ABOUT the Vancouver Special

The ubiquitous Vancouver Special is a fixture in our city's landscape, predominantly as an east side phenomenon. With their flat fronts, boxy shapes, and low pitched roofs, these homes are regionally unique as they were designed to optimize the use of a 33 ft. wide city lot under the RS-1 District Zoning Schedule in the 1960s and 1970s. The Specials first appeared circa 1965 and multiplied to over 10,000 (est.) examples by 1985. The original stock-plan design, probably drafted in collaboration with local builders and often adjusted to adapt to various lot sizes or client needs, maximized the floor space the City's zoning would allow at the time, and was sold in vast numbers. In the late 1970s, a house plan for a Special could be bought at a stock plan office for about $65. In those days, all the information required for a building permit (including elevations) could fit onto one sheet. Given the regularity this design was submitted at City Hall, permits were issued in no time. In the 1960s and 70s it was not unusual for a Special to be built in just a few weeks.

Vancouver Specials first appealed to European immigrants in the 1960s when affordable, modern housing was in demand. The builders of Specials had turned their attention to families who emigrated from post-war Europe to improve the quality of their lives and were now in a position to afford inexpensive new housing on cheaper lots. The house design suited immigrant needs. They could use the first floor for extended family members or rent it out to help pay the mortgage. Initially, Vancouver Specials were constructed by small builders for European immigrant families. As the Special spread, immigrant patterns changed. In the 1970s Asia was becoming the predominant source of immigration, and it was this group that was increasingly building and buying Specials. In 1968, 44 percent of international immigrants to British Columbia came from Europe and 22 percent came from Asia. But by 1988, 66 percent came from Asia and only 17 percent from Europe. As a result, many Vancouver Specials in the 1970s were being built and bought by South East Asian and Chinese immigrants.

During the heyday of their construction, Vancouver Specials were criticized as monotonous, flat-fronted boxes that were seen to take over neighbourhoods in an intimidating manner. On the other hand, they were obviously immensely popular as the basic design was continuously and steadily repeated in Vancouver for about 20 years. Today, the Special is still the most common house design in Vancouver and despite its controversial reputation many families are specifically choosing them for their practical construction and layout, and for their straightforward potential to be personalized and updated. More background about the Vancouver Special will continue to be told through the description of the five homes in this brochure.

The five Vancouver Specials on tour, constructed between 1965 and 1978, demonstrate how current owners can achieve a continuing contemporary use of this design. Through repair and alterations, the homes remain valued as modern, efficient, and spacious but boast various levels of personal twists and technical upgrades. Most Specials still have first floor rental suites. According to current preferences for design aesthetics and energy efficiency standards, many Specials don't deliver. Unfortunate elements in the original low-cost construction included single-glazed aluminum windows and roofs that were poorly insulated. Owners have often improved the energy efficiency of the home by replacing windows and doors, upgrading mechanical systems and adding insulation. Some have cosmetically updated their homes with creative but simple, non-invasive ideas such as painting over the ornamental brick cladding with current colour schemes, introducing cedar strip siding, improving the landscaping, toning down the grandiose fences and post ornaments, changing window frames and soffits or adding other details. We wish you an enjoyable and educational day. Make sure to take note of innovative, practical ideas and design solutions – certain to inspire many future Special renovations across the city.

Guidelines for Visitors

Welcome to the 2nd Annual Vancouver Special Tour!

THIS NUMBERED BROCHURE IS YOUR TICKET.

FOR SECURITY REASONS THE PASSPORT ON THE BACK COVER WILL BE MARKED AT THE ENTRANCE TO EACH HOUSE.

ONLY TICKET HOLDERS WILL BE ADMITTED.

THE HOUSES ARE OPEN FOR VISITING FROM 12 TO 5 P.M. IN WHATEVER ORDER YOU PREFER.

EARLY BIRDS AND LATECOMERS WILL NOT BE ADMITTED.

EXPECT A LINE-UP OUTSIDE SOME OF THE HOMES.

INTERIOR PHOTOGRAPHY IS PROHIBITED EXCEPT BY DESIGNATED AND IDENTIFIED TOUR PHOTOGRAPHERS.

WE SUGGEST THAT YOUNG CHILDREN ARE NOT SUITABLE VISITORS AND NO STROLLERS WILL BE PERMITTED.

PLEASE LEAVE YOUR PETS AT HOME.

WHEN PARKING, PLEASE BE AWARE OF THE NEEDS OF NEIGHBOURS AND OTHER TOUR PARTICIPANTS. DO NOT BLOCK DRIVEWAYS OR STREETS.

PARKING IS LIMITED AND WE STRONGLY SUGGEST CARPOOLING WITH FRIENDS.

PLEASE LEAVE ANY PARCELS OR BIG BAGS IN YOUR CAR OR AT HOME. NO FOOD, DRINK OR SMOKING WILL BE ALLOWED ON TOUR PROPERTIES.

DO NOT ENTER ANY ROOMS WHICH HAVE BEEN ROPED OFF OR WHICH HAVE CLOSED DOORS. AVOID TOUCHING FURNITURE, ART AND HOUSEHOLD ITEMS.

NOTE THAT WASHROOM FACILITIES ARE NOT PROVIDED IN THE HOUSES. PLEASE PLAN TO MAKE WASHROOM STOPS IN PUBLIC FACILITIES SUCH AS MCLEAN PARK (ACROSS FROM HOUSE #3)

THIS BROCHURE IS YOUR TICKET

SEPTEMBER 25TH 2010 12-5 PM

VANCOUVER SPECIAL

self-guided tour

The Vancouver Heritage Foundation

TOUR PASSPORT

With this numbered brochure in hand you're ready for a great experience!
Present this passport at each house.

All you need now is:

- a pair of shoes that can easily be removed as you will be required to remove them at the entrance to every house.
- a Vancouver street map to help you find the participating houses.

1333 Lakewood | 1820-22 Venables | 718 E Georgia | 1273 E 29th

Vancouver Heritage Foundation
402 - 510 W. Hastings St. Vancouver BC V6B 1L8
tel: 604.264.9642 www.vancouverheritagefoundation.org

WELCOME from the VHF

The Vancouver Heritage Foundation is a registered charity committed to the conservation of Vancouver's heritage buildings. Creating new life for Vancouver's older buildings is important in sustaining the culture, the economy and the environmental well-being of our city. When a historic building is demolished we lose the connection to our past, and we add tons of debris to our landfill. Through education, public awareness and granting activities, the VHF is helping to create a culture of repairing and reusing Vancouver's older buildings.

THANK YOU

The Vancouver Special Tour 2010 would not have been possible without the tremendous effort of over 100 people who have volunteered their time, expertise and homes. We appreciate their contributions to ensure the success of the Tour.

Pre-tour lecture
Architect Stephanie Robb, Pechet and Robb Art + Architecture
Scott Massey

Photography
mkphotomedia.com
MARTIN KNOWLES PHOTO/MEDIA

Floral Arrangements
fullbloomflowers.ca
Full Bloom Flowers Inc.

Research Support
City of Vancouver Archives
CITY OF VANCOUVER Archives

A Special Thanks
To the 2010 homeowners who generously opened their homes!

House captains and volunteers
To view an updated list of volunteer names for this event please visit www.vancouverheritagefoundation.org

www.vancouverheritagefoundation.org

1 1333 Lakewood Drive

Lakewood between Kitchener and Charles Streets

Architect Stephanie Robb, Pechet & Robb Art and Architecture, spotted the potential in Vancouver Specials before anybody else did. After it sat on the market for months, she purchased this 1972 Special as a family home in 1999. Originally built of salvaged lumber in only two weeks by a Portuguese immigrant, this 1100 square foot home on a 25 foot lot seemed to Robb like good value on a desirable block. She saw the house as "a good house that's easy to understand: solid and square and in good shape." But when applying for a building permit to renovate the home in 2000, she was shocked to discover the City's Planning Department resolve to have her demolish it, as it was considered worthless and abhorrent architecture.

After resisting the City's approach in a year-long negotiation process, she obtained a permit to rehabilitate the existing house, and conducted a transformative renovation of the property in 2001. This project brought immense attention to the Vancouver Special house style. It was a pioneer attempt at having an architectural dialogue with the original design rather than trying to improve or hide its humble simplicity. Known today as the Lakewood Residence, this home is probably the most high-profile, talked-about Vancouver Special in history. It was featured on the cover of Canadian Architect Magazine in 2004, and won the Lieutenant-Governor of BC Innovation Award for Architecture in 2005.

The renovation transformed two existing suites into a single family, open concept home. On the ground level interior walls were removed to create an open loftlike space for the kitchen and living area. Large glass doors in front and back open onto garden courts which act as extensions of the ground level. At the back, Robb added a double-height extension increasing the floor space to a more livable 1300 sq ft for a family of four. Other innovative features are exposed joists and rafters in the ceilings, a "mashrabiya" inspired enclosed veranda on the façade (a type of enclosed bay window that is an element of traditional Arabic architecture), open storage units that double up as partition walls, and a reclaimed wood ladder-like staircase, a modest but bold conduit to the living quarters.

The Lakewood Residence embodies Robb's view that the line between the sophisticated and the mundane is mutable. "I really find that sort of divide interesting. Taking an area where you have something that's considered high culture and something considered low culture, and just wondering why. What does it take for something that's 'low culture' to be considered 'high culture', or vice versa?"

2 1820-22 Venables Street

Venables between Commercial and Victoria Drives

On a block of turreted Victorians and California Bungalows this Vancouver Special probably went unnoticed by most commuters driving along Venables-Prior in and out of downtown. But for Kinbrace, a community that annually provides affordable housing, hospitality, and support to 25 newly arrived refugee claimants in the house next door, this property was always on their radar as a greatly needed expansion space. Built in 1968, this is a typical 33 ft lot Vancouver Special, but with an uncommon entrance scheme of two separate front doors stacked one above the other perpendicular to the street. When the house came up for sale in 2005, the Hawthorne Charitable Foundation, a funding partner in the Kinbrace vision, was able to purchase it.

Having two adjacent lots finally opened the opportunity for endless architectural configurations to meet the practical needs of the Kinbrace community living on site. They were lacking a community-building space that did not impinge on essential affordable housing, functional outdoor space for gathering, gardening, and children's play, and lounging space where residents could meet informally. Architect Stephanie Robb of Pechet & Robb Art and Architecture, was brought on board to design a beautiful solution for Kinbrace's functional needs. The surprising thing was that although their requirements were not the same as a typical single-family, Robb found that the original Vancouver Special design could respond and adapt to Kinbrace's ideas without major structural changes.

The renovation was completed in spring 2010 by Bentall Taylor Construction. Known today as K2, (Kinbrace "2") this Vancouver Special was given a new life. Refreshing and current are a greyscale exterior paint scheme with a tropical pink accent, homage to the many families who live here with origins in warmer climates. Other features are aluminum-clad wood windows, a sleeker veranda design, front and back landscaping that connects the two houses, and most importantly, an extension in the back which accommodates a new kitchen and a large common space for communal meals. Through sliding glass doors, this indoor area flows out to a large concrete patio, green yard and raised vegetable beds designed by Elizabeth Whitelaw. Both front and back interventions on the property have created seamless access from inside to out and vice versa. The newly introduced architectural choices in this house and around the two properties, effectively express Kinbrace's values of hospitality, community, support and homemaking.

3 718 E Georgia Street

East Georgia near Heatley Avenue on Mclean Park

Vancouver Specials are not as common in Strathcona, Vancouver's oldest neighbourhood, as in other East Vancouver areas. The standard Special plan designed for 33 ft lots was proportionally shrunk down here to fit Strathcona's early 25 ft lots. The current homeowner purchased this high-perched 1973 Special with a view in 1998 as a means to get onto what she felt is the best block in the neighbourhood. Surrounded by 100 year-old heritage homes, it was overlooked by many potential buyers because of its "lack of character".

During a self-managed, low-budget renovation project, she created a warm, contemporary and more open home. Inspired by the view of the park and mountains and the potential for more light and air, she opened up the wall between the kitchen and the dining room and upgraded the windows. The resourceful renovation included the introduction of a rental suite on the main floor and a wood refinishing workshop under the car-port. She was positively surprised to discover the house had 2' x 8' 'bomb-shelter' grade framing and an original metal roof that is still in great shape after 40 odd years. Removing the old furnace system with all its ducting (which was occupying a 3' cavity between the floors) allowed for excellent ceiling height in the suite. Small electric in-wall fan heaters in select rooms replaced the entire furnace system and keep bills extremely low. With newly insulated walls some of the fans are rarely turned on even in the winter. Part of the original design in Vancouver Specials is a direct flow of air from front to back doors, providing natural and free ventilation all year round.

In a neighbourhood like Strathcona where old houses are constantly getting maintained and upgraded, construction materials are often swapped and recycled. Parquet flooring, that the homeowner chose to replace with reclaimed maple flooring, found a home across the lane. Excess insulation ordered for a warehouse conversion at the corner was used in the carport ceiling, when it was closed in to make a workshop. Another local contribution is the beautiful custom metal railing made by a Strathcona sculptor who works with reclaimed metal, wood and stone.

"One of the best, but overlooked features in Specials is the back balcony over the carport" claims the owner. How many homes can boast a 400 sqft outdoor sitting area that is both covered and private, has clothes lines for two families (dryers are rarely used in this house in spring and summer), and room for herb & tomato planters? Most Vancouver Specials can!

4 1273 East 29th Avenue

East 29th just west of Knight Street

In today's real estate market it is not uncommon for two families, or an extended family, to look for a house together. Many people looking for a house to fit this type of arrangement discover quite quickly (and often reluctantly) that Vancouver Specials can not only handle a shared configuration, they were designed for it! For the current owners in this house, "reluctant" would have been an understatement, as they started out their house search instructing their realtor "Not a Vancouver Special!" But in the end, this 1973 Special on E 29th was everything they were looking for: the potential for a spacious, child friendly unit for a young couple above, a smaller one bedroom unit for Mom below and an attached office with a separate entrance for her psychotherapy practice. Turning an original rough & ready Italian 'summer kitchen' (where homemade tomato sauce, wine and salami were made in industrial quantities over decades) into a discreet counselling room is not a makeover that most people can envision. But for this family, who completed their self-managed renovation in 2006, insight and creativity was their forte.

Each unit has a different design approach: below is 'Contemporary-Traditional', above is 'Retro-Modern'. Notwithstanding their different tastes, both units found creative ways to work with the existing architectural elements in the house, and adjust them to their liking through non-invasive means. Simple solutions such as colour change, reduced ornamentation, updated hardware and appliances are enough to bring new life to an outdated space.

In most renovations the demolition phase is hectic. In this case, very little was taken away, but the transformation is immense. Downstairs, a hallway running through the unit was eliminated but no walls were knocked down. Instead it was repurposed in sections and became an extension to the office on one side and a generous pantry on the other. Upstairs, the desire for a more open feel did not result in layout change or structural complications. Their simple solution was to completely eliminate the upper kitchen cabinets, and introduce an opening between the kitchen and dining room. Sophisticated design pieces, light colours and contemporary textures work surprisingly well with retained, sometimes tweaked 1970s features such as the black & white fireplace, a wood panelled feature wall, original oak flooring, textured ceilings, valances and even some original light fixtures.