

# Restoring a BC Mills Prefab House in Strathcona

521 Hawks Street, Heritage B, 1903 construction, 1904 water hookup.



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Paige Gardiner was a fan of Strathcona and its old homes and had long wanted to be a resident. When she heard about a listing before it hit the MLS in 2007, she jumped. Paige was about to embark on a long road to restore a Strathcona home to its former glory (restored home pictured left).

Neighbours thought she was crazy, but with the help of family, she secured a house she could restore. Unknown to Paige at the time, what she acquired was not just a small house, but a unique structure in a row of three. They share the same simple architecture, although one is covered in

stucco. The other two, including hers, have panels of distinct narrow horizontal siding interrupted by vertical trim.

These three houses are rare examples of a modular, prefab form of construction created by BC Mills in the early 20th century. The houses were demonstration houses and their plans never made it into a catalogue. The BC Mills yard foreman was listed as the resident of 521 Hawks in 1903. A handful of these prefab buildings still exist in Vancouver and the Lower Mainland, and scattered across Canada. The Bank of Commerce was one of their best customers, ordering numerous "bank kits" from the catalogue that were shipped across Canada.

The three homes sit on one city lot (not uncommon with early Vancouver houses) so a Heritage Revitalization Agreement was not an option without subdividing. The city therefore pushed for regulation, non-heritage treatment of the house including sprinklers, a new sewer line,

and internal stairs if the crawlspace became a basement. Paige was determined to minimize the invasiveness of the restoration and declined all three recommendations. This meant going through the Board of Variance; a time costing endeavour. Patience however paid off, as Paige completed her carpentry ticket during the two years of planning and negotiating with the city. Paige's cultivated carpentry skills have served her well since the permits were approved in late 2009.

"I was just starting my apprenticeship when we got the house. We are really into old things so were not put off by how much work it was going to be. I love it and see it as a challenge," said Paige. The only thing that led her to fear completing the restoration was the struggle with the city. She wished she had known more people in the heritage community at the beginning of the process to help with guidance and advice.

Strathcona roads had previously followed the undulation of the land. When the land was leveled for safety decades earlier, many homes were



Top Left: After restoration of porch, siding and re-painting

Bottom Left: Archival Images of original home. The lower image from the 1970's shows the original porch missing and the streets have been leveled.

Bottom Right: Porch restoration has started



suddenly below street level. It required some back and forth with the city for permission to raise the house 3 feet to be level with the road. With that permission attained the home was raised for a cement foundation to be poured. The house was sound when the Gardiners bought it in 2007 but the foundation posts were on dirt. The house was constructed using balloon framing meaning the floor joists are hung from the wall framing.

Raised initially from the joists, the walls didn't lift with them plus the kitchen fell away from the back of the house. The kitchen was a modular addition and required a reframed roof, and was reattached after the house was tied to its new foundations. When the kitchen was reattached, the damaged roof framing and flat ceiling were replaced with a new insulated ceiling. The former ceiling had the same tongue & groove material as the interior walls so Paige salvaged the old ceiling, stripped it of ceiling tile and layers of wallpaper and reused it as siding materials for the kitchen walls.

After raising the house and fixing the kitchen roof, two new replica wood windows were installed in the new basement, and Paige started work on the siding in 2012. Much was in poor condition and needed heavy scraping or replacement prior to painting. The siding is tongue-and-groove that sits in dadoed vertical posts in independent panels. Each panel unit would come from BC Mills assembled, and the units would be bolted to the balloon framing. Then they were bolted to each other, and covered by trim. This made the restoration of the siding especially tricky. When one piece of board was in poor condition and needed replacing, the entire panel was involved.

The more Paige learned about these prefab homes, the more she realized that the less invasive the work the better. The internal walls were similarly



replacement and was custom milled to match. Paige manufactured matching replacement trim and bead trim for the exterior on site with a router and table saw. The prior residents had stripped all interior walls and floors to the original wood, so that job was already done. Since starting Paige has keenly developed an appreciation for retaining original fabric!

Restoring this 1903 house will be an ongoing project. Paige has some questions about two chimneys with gaps instead of fireplaces or stoves, but intends to keep the layout intact. She and her partner have chosen to paint the house inside and out in simple white to emphasize the architectural details of the house. As Vancouver is no longer the coal-burning mill town of the early century, the contemporary choice of colour works to highlight the construction of this early prefab home. Paige exactly replicated the original front porch this summer using archival photographs as a guide, and is considering options for insulating the walls. This labour of love is returning to its former self, step by careful step.

constructed to the exterior ones. Instead of paneling or lath and plaster, the inside walls are the same tongue-and-groove solid wood construction held in dadoed vertical 2x4's covered with trim. Cutting into a wall to install electrical would affect an entire panel. Paige could imagine what installing sprinklers would do. It also explained why the house almost exactly mirrors its neighbours' layout and changing that floorplan would be an intense undertaking.

Much of the exterior siding needed

Pictured Above:

The restoration process for the wood siding

Top: Damaged siding in the process of replacement, front porch restoration is underway

Centre: Some siding and trim has been replaced, damaged pieces are repaired and the entire wall sanded in preparation for paint

Bottom: Painting has been completed and porch is fully restored