echoes the same style the couple discovered when they chipped away the house's circa-1950s glass-stucco coat.



CREDIT: Bruce Stotesbury, Times Colonist

The Camosun Street house looks like a single-family dwelling from the street, but separate entrances on the side lead to restored suites.



CREDIT: Bruce Stotesbury, Times Colonist

The building materials might be new but the renovator maintained some of the original features by replicating vintage mouldings and trims.

Coster approached his latest project with the same idea in mind. He had eyed the house on Camosun Street for years. Living nearby, he was familiar with the then-12-suite house's reputation.

"It was a flophouse," he says. "It was the heart of decay in the community."

He transformed it into four chic suites, creating a sense of pride that filtered throughout the neighbourhood and even motivated several renovation projects.

Fay Mayer, a veteran of 18 moves, knew she was home before she had even walked through the foyer of the 1,200-square-foot character conversion suite.

"In all those moves, I had never felt at home before, but this place had everything I was looking for."

The home has the appearance of a single-family dwelling from the street, but a side drive leads to a paved parking lot in the rear, and reveals mailboxes and numbers for the suites, all touches that preserve a neighbourly ambience.

Outside a pair of french doors, Mayer enjoys a private patio that is laid in red reclaimed brick and walled with stone blasted from the site.

Indoors and out, Coster replicated vintage mouldings and trims.

With several projects on the go, Coster was able to trade salvaged objects from one site to another. He installed a rescued clawfoot tub from another house in the main bathroom of Mayer's suite.

Chris Hancock, a writer, lives in a 1,000-square-foot suite above.

Like Mayer's suite, her living room is anchored with a restored period fireplace that pairs with the fir floors.

Hancock says the character conversion satisfies her appetite for living in a vintage home, but without the troubles of upkeep and maintenance that come with a century-old structure. "It's like living in a new character," says Hancock.

When asked what construction challenges the house posed, Coster smiles and says, "Challenges? Every single thing seemed to be a challenge, but it was worth it. Working with these old houses, to see the craftsmanship that was put into them, it's an absolute pleasure. People took a lot of pride in their work back then."

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