

A house dating from when Kingston was the capital of Canada gets an award-winning renovation



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The kitchen: salvaged wood ceiling beams and marble slab table-top from an old bank building.

Kingston classic

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The Frontenac Historic Foundation does not award its commendation certificates lightly. Some years it doesn't give out any. But when the foundation does present the owner of a newly renovated old building with a certificate, Kingstonsians know that another of this city's prized collection of 19th-century buildings has been beautifully saved.

Such is the case with half of a double stone house located on College Street. Built in 1841, it had scarcely been touched since the 1950s. The historic foundation described it as "representative of the many gracious houses built for prominent Kingston residents when Kingston was the capital of Canada." Indeed, its handsome outlines were still evident, but when the house went on the market in 2001, the real estate broker's careful description forewarned the purchaser: "This house deserves extensive renovation."

The new owner, a former international investment broker who wants to remain anonymous, brought Toronto

designer and builder Yuill McGregor to Kingston to undertake the project.

"The owner had warned me on the phone, 'It needs everything,'" Mr. McGregor recalls. "It was a grand home, but the owner was right."

A prominent feature at the front was its large two-storey wood veranda and sunroom that had deteriorated so badly neighbours were betting on when it would collapse. Inside, the proportions of the rooms were lovely, with high ceilings and windows that were long and set deep into the two-foot-thick limestone walls. Some floors were hardwood, laid in the 1950s; others were wide pine blanks dating back to 1841. The staircases, trim and plaster were all original. The potential here was exciting.

On the downside, there was only one bathroom, a cramped little cubicle upstairs. The kitchen was also small and old. The plumbing and wiring were ancient, and although the basement was listed as "full" and had lovely windows facing the southwest garden, the ceiling was low and the partially dirt floor was cold. There was much to be done.

Mr. McGregor and the owner



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faced two big challenges even before they started. They had to get the plans for the outside of the house through Kingston's local architectural conservation advisory committee (LACAC). And they had to get both outside and inside plans through the city's building inspection department.

It took two tries before LACAC approved their drawings for a new kitchen addition, a new side veranda and the exterior restoration details. The second time was made much easier by

hiring local architects Inglis and Downey, a firm well respected for its knowledgeable treatment of old buildings.

Their troubles with the building department continued as a running sore throughout the project. "We were dealing with a department that was completely inflexible to reasonable requests," Mr. McGregor says. Furthermore, the city's bylaws, which stipulate that plumbers and electricians be licensed in Kingston or jump



The rebuilt sunroom (top) with wood beam cathedral ceiling, and its deteriorating predecessor (left). The house (above) had been neglected since the 1950's.

through innumerable hoops as an alternative, meant Mr. McGregor couldn't use members of his own team, on whom he normally depends, because they had only Toronto licenses. Still, they persevered and the result, two years on, is beautiful.

They repointed the stone work and chimney, restored the original shutters, and replaced the veranda and sunroom following the original design. Each pane of glass from the sunroom — 60 panes in all — was shipped to Toronto to

be insulated. They took down the Douglas fir ceiling boards in the sunroom and added insulation before replacing them. Similarly, the floor boards were removed and insulation put underneath, and six heating ducts were added. Now, even on the coldest days, the sunroom is a cozy sanctuary.

In addition, the house was jacked up 4 inches (about 10 centimetres) to true the floors. They replaced the old plaster, which was cracked beyond salvation, and the limestone in some of the interior walls was exposed. Four new bathrooms were added.

The plumbing and wiring were changed, and a hybrid heating system was installed that provides the house with fresh air and just the right humidity, winter or summer. The basement floor was dug out 5 inches to add more head room and heating was installed under the new floor. The finishing touches included adding Category 5 wiring for high-speed Internet in every room and a water purifying system that runs to each cold-water faucet in the house.

The size of the building was originally listed as 2,294 square feet. It is now closer to 4,000 with the new kitchen addition and guest room en suite below.

In many ways, the addition is the show-stopper. Seen from the street, it blends well with the limestone of the main house. Located at the rear corner of the house and constructed of timber frame with infill stucco panels, its new porch and side entrance feature the same architectural detailing and proportions as the restored veranda in front.

But take a walk around the back, and the addition is a surprise — all windows and high cathedral ceiling. Inside are Mr. McGregor's signature features: beams of Douglas fir, cabinetry full of curves, and space filled with light. It's a thoroughly modern kitchen, but it's filled with old features. Many of the beams were made from salvaged wood. The marble slab that forms the top of the bake table came from a 50-year-old bank building. The interior limestone wall was originally the back exterior of the house. Even the drawer handles are old, thousands of years old. They're stones taken from Lake Ontario.

Upstairs, the curves continue, and transoms, skylights and wood-beamed cathedral ceilings, invisible from the street, imbue the old house with an almost giddy air of renewal.

"I love the house," Mr. McGregor says. "I really love the stone and wood elements — that limestone combined with Douglas fir — nothing speaks more of home. It's quiet and secure, a bastion of warmth and elegance."

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