

The 'special' Vancouver Special

Since its first appearance in 1965 the ubiquitous Vancouver Special has been a fixture in our city's landscape. With their flat fronts, boxy shapes, and low pitched roofs, these homes are regionally unique because they were designed to optimize the use of a 33 ft. wide City lot under the RS-1 District Zoning Schedule. The original stock-plan design, that could be purchased from a stock plan office for about \$65, was probably drafted in collaboration with a local builder with adjustments to adapt to various lot sizes and client needs. Given the regularity this design was submitted at City Hall, permits were issued quickly and it was not unusual for a Special to be built in a few weeks time. By 1985 there were an estimated 10,000 houses in the city.

The initial market for Specials were families who had emigrated from post-war Europe and were looking for affordable, modern housing to improve the quality of their lives. The house design was affordable because the first floor could be used for extended family members or rented out to help pay the mortgage. As the Special spread, immigrant patterns changed. In the 1970s, China and South Asia were 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.

Many Specials don't deliver on energy efficiency. Original low-cost construction included single-glazed aluminum windows and roofs that were poorly insulated. Owners have improved the energy efficiency of the homes by replacing windows and doors, upgrading mechanical systems and adding insulation.

The Vancouver Specials on tour demonstrate how the homes can remain relevant for modern family living. Each boasts its own personal twists and technical upgrades.

We wish you an enjoyable and educational day.

GUIDELINES FOR VISITORS

- » The houses are open for visiting from 12 to 5pm in whatever order you prefer. No earlybirds or latecomers.
- » Attendees must each have their own individual ticket regardless of age (infants are the exception).
- » Children under 6 cannot attend the event. Infants in front carriers admitted.
- » Expect a line up outside some of the homes.
- » Interior photography is prohibited except by designated and identified tour photographers.
- » Please leave your pets at home.
- » When parking, do not block driveways or streets.
- » Leave large bags and backpacks in your car or at home.
- » No food, drink or smoking on tour properties.
- » Avoid touching furniture, art and household items.
- » Note that washroom facilities are not provided in the houses.



1. 608 Union St Union between Princess and Heatley Avenues

Built as part of phase three (1976-79) of the Strathcona Area Housing Society's four-phase project to build housing for the neighbourhood's residents on lots that lay vacant after the final stage of the City's urban renewal scheme in Strathcona was halted, this "Joe Wai Special" is a home with a very interesting history.

The homeowners bought the home from an art curator in the spring of 2008 and began renovating in April 2009. They started by adding ten feet onto the back of the main floor, enabling them to create an open concept living area housing the living room, kitchen and dining room. An aluminum-framed patio door and walls of glass facing south flood the space with natural light and provide a close connection with the outdoors. In the kitchen, the homeowners created a modern feel by taking out the linoleum flooring and adding new appliances, countertops, and cabinetry.

On the second floor, the homeowners changed the front-facing master bedroom into a spacious child's bedroom, and knocked out two small bedrooms with closets to make space for an enlarged bathroom and a south-facing master bedroom. Notable features of the upstairs renovation include glass tiling on the floors and walls of the bathroom as well as a modern tub, and in the master bedroom, a deck that doubles as a peaceful outdoor room and a sun-filled place to hang-dry laundry.

Other changes undertaken by the homeowners included: replacing the roof, removing the red "door-to-nowhere" leading outside from the front bedroom that the previous owner had added with the intention of building a balcony, and reflooring the whole interior with FSC certified American Walnut from Wide Plank Flooring in Chilliwack.

By renovating this "Joe Wai Special," the homeowners have adapted the dwelling to suit their needs without compromising the integrity of a home that is important to the history of Strathcona.



The Vancouver Heritage Foundation

THIS BROCHURE IS YOUR TICKET

Saturday Sept 24th 2011
12-5pm



TOUR PASSPORT

With this numbered brochure in hand, you're ready for a great experience! All you need now is:

- 1 a pair of shoes that can easily be removed as you will be required to remove them at the entrance to every house.
- 2 a Vancouver street map to help you find the participating houses.
- 3 make sure to present this brochure at each house.



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, economy and 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 city that repairs and reuses its older buildings rather than demolish them.

THANK YOU!

The Vancouver Special Tour 2011 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.

photography:
Martin Knowles Photo/Media
mkphotomedia.com

research support:
City of Vancouver Archives

special thanks:
To the 2011 homeowners who generously opened their homes!

house captains and volunteers:
Roberta Robertson, Jean Fraser, Karen Russell, Paul Nurse, Annalies Camfferman

Michael Kluckner, Christine Allen, Kim Davison, Sherry Fraser, Yuri Artibise, Gerry Teahan, Duane Cromwell, Siobhan McCormick, Richard Keate, Helen Wood, Ian Gray, Stephanie McWilliams, Christine Bouchard, Stewart Burgess, Jack Fraser, Louise Klaassen, Donna-Mae Coulter, Imbi Harding, Phillip Harding, Sooz Klinkhamer, Wayne Worden, Gloria Burgess, Kathie Road, Judy Finch, Jane Banfield, Judith Levy, Shirley Cutts, Rosemary Lawrence, Bonnie Thiele, Jo-ann Hilton, Martin Ferries, Sarah Gillies, Peter Mustard, Rebecca Watt, June Harrison, Beryl Allen, Adam Fitch, Brenda Sawyer, Phyllis Burk, Barbara Crowther, Pat Canning, Menora Tse, Trewin Chan, Brenda Draney, Sheila Butt and Lindsay Wilkinson.

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



2. 2057 East 3rd Ave

E 3rd between Lakewood and Semlin Drives

Although not originally interested in a Vancouver Special when they started house-hunting, by the time that the current owners moved into this home in February 2010 they knew that it met all of their criteria for a new place to live: a location in Grandview, a view overlooking Vancouver, room for a good sized rental suite downstairs, and the potential to be opened up to create a more spacious living area.

As is visible from the exterior, the homeowners have done well to integrate old and new design features into this 1983 Vancouver Special. While they maintained the original brick siding and wood front doors on the first storey, they updated the second storey with cedar siding and wood-framed French doors that lead out onto a balcony enclosed by cedar planters.

A few changes were made on the main floor of the interior to open up the space. The homeowners raised the sunken living room floor by 14 inches and removed a railing that originally separated this space from the dining room. They also knocked out the kitchen wall and added multi-paned French doors at both ends.

The homeowners changed many other aspects of the interior. They added all new windows to replace the originals that had failed, resurfaced the tile flooring with hardwood, and remodelled the kitchen adding Silestone countertops and plywood millwork along with an island and gas stove. The kitchen also now houses a full-wall cupboard and computer station along one side.

In the master bedroom, the homeowners raised the ceiling and took out a built-in closet. This extra space was used to add a shower to the ensuite bathroom and a stacking washer-dryer in the hallway.

Changes such as these have added spaciousness and comfort to a home that provided a good base from which to work, and while the homeowners have updated their Vancouver Special to meet 21st century tastes, they have maintained stylistic elements that serve as a link to an earlier moment in our city's history.



3. 2064 East 3rd Ave

E 3rd between Lakewood and Semlin Drives

Originally built for an Italian-Canadian family in 1973, this Vancouver Special has been thoroughly transformed since the current owners bought it in 2005. With the expertise of architect Stephanie Robb, the owners have created a home that meets the highest standards of modernist and sustainable design while still retaining the essence of a 'Special'.

The front of the house was not altered dramatically but instead thoughtfully updated in key areas with the original balcony and railing remaining. After some unavoidable damage resulting from window enlargement and replacement, the original brick façade on the lower level was covered with vertical channel cedar which has been painted black and contrasted with a blue front door with aluminum detailing and hardware. In contrast to the front of the house, the front landscape received a dramatic makeover. Major changes included replacing the original front lawn and cedar hedging with a dry creek and a naturalistic planting design comprised of native and climate tolerant species, as well as removing the original wrought iron gate that had brick columns and classical urns.

With the intent of opening up the house and creating better flow and connection through the living spaces, the interior was completely gutted. The original living and dining room footprints were retained but all bedrooms and bathrooms were reconfigured to optimize space and light. On the second floor, a series of open living spaces wrap around the master bedroom, including a walk-in closet and ensuite bathroom. The kitchen was re-built from the ground up.

In the rear of the house, a dramatic loft space was created by removing a section of the second floor. Overlooked by the kitchen and an office space, the loft contains a built-in sectional on the ground floor where the former cold cellar once stored wine and cheese. Also on the ground floor, the former summer kitchen was converted to a self-contained one-bedroom suite. The remainder of this floor was reconfigured as a laundry, workshop, guest bedroom and bathroom for the main dwelling.



4. 3247 Commercial Drive

Access only via lane on Fleming Street off 18th Avenue

Please note: This house is staged as part of its sales and marketing campaign.

The current owners, two builders with an appreciation for Vancouver Specials, have transformed this 1980 house into a home that exudes modern living while keeping the unique features of the Special intact.

The homeowners purchased the house, perched high above Commercial Drive, because they could see the potential to create a magnificent home. The house provides 2,734 sq ft of above grade living over three levels. The owners have completely renovated the house to an extremely high standard with all the specifications one could ask for, including a 'basement' suite finished to the same first-class standard as the rest of the house.

A standout aspect of this renovation is the astonishing amount of details and finishing touches incorporated into the home by the builders, from the maple hardwood floors to the built-in media system, the glass railings to the heated bathroom floors, the rebuilt deck off the upstairs master bedroom to the Chef's kitchen!

An 8ft ceiling in the living room was removed to reveal an 11ft vaulted ceiling accentuating a feeling of space and brightness, further enhanced by the expanse of windows framing the views of the city, mountains and skytrain. The original fireplace stonework has been cleaned and polished and complemented by custom-made concrete hearths becoming striking features of the living rooms of both the main level and basement suite.

Externally, the front of the house has retained the original brick and stucco finishes updated with a cool grey paint scheme and halogen lighting recessed into the soffits, creating a dramatic night-time presence. A garden makeover adds to the house's impressive curb appeal. To the rear of the house an enclosed custom-built cedar and iron wood patio is adorned by an edible ornamental garden.

Although this house was purchased to update for sale, it embodies a beautiful vision of the current owners while enriching the original workmanship of the house.



5. 384 E 38th Ave

E 38th between Prince Edward and Sophia Streets

The orange and grey paint scheme makes an exciting statement – the current homeowners have their own vision for this 1977 Vancouver Special! After spending two years searching for just the right Vancouver Special to come up for sale in this neighbourhood, the house was purchased three and a half years ago by a couple, both landscape architects, as an ideal place to raise their young family.

When the house was purchased, the front garden consisted of only lawn and one lonely rhododendron. With their landscape architecture talents put to good use, a dramatic transformation of the garden greets visitors. Twenty six vine maples have been planted with an understory of woodland plants, creating a palette that evokes a westcoast forest landscape. This kind of landscape has typically been used in conjunction with westcoast modern architecture on larger lots (for example, Arthur Erikson and BC Binning mid-century architecture), but the homeowners thought it would be an interesting and bold challenge to try this on their 33' wide lot as they believe that this type of landscape goes well with post and beam architecture typical to Vancouver Specials.

This house proves that a small amount of demolition can dramatically transform a space - only one wall was removed between the old kitchen and dining room creating an open plan living space with a beautiful new kitchen as the centerpiece. The hall wall remains to keep some separation from the living space and the bedrooms. As the homeowners are updating this house in stages many of its original features currently remain. Original windows, brickwork, decking (now with a fresh coat of paint) and bathrooms in pristine condition (apart from the installation of more water efficient toilets) are retained. The living room is fairly untouched and is complemented by some mid-century modern furniture from the owner's grandfather and artwork from her mother, Jane Adams. A unique aspect of this Vancouver Special is its basement. The homeowner stated that she wanted a house with 'good bones' – an unfinished basement that has been only minimally altered since the house was built showcases the quality workmanship and construction techniques of the 1970s Vancouver Special allowing visitors to examine these 'good bones' for themselves!

This home offers visitors a realistic example of updating a Vancouver Special – homeowners enjoying the experience of altering the space to suit their needs - as time and money allows.