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MIKE CHAJECKI

What's old is new

Silvana Longo shows that these century home renos balance heritage details with modern comforts

The door to designer Jessica Cinnamon's 1920s Tudor home is new. The stone arch around it is not.

The Toronto neighbourhood, Old Mill, is one of the city's coveted pockets. Its century-old houses have been largely left alone or are at least still recognizable, notable in a city where sprawling new builds increasingly dominate.

Cinnamon's home makes the case for a hybrid approach to renovating an older property; one that respects the place's history while reinventing its interior for 21st-century life.

Much of Toronto's older housing stock, including Cinnamon's home, has been altered by decades of piecemeal updates. The house had been carved into a duplex years earlier, according to the designer, who moved in this year with her husband and two young children after a two-year renovation.

By the time they bought the place, in 2024, the Tudor exterior was intact and the original windows were still in place, though they were cracked and deteriorating. Opening the walls revealed asbestos, a discovery that halted their plans until a full remediation could happen.

"It added another layer to the process," Cinnamon said, "but it also reinforced the importance of taking the house back to its fundamentals."

The updated home features original corbels, salvaged where possible; windows in their original dimensions, now black, mullioned and triple-paned; and fireplaces in their original locations. The remodel also reinstated the staircase's curved bull-nose detail, which had been lost during the duplex years.

Cinnamon didn't increase the property's footprint, which she felt would have altered its Tudor character. Instead, she found space in what was already there: a vaulted ceiling opened up in her daughter's bedroom once the house was stripped to its frame, and an attic converted into usable space on the third floor.

The interior design is textured, restrained and contemporary while still reflecting the original home's character. A fluted black marble archway, backlit, frames the entry to the family room. Warm oak floors run underfoot. Gunmetal hardware carries through every room.

"The goal was never to recreate a 1920s interior," said Cinnamon, who led the design. "It was to preserve the architectural soul of the home while creating an interior that felt relevant to how we live today."

Others prefer a different approach.

Designer Kate Stuart of Toronto's TOM Design Collective works with clients who want history running through every room. Original medallions, cornices, stained glass, fireplaces and woodwork aren't just nostalgic details; homeowners "are coming to us because they want that history to inform the house as a whole," she said.

For a residence in Saint-Lambert, Que., that philosophy was the starting point.

At Résidence Victoria, a Second Empire and neo-Georgian home built in 1892 and renovated by Montreal's Blanc Marine Intérieurs, led by Mélanie Cherrier and Laurence Pons Lavigne, the architecture and original interior remain remarkably intact. The home belongs to Kimberley Pontbriand, marketing director and partner at Blanc Marine, and her husband, Samuel Finn, the firm's president.

"We weren't interested in reducing the house to a particular architectural label or recreating a period interior," said Cherrier. "We wanted to understand what gave it its character, preserve those elements and allow the new interventions to enter into a dialogue with them."

Blanc Marine leaned into the home's layered identity. Second Empire influences are reflected in its mansard roof and decorative detailing, while classical elements such as fluted pilasters, carved rosettes and layered mouldings speak to its Georgian Revival lineage.

Contemporary changes weren't designed to imitate either era but to complement them.

Original stained glass runs above the front door and through nearly every window. A gilded chandelier hangs beneath a ceiling medallion in the entryway. The main staircase, crafted entirely from solid wood, carries its own classical language: an intricately carved newel post, turned balusters, fluting and rosettes, with the original warm-wood tone still intact. In the sitting room, woodland wallpaper wraps a fireplace framed in original woodwork.

"We believe contrast can actually make heritage architecture more powerful," Cherrier said. "We allowed the home's classical architecture to become the backdrop, introducing cleaner contemporary lines alongside vintage and antique pieces, natural materials and layers of texture."

Even the kitchen, the most updated room in the home, feels cohesive, with warm wood cabinetry, an apron sink and a country-style stove.

Quebec's Cultural Heritage Act can extend protection to a home's interior, whereas in Ontario, heritage rules generally apply only to what's visible from the street. Résidence Victoria has no formal heritage designation; the preservation reflects Blanc Marine's design philosophy, not a legal requirement.

"Our clients rarely want an older home to feel new again," Cherrier says. "They want to preserve what made them fall in love with it in the first place."

In Halifax, designer Natalie Owens, principal of Stil James, sees a version of that same instinct. "There is a bit of a forced hand when it comes to buying a property," she said. "It is just too costly to be knocking down homes." She also pointed to something more emotional: a younger generation, she's noticed, has developed a real appreciation for layered, traditional design.

"I do think there is something attractive about these homes that are reminiscent of my generation's childhood. Most of us grew up in a traditional-style home. Modern, super-contemporary homes weren't a thing in Atlantic Canada. There is something that pulls you in as a prospective buyer: Wouldn't it be great if I could raise my kids in a home like the one I was raised in?"

She also pushed back on the notion that heritage work costs 20 to 30 per cent more than a new build. "If you're comparing apples to apples," she said, "you're still going to be spending more on a new build" of matching quality. Cherrier and Stuart agreed: The premium isn't a heritage tax. It's simply what quality materials cost with any renovation.

The designers have all observed a growing pull toward the past. "It does feel as though heritage is having a moment again," said Stuart. "What's old is new."

The shift may point to something larger than just design preference. "I think the broader state of the world plays into this," Stuart said. "Between uncertainty, constant screen time, technology and the speed at which everything changes, people are craving warmth and comfort at home. There is something grounding about living in a house that has a history."

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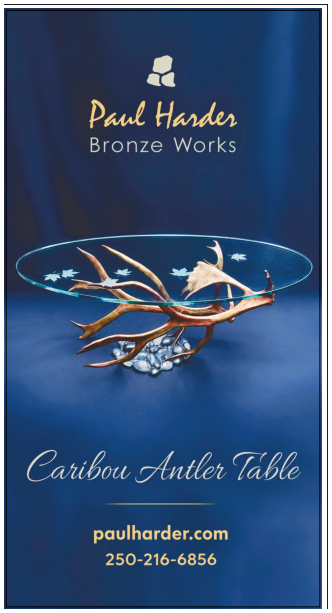
Budget-friendly tips

NATALIE OWENS, STIL JAMES: Before ripping out original hardwood, sand and refinish it. Stripping a yellowed oil finish and recoating the wood with a water-based clear finish restores the original wood tone for roughly half the cost of replacing the floor outright. Owens also recommended phasing the work: do the kitchen, dining room and mud room first, and hold off on secondary spaces such as a dated bathroom.

MÉLANIE CHERRIER, BLANC MARINE INTÉRIEURS: Prioritize what's genuinely hard to recreate today: original woodwork, floors, mouldings, doors and staircases. "Sometimes the most respectful design decision, and even the most economical one, is to leave something beautiful exactly where it is."

KATE STUART, TOM DESIGN COLLECTIVE: When budgets are tight, protect the elements that give the house its character – original millwork, doors, plasterwork, fireplaces and good-quality flooring – rather than trying to save everything. A cheaper replacement isn't always a more economical choice if it will need to be redone in a decade. "The perception that preservation is automatically prohibitively expensive can push people toward a full renovation when a more strategic approach might serve the house better."







'Our clients rarely want an older home to feel new again,' interior designer Mélanie Cherrier says.
ANNIE FAFARD

