

The Story of the Holmes Family's 1908 Edwardian Restoration



Our family bought a beautiful 1908 heritage house near Kitsilano beach in Vancouver three years ago. It wasn't what most people would call beautiful at the time, but to my husband and I, it was a dream home that just needed a bit of polish. I guess "a bit" would be an understatement.

The house had the exact layout we wanted: three bedrooms and a bathroom upstairs; a living room, dining room, kitchen, office and powder room on the main floor; and room for a mortgage-helping suite downstairs. It was almost entirely in original condition, BUT it had been rented for 20+ years and there was significant damage inside and out. There were holes in the windows, floors, walls... you name it and it was broken.

At the time, we had an 8-month old baby and five year old daughter and had to really think about what we were signing our family up for, but we decided this could be the chance of a lifetime: to live in a heritage home five blocks from the ocean. We fought hard and beat out a developer from San Francisco to buy the house. With the help of the Vancouver Heritage Foundation, we also used a heritage-friendly appraiser, who saw the home for what it's worth, rather than as a "tear down" as most everyone else in the Vancouver housing industry saw it.

Before we even took possession of the house, we started working on the outside. We pulled six-foot weeds in the backyard and laid grass around the original centre sidewalk and back porch. We built a back fence and planted some shrubs and privacy trees. We reinforced the front stairs and original front porch so that no one would fall through when they came to visit.

Once we gained access to the inside, there was a lot of work to do before we could even begin to fix the things that were broken. It took three days just to take off the things the tenants had nailed to the walls... and there were a lot of things, from plywood room dividers to hundreds of staples and hooks attached to every surface.

We brought in a friend of ours who was pretty good at lath and plaster to fix what we were told were lath and plaster walls, but surprise: they weren't lath and plaster! In fact, no one knew what they were. The walls turned out to be shiplap with a thick cardboard-type of insulation. Our friend was so distressed, he took off and forgot his tools laying against the wall. We still have them for when he feels it's safe enough to come back.

That's when we realized we had a rare project on our hands and decided we just had to do most things ourselves. Enter... the family.

My mom took one look at the walls and said, "Oh that's what we had on the walls of our house when I grew up! It's fine." We learned how to use flat-head screws to repair the cardboard insulation and smoothed the holes with drywall filler. I handed my stepfather a sledgehammer and he demolished the temporary kitchen (built in an upstairs bedroom) with The Who's "My Generation" cranked in the background. An army of family members and friends came to help. They spent not one day, not two days, but upwards of a week at our house, helping to paint, re-attach doors and fix various things. I think they took one look at our daughters and said to themselves, "These guys need A LOT of help." I spent \$300 a night on pizza, but it was well worth it!



Above: The house before renovations had begun.



Above: Completed! New exterior paint and stairs thanks to VHF True Colours and Restore It! grants.



Above: after removal of temporary staircase, a grand original-style staircase was completed.

We did hire a few moderately-priced people to help us with the things we had no idea how to fix. We brought in floor refinishers to take the chipped cobalt blue paint off the fir floors and restore them to their original honey-gold. We had a retired science teacher-turned handyman and his group of tradesmen friends help us lay new kitchen and bathroom floors, re-plumb the whole house and make numerous carpentry fixes. We asked our electrician friend to redo the wiring and bring it from outside to inside the walls. We pulled out the extremely small '80s kitchen (that must have once housed only an icebox and counter) and turned it into a pantry. We used the attached outer room (which led to the back porch) to put in a new kitchen, stairwell to downstairs and back window. We fixed, painted and got appliances for the rudimentary two bedroom suite in the basement. We put a plywood floor and light in the attic for storage. We kept the original single-pane windows, bought heavy curtains and insulated the attic (which cut our heating bill in half!).

With the help of the Vancouver Heritage Foundation, we hired people to fix and paint the exterior siding (*the Holmes received a 2009 True Colours Grant*). We also tore down the precarious chimney and installed a brick replacement. We tore off the temporary front stairs and built a grand original-style staircase (*with the aid of a 2011 Restore It! Grant*).

In all, it took three years and about \$75,000 to fix and replace all the things that were broken. We are just finishing up the laundry room (painting, trim, etc.) and then we will be done the inside of the house. The only major project left is the roof, which we will have to save up a few years for.



Left: before shot of the front porch. Right: after.

We bought the house for under \$900,000 and it now looks like a \$1.5 million stunner, if we do say so ourselves. It has been the best investment of our lives and I believe it will only grow in value as the years go by. Now, with a third daughter on the way, I think the big payback will simply be enjoying the fruits of our labour as we raise our family in this beautiful home. We will always be grateful to those who helped us and never regret the day we looked at a 100 year-old tumbledown and said, "Let's save that house."

Jessica, Jeremy, Violet, Chloe (and Lola coming soon!) Holmes, January 2012



Left: before shot of the dining room including a plywood door!

Right: after.

