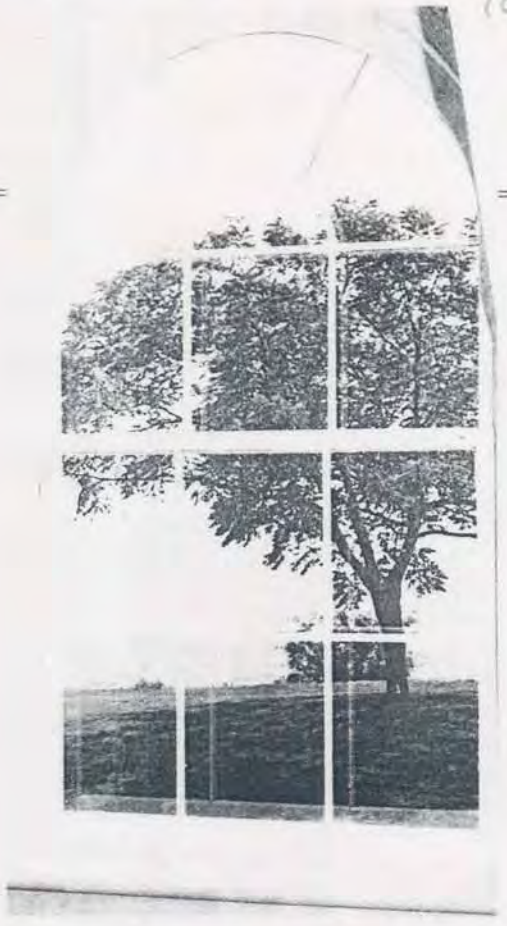
Contemporary Classic



Design and detail are the key ingredients in the success of a 'new old' house.

Doug and **Debbie Smith** spent a year and a half in search of a century home but to no avail. His new job in the teaching profession had brought them to Cobourg, Ontario, after years in and around Uxbridge. There they had renovated three homes and were looking forward to turning their talents to another. "But every house we looked at was either in the wrong location, or needed too much work or was out of our reach," says Debbie. "After so much looking around, we felt we had no choice but to buy a lot and build new."

At a glance you might think the Smiths' home was built in the 1830s, but in fact it's just over a year old. It takes its inspiration from an early house, and many of the structural and trim components are recycled.

They chose a lakeside location in a new estate subdivision on the edge of town. It offered a taste of country life but still indulged the decided advantage of municipal services, not to mention all the benefits of having a town close at hand. Meanwhile the couple were contemplating what kind of house to build.

"We never considered anything but a traditional design," recalls Doug. "But at first we didn't give much thought to authenticity. So we settled on a stock plan in the Georgian style, chosen from a book of house plans." As the couple became more engrossed by the thought of building a 'new-old' house, they developed an eye for scale. They read everything they could lay their hands on about nineteenth-century architecture, and travelled throughout New England and Ontario absorbing the nuance of vintage design as they went from town to town. The couple found the houses of Niagara-on-the-Lake particularly inspiring. "We learned by observation that scale and symmetry are the most critical aspects of a classic house," says Doug. "The windows have to be the right size; the roof has to be the right pitch; the overall proportions have to look convincing." Debbie adds, "We took a second look at our stock plans and we weren't so satisfied any more."

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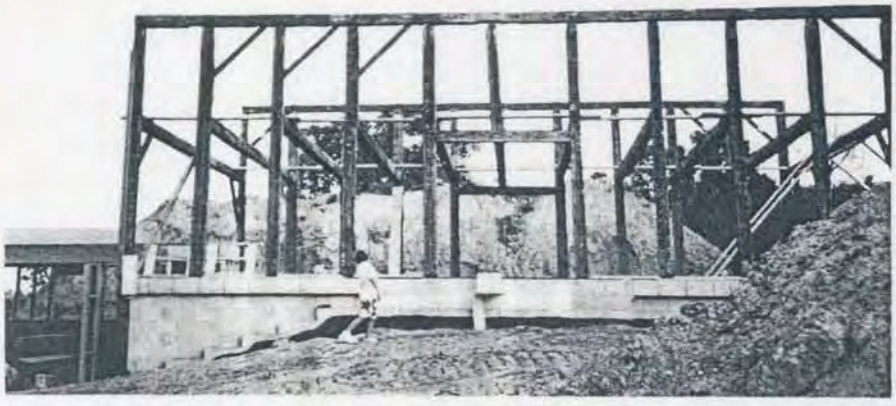
Doug and Debbie had to use their imagination to find the redeeming features in this dilapidated house but they recognized the early character and balanced symmetrical facade. Restoration wasn't feasible so the couple decided to salvage structural components as the basis for a new dwelling they were planning in Cobourg. The frame was recycled and the abandoned house served as a model for the new design. Certain trim items, namely the cornice and eaves returns, were replicated.

As Doug Smith toured the dying house, he realized he couldn't salvage everything. Most of the interior trim had disappeared (save for the moulded woodwork shown here) but most of the frame was worth retrieving. The bents—the massive hewn timbers forming the upright posts and ceiling beams—are clearly visible in this view.

When the Smiths lived in Uxbridge and area, they rejuvenated no less than three Victorian homes. They updated each considerably but were sure not to spoil the lines of the vintage architecture. By the time the couple moved to their present location in Cobourg, they were old hands at renovating.



The structure consists of several H-shaped 'bents', each composed of two upright posts joined by a horizontal beam.

It took a day for a crane and crew to re-assemble the bents on the new concrete-block foundation. "People thought we were raising a barn when they saw the frame go up," recalls Doug. Of special note is the 'half-bent' which allows for the central placement of the front door. The sill, of course, is new.

The answer to their dilemma came in the form of a pre-Victorian house for sale, so dilapidated that it seemed beyond repair. Denuded of its clapboard cladding and without a window in place, it stood forlorn in a farmer's field near Morganston, Ontario. But even in disrepair, nothing could hide its handsome proportions. Doug recognized it immediately. "I knew we'd found the house of our dreams," he says with a touch of irony in his voice. "We couldn't restore it but we could use it as the basis for our new design."

Parts of the house were salvageable. "Fortunately the farmer used the house for grain storage and had kept a roof on the place," Doug continues. "That protected much of the main structure from serious decay." Then the Smiths let their imaginations run wild. "With the help of our contractor, we figured we could retrieve the structural components, and recycle trim—window frames, mouldings, doors and so on—from other demolished houses. And then we could combine all that with our own design ideas to make the house complete."

For weeks the couple worked hand in hand with the contractor, exchanging ideas over the kitchen table and committing them to paper. "The design phase was fun," Debbie comments. They devised a well-considered plan that retained the traditional character of the house, yet provided all the amenities of contemporary living. The concept is less confined than the original with an informal, open appeal. And to provide extra space for family living, a wing was added to the side.

It seemed an ambitious project but

"It wasn't until the frame was finished that our project actually started to look like a house," says Doug, pointing to the chipboard panels applied to the exterior. Conventional frame fills the gaps between the bents. Wing at left did not use any recycled structural components.

With the roof installed and windows in place, the rear of the Smith house is almost finished. A veneer of reclaimed brick disguises the exposed parts of the concrete-block foundation.

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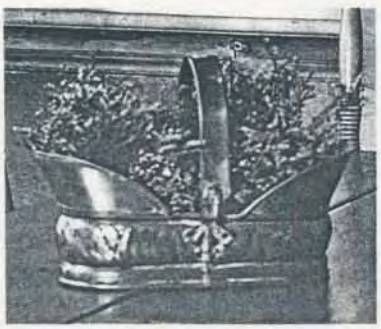
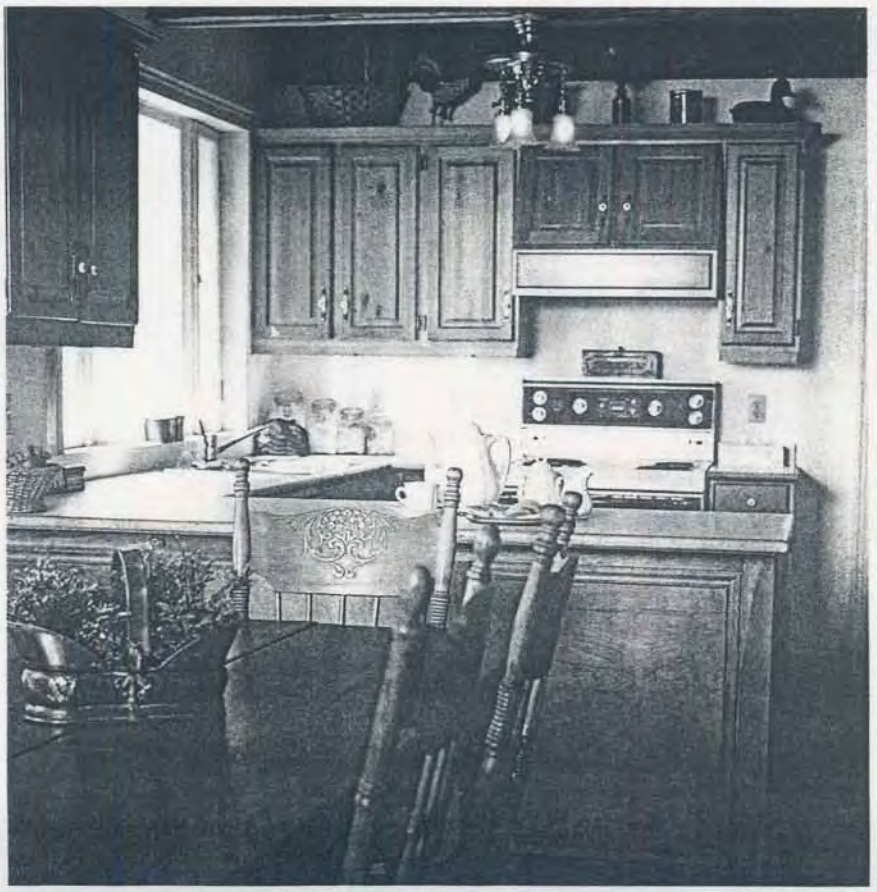
"Since the back of the house isn't exposed to public view, we felt it didn't have to look as authentic as the front," explains Doug. Dormers and clustered windows have a decidedly contemporary flair that takes better advantage of the southern exposure. The house and family-room wing stand complete, but already the Smiths are looking toward future projects. "We have yet to finish landscaping, and when the time comes we'd like to replace the asphalt shingles with cedar."

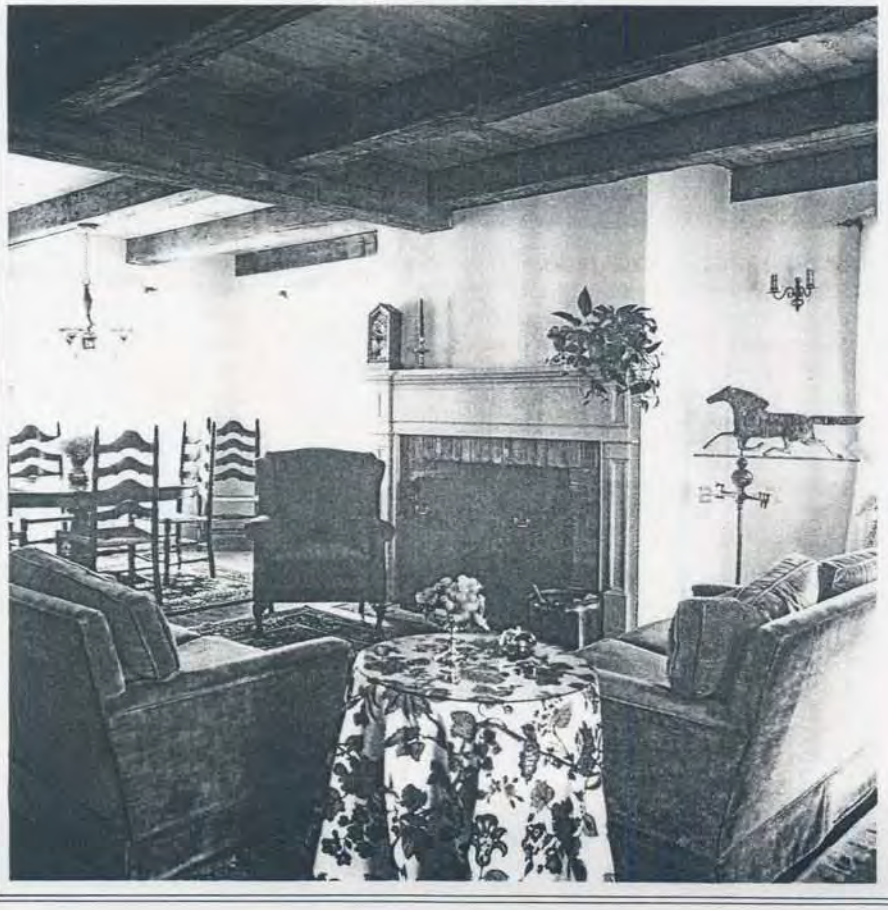


Placement of kitchen amenities is based on a functional and simple arrangement. The patina of wood cabinetry blends naturally with its surroundings; pressback chairs and harvest table add a country accent.



"We learned by observation that scale is the most critical aspect of a classic house."

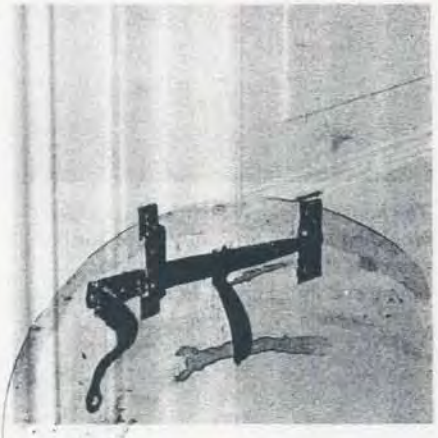
The family room basks in the sunshine from its sunny southern exposure and offers a panorama of Lake Ontario. "We wanted a picture window to do the view justice," remarks Doug but we didn't want an expanse of plain glass to spoil our traditional theme." So they compromised with a bank of vintage-style double-hung windows.



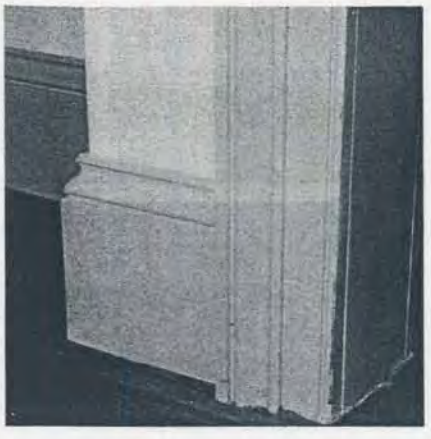
The house is more open in concept than it would have been originally. Note, for example, the lack of a wall between dining and living areas. In its pristine finished state, the interior belies some of the important (and costly) construction decisions: to accommodate the beamed ceiling, services such as heating ducts had to be aligned within perimeter walls, which wasn't always the most direct route. Likewise, a structural engineer recommended a summer beam (the larger timber tied into the chimney breast) be installed to ensure the integrity of the building. A striking Adam-style mantelpiece recycled from an eastern-Ontario house is the most elegant accoutrement.

As if building a new house is not complicated enough, Debbie and Doug learned that reconstruction using recycled components poses a unique challenge.

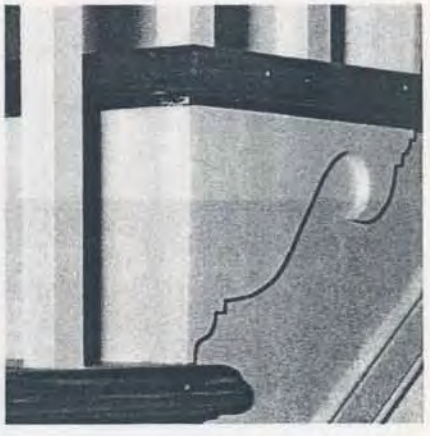
Not a reconstruction, the recycled mantel dates to the 1820s or '30s. Fine detail marks it as the showpiece of the living room. Restrained mouldings and handsome panel typify the early approach.



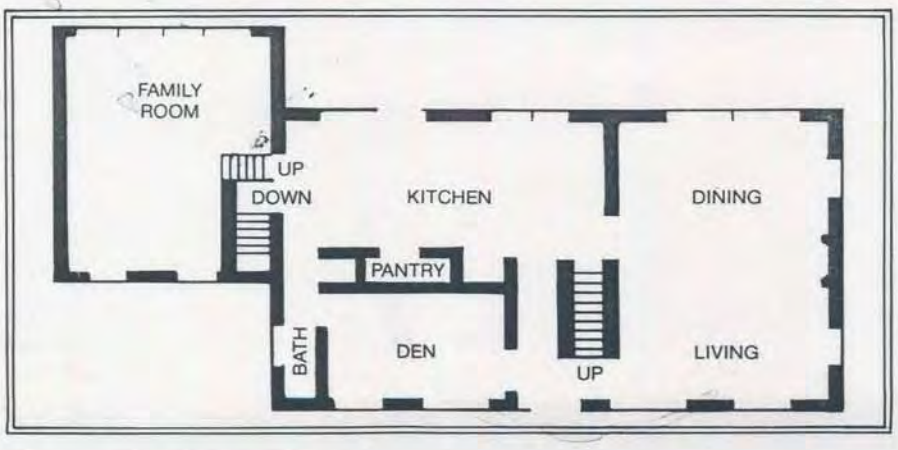
Door hardware is one of the details that lend a home a vintage look. Doug has collected a box full of wrought-iron latches well suited to the early character of the house.



Wood trim like this moulded baseboard and door frame hails from a variety of places: some came from a house in eastern Ontario, some from a farmhouse on Lake Erie. All are roughly contemporary (c.1830s) and blend well together in their new surroundings.



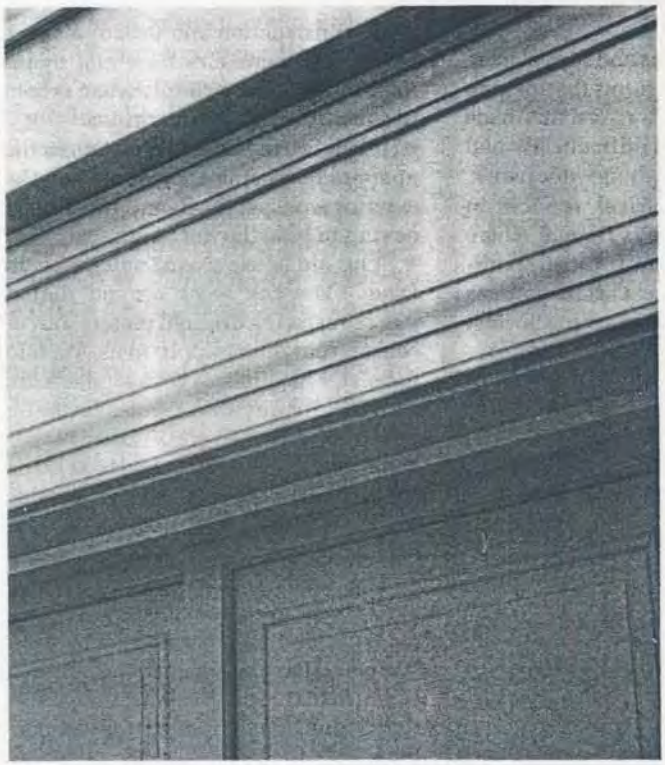
Staircase was too worn to be recycled, but undaunted, Doug had ideas for a new one. "I kept a file of magazine clippings to show our contractor what kind of staircase we wanted him to build for us," he recalls.



The Smith house adopts a variation of the centre hall theme.

any doubts evaporated when Doug read about similar projects, including some featured in RE•NEW. "I remember one story in particular about an abandoned inn in Prince Edward County [RE•NEW, Feb-Mar 1987]. That building was in even worse shape than ours, but the owners never gave up," Doug says. "I figured if they could do it so could we."

Soon the Smiths' contractor and his crew were hard at work dismantling the old house. Piece by piece the frame



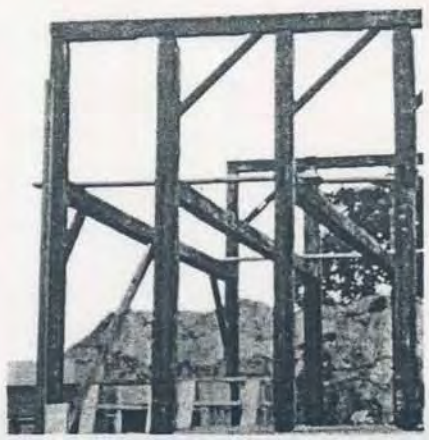
Details make the difference: cornice mouldings above the garage door are an elegant feature that help tie this contemporary amenity with the pervasive old-time character.

Another device borrowed from the past is the exposed brick wall of the fireplace, a feature which generally disappeared from frame construction by the 1850s. Its inclusion here helps lend the Smith house a pre-Victorian character.

Doorcase was missing but this facsimile certainly suggests an early date with its simple pilasters, small transom light and plain entablature. Six-panel door also adopts a traditional pose.

was reduced to a pile of lumber, each member carefully numbered for re-assembly. Originally the house had been constructed using an almost forgotten technique called 'post-and-beam bent', popular in the early days of settlement. Similar to a barn frame, the structure consists of several H-shaped 'bents' (see photos), each composed of two upright posts joined by a horizontal beam. All the timbers are hewn logs and pegged into place. For Doug and Debbie, this ancient construction technique only added to the allure of their project.

Back in Cobourg, a concrete-block



foundation lay awaiting the arrival of the frame. In the old days, the bents were assembled on the ground and hoisted into place with pulleys and horse power, but today a crane is used. It was a momentous occasion on that summer morning in 1987 when the frame was erected into place. "It only took a day, recalls Doug, "but to see the house actually taking form was exciting. We felt like we were really on our way."

Then began the steady parade of sub-trades: carpenters, plumbers, roofers, electricians, heating specialists, dry-wallers and masons. As if building

a new house is not complicated enough, Debbie and Doug learned that reconstruction using recycled components poses additional challenges:

- Local building officials questioned the structural integrity of the bents—after all they were over 150 years old—and insisted the Smiths consult a structural engineer. The latter recommended the frame be bolstered with an extra 'summer beam'. It too takes the form of a weathered hewn timber, and blends well with the exposed-beam ceiling. There was also some concern that interior doors were not tall enough to meet current standards.
- With exposed beams and *sans* plaster, the main-floor ceiling forms the upstairs floors and although attractive, this made placement of services difficult. "We had to conceal the plumbing, ductwork, central-vac and electrical services in the outside walls," says Doug. "Where else could we put them? It added significantly to our costs because the services couldn't always follow the shortest route."
- Upstairs in the bathroom, the tub is raised several inches above floor height. This is another reflection of the exposed-beam construction and lack of a space between the upstairs floor and main-floor ceiling. There simply wasn't room to allow for the bathtub drains.
- Likewise, the hot-air registers in the upstairs bedrooms are mounted on the exterior wall, not the floor, a function of having to hide the ductwork.
- "Our old house wasn't square," said Doug. "You can work around that if you're restoring original plaster, but of course, that didn't apply to us. We had to bolster the timbers with a 'false' stud wall just to provide a regular frame on which to apply dry-wall." Correspondingly, the window frames had to be made deeper, but on the plus side, the extra wall provided plenty of room for insulation.
- The Smiths had to apply for a minor variance because the house was slightly too wide for municipal setback bylaws. "We could have redesigned the house to conform to the lot," explains Doug, "but that would have spoiled the proportions."
- Labour costs ran high simply because of the tedious hand work involved in resurrecting the old structure. "It's hard to find a carpenter who knows how to hang an old door," says Doug, "and it takes extra time to remove the nails from recycled joinery. Things like that quickly add up."
- Lastly, the Smiths had to accept the fact that they'll have to face maintenance. "I'm not looking forward to repainting this place, but I think the clapboard was worth it," muses Doug.

Neither Doug nor Debbie count themselves among the purists, nor do they claim to be experts on architectural style. Like many couples, they've been smitten by the charm of traditional homes and merely wanted to incorporate a little into their lifestyle. Along the way, however, they developed a keen eye and with the house now complete, the results show to good advantage. □

Nuts & Bolts

Structure: Recycled timber frame in post-and-beam bent construction; wing in conventional contemporary frame; clapboard cladding; concrete block foundation with reclaimed brick veneer.

Heat: gas-fired high-efficiency forced-air furnace; wing is heated with electric baseboards

Insulation: fibreglass batts (exterior walls and attic)

Walls: dry-wall throughout

Electricity: 200 amp service