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HERITAGE

Planning for the future requires an examination of our past

The soul of a Georgian farmhouse

*150-year-old warehouse
given a new lease on life*

Like Cinderella dressed for the ball, the former warehouse looks more beautiful today, than its builders could ever have intended.

The old brick building is about 12 metres (40 feet) square, two storeys high. It is supported by 33.5-centimetre (14-inch) beams throughout,

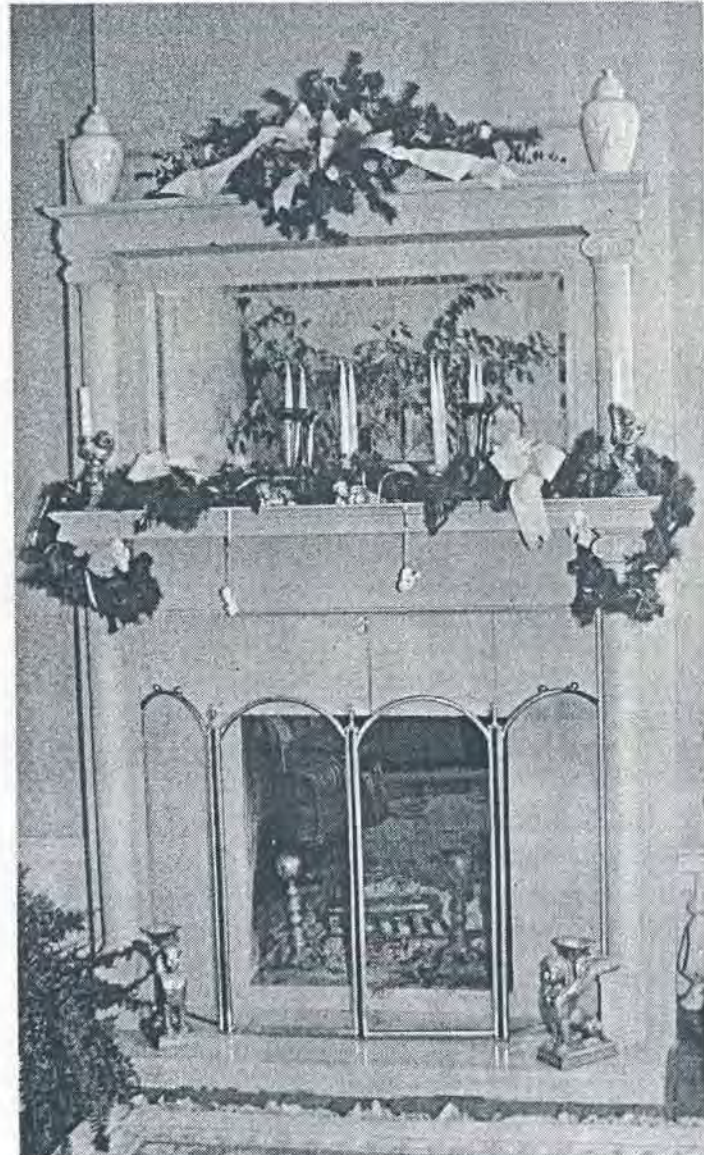
wheel-barrow.

"For about 90 years," the building had been divided into two, two-storey apartments and whatever was left



at the building that still survives across the street, backing on Factory Creek.

Ms. Atkinson and her family dug out the basement by hand, carting the soil away in



This fireplace surround in the main formal floor living room was rescued from a building across from Victoria College, which burned in 1992. Original fireplace surrounds were missing when Ms. Atkinson bought the building, and the three fireplaces were bricked in.

A less formal original staircase at the back, which also led from the main to the second floor, was disassembled and reinstalled on the second floor, leading up to the attic.

The original wide-board red pine floors, buried under numerous different floor treatments, had to be painstakingly sanded, and individually cleaned and, in some places, moved piece by piece to other parts of the building.

The family lived in one room at a time, as the work progressed.

Three original fireplaces, covered with various kinds of interior wall treatments, were uncovered during the renovations. But all had been bricked in — “right up to the roof,” Ms. Atkinson says, and the mortar had to be smashed and the bricks removed one by one.

“We just hammered away,” Ms. Atkinson notes.

“And, as you do that, everything that has died and fallen in there over the last 100 years, falls down on your head.”

But, the results were worth it, as layers of flooring and wall treatments fell away to reveal original bricks and slate hearths. Cast-iron inserts, designed for burning coal, were removed and the fireplaces made operational



This sturdy edifice, originally built as a utilitarian warehouse in the 1840s, is now an elegant family home. Between its days as a fabric-storage facility and its current incarnation, this was an apartment building for about 90 years. In the 1920s, its current owner believes it had a wrap-around verandah, but she has not restored it, preferring a Georgian look to a Victorian one.

again.

Around 1992, when a house across from Cobourg’s historic Victoria College burned, Ms. Atkinson was able to salvage two fireplace surrounds which fit her home beautifully, both in terms of measurement, and in character.

The trim in the house, where it has survived, is mostly original. Baseboards over 100 years old and 30.5 centimetres (12 inches) high grace some of the rooms.

Where door casings were missing, new ones were made to resemble the old as closely as possible.

All the plumbing pipes and fixtures had to be torn out and replaced, since they contained lead. The wiring “was the old knob-and-tube style, from the Middle Ages,” says Ms. Atkinson.

“We couldn’t save anything.

“At different times, I thought I had made a terrible mistake (buying the place),” she admits.

Although the structure was basically more than sound, the rear wall of the building had bowed out because of doorways that had been removed and windows that

had been “stuck in” for the convenience of various tenants over the years. The whole wall had to come down and be rebuilt.

Elsewhere in the building, original exterior walls survive, over 60 centimetres (two feet) thick.

But most of the windows in the place are original two-over-two sash windows, with old, wavy panes still present. The discreet addition of plexiglass storms has helped lower the heating bills in the hazy place.

Ms. Atkinson has learned that, “at one time or another, most everyone in Cobourg has lived in this building. Somebody is always stopping in to tell us they had lived here.”

At one time, she has learned, perhaps around 1920, the building featured a wrap-around verandah.

But that being more of a Victorian than a Georgian-style trait, it has not been replaced by Ms. Atkinson.

“I don’t like the darkness and the ornateness of the Victorian style. It’s too stiff for me,” Ms. Atkinson says.

As with many old-building owners, Ms. Atkinson has found that her house does not

require air-conditioning, since, with its triple-thick walls and equally thick floors, it is so well insulated that it is always cool in summer. As well, the windows are so positioned that they take advantage of every cross-breeze coming off nearby Lake Ontario.

Ms. Atkinson, who has been involved in real estate sales for a number of years, acknowledges that old houses and old buildings are not for everyone.

“Unless you have a lot of money, you’d better have a lot of talent,” she advises.

But, then again, if old houses are in your heart, as they are in hers, she offers the following words of wisdom:

“If it’s sound — go for it. That’s the two primary things to consider: soundness, and location.”

Ms. Atkinson’s home was originally built by Stuart Mackechnie, the first owner of what is now the Mackechnie House Bed and Breakfast, next-door to Ms. Atkinson’s. Mr. Mackechnie was a Scottish immigrant and businessman who also established the woollen and cotton mills across Tremaine Street from his house and warehouse.

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Like Cinderella dressed for the ball, the former warehouse looks more beautiful today, than its builders could ever have intended.

You'd have to have a good imagination to divine the soul of a Georgian-style farmhouse in the old warehouse that had been converted to a duplex.

But that's what Marcia Atkinson saw; and she made her dream come true.

Built around 1844, the square brick building on Tremaine Street was never intended as a dwelling, but its massive triple-layer solid brick

construction ensured that it outlived its original use and went on to several others.

"I knew it would be an incredible challenge, but it was so solid, I knew it would be a great place to live," says Ms. Atkinson who bought the warehouse-turned-duplex in 1989 and, with her family, began the onerous task of converting it into an elegant single-family home.

Ms. Atkinson grew up in Cobourg's west end and never would have believed that she would one day live in the building that began its existence as a warehouse for woollens and cottons milled at the building that still survives across the street, backing on Factory Creek.

The old brick building is about 12 metres (40 feet) square, two storeys high. It is supported by 33.5-centimetre (14-inch) beams throughout, and the upper storey is literally strong enough for a team of horses to walk on the floor.

But that was about all the old building had in its favour when Ms. Atkinson first bought it.

"It was a tremendous undertaking," she recalls.

Her daughter, Shannon, now 13, was six years old then "and she thought her mother had lost her mind," Ms. Atkinson says.

"Since I was a little girl I always wanted an old house. This reminded me of a Georgian-style farmhouse," she explains, so she made it resemble one.

The upstairs of the building had originally been used to store huge spools of cotton and wool, "that's why the big beams."

The main floor, she believes, housed offices.

The basement had been cemented in part, but most of it was a shallow, mud-floored mess, half-filled with coal from the old coal furnace that was gone by that time.

Ms. Atkinson and her family dug out the basement by hand, carting the soil away in

wheel-barrows.

"For about 90 years," the building had been divided into two, two-storey apartments and whatever was left of the original plaster interior walls was unsalvageable. In fact, the entire interior had to be gutted.

It was back-breaking work.

"We worked like a team — of oxen," Ms. Atkinson sums up.

A 20th-century staircase was removed and the original staircase, which Ms. Atkinson found in pieces in the basement, was re-installed at the building's centre.

That was one of the few projects Ms. Atkinson and her family did not undertake themselves. They hired "a craftsperson from South Carolina," to rebuild the staircase from pieces found in sacks in the cellar.

A less formal original staircase at the back, which also led from the main to the second floor, was disassembled and re-installed on



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From the second floor, looking down the staircase toward the main door you can see how thick the floors are; strong enough to withstand the weight of a team of horses, says Marcia Atkinson. The staircase was found in pieces in the cellar and was reassembled by a professional craftsman.

Story and photos
by
Eileen Argyris



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