

## 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 1 to 5pm in any order you prefer. No earlybirds or latecomers.
- Attendees must each have their own individual ticket & be at least 6 years of age (infants in front carriers may attend without a ticket, no other exceptions).
- No cell phone use permitted inside homes.
- 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 & backpacks in your car or at home.
- No food, drink or smoking on tour properties.
- Refrain from touching furniture, art and household items.
- No washroom facilities are provided in the houses, and you will be asked to remove your shoes in all homes.
- Homes are not wheelchair accessible.

THIS BROCHURE IS YOUR TICKET

SATURDAY  
SEPT. 22<sup>nd</sup> | 1pm - 5pm



## VANCOUVER SPECIAL HOUSE TOUR



## TOUR PASSPORT

With this numbered brochure in hand, you're ready for a great experience! **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.
- 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 to our Tour Sponsor:

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## THANK YOU!

The Vancouver Special Tour is only possible through the tremendous effort of over 90 people who volunteered their time, expertise and homes. We appreciate all of their contributions to ensure the success of this Tour.

Photography: Martin Knowles Photo/Media  
[mkphotomedia.com](http://mkphotomedia.com)

Special thanks to all of the 2012 homeowners who generously opened their homes!

House Captains: Debbie & Jack Allen, Stewart Burgess, Sheila Butt, Paul Nursey & Karen Russell.

Volunteers: Christine Allen, Beryl Allen, Barbara Baker, Jane Banfield, Christiane Bouchard, Shelley Bruce, Gloria Burgess, Kristy Burnett, Annalies Camfferman, Pat Canning, Myles Constable, Kimberley Davison, Sara Deter, Brenda Draney, Dianne Dy, Martin Ferries, Margeurite Ford, Sherry Fraser, Christine Giesbrecht, Joan Gilbert, Carol Gordon, Imbi & Phillip Harding, Melissa Hardwick, June Harrison, Jo-ann Hilton, T Horvath, Emily Huser, Misty Jorgensen, Jackie Kanyuk, Richard Keate, Michael Kluckner, Martin Knowles, Anne Lidstone, Sofia Lin, Nancy Love, Bonnie Low, Laverne MacFadden, Ursula MacLeod, Debra McGerrigle, Stephanie McWilliams, Peter Mustard, Carol Nest, Adele Oliver, Farshid Rafiei, Steve Rom, Brenda Sawyer, Alexandra Shaw, Penny Street, Hilary Taylor, Jill Teasley, Elizabeth Vezina, Phil & Rebecca Watt, Evelyn Wong, Helen Wood & Wayne Worden!

**Vancouver Heritage Foundation**

402 - 510 W. Hastings St. Vancouver BC V6B 1L8  
604.264.9642 [www.vancouverheritagefoundation.org](http://www.vancouverheritagefoundation.org)



## 2. 4596 Windsor Street

3 blocks East of Fraser, at E. 31st Avenue

A number of successful surface changes have kept this 1976 Special both largely intact and an affordable renovation. The family of three (humans) has been here over three years and includes a 6 year old, Spartacus the cat, Pepe the rescue Chihuahua from Orange County, and a second dog and 2 more cats. They needed wide open effective space, but not necessarily a lot of space. The changes made have created friendly, well used front and back yards, a welcoming entry with a cool new brushed steel door, and only a few walls removed to open the kitchen and living spaces up for family living.

The entry foyer is tiled with inexpensive 12 x 24 porcelain tiles, and the stair treads and flooring upstairs is all new three-quarter inch birch hardwood installed by the owner who is also a contractor – this was a DIY renovation done by a skilled builder. Material costs were approximately \$65,000. Mechanical improvements were limited to upgrading the plumbing and some new wiring, but the original breaker box and furnace are intact as are the windows. Insulation made the difference for improving energy efficiency. The kitchen and bathrooms all have brand new fixtures and cabinets, but the fireplace was retained as was the back porch. No drywall was removed so this house illustrates what you can achieve with a considerable amount of retention and a limited budget.

On the front exterior, the porch has been shortened (note the exposed rafters above the door where the porch extended) but deepened with a new slate tile deck surface and cedar railing and siding that sits on top of the original brickwork. Small changes like new address numbers make a significant difference to reviving the façade. The stucco remaining has just been painted.

An existing basement suite was reconfigured to make more sense and a new private entry was put through the laundry room. The proof of the success of the open living in this house is that the family has adequate room while retaining a ground level rental suite. Blacktop in the back yard was recycled to level the yard and allow for the landscaping. Spartacus and Pepe like to wrestle in the living room and relax on the back patio – the house has proven to be well suited to work, play and contemporary living.



## 3. 593 W 20th Avenue

20th Avenue just West of Cambie

This property not only has a beautifully updated Vancouver Special (constructed in 1966), but the landscaped gardens also provide an oasis in the heart of the city. The owner of this Vancouver Special was looking for a residence near his workplace, and was immediately charmed by the gardens on the property. He happily credits the previous owners with interior and exterior updates, which incorporated contemporary finishes but kept the original floor plans and stunning hardwood floors. It's believed the dramatic chandelier in the stairwell was part of the original home as well.

The front façade has had a makeover with new windows and French doors that open out to the front balcony, providing a view of the water fountain that anchors the front yard. The ground floor has a sizeable entry leading to a living space that serves as a music room. The baby grand piano, which serves as the centerpiece of this room, was part of the home purchase. The ground floor also includes a bathroom and laundry room. The rest of the basement is occupied by a finished basement suite, which was also refurbished during the renovation. The basement suite will also be open on the tour. Like most Specials, the main floor and rental suite enjoy high ceilings. In addition, the rental suite's floor plan incorporates French doors between the bedroom and living room that can be opened to create the sense of an even larger space in this already comfortably sized suite.

Noticeable first is the substantial landscaping, which was not typical of Specials but adds a significant element of warmth and liveability to this residence, one block from Douglas Park. The landscaping softens the house with sizeable planter boxes under the upstairs windows and vines that grow on the house. The garden requires regular seasonal maintenance, but most of the plantings are perennials with the exception of a summer vegetable patch and some of the flowers. The hardness of the plants was intentional so that an irrigation system was not required. A concrete drive in the back was removed and replaced with grassy open brick creating a permeable driveway. Flanking the driveway is a well-established garden of lawn, raised flower and herb beds, and seasonal vegetables.

One challenge often encountered with Specials is limited storage space. The owner intends to put in more storage and add built-in lighting to new and existing closets. Apart from storage concerns that now have a plan, he is thrilled with the house and enjoyed his first summer eating his own fresh greens and vegetables.



## 4. 3210 W 15th Avenue

Four blocks East of MacDonald at Trutch Street

Built in 1965, this Special retains its floor plan on the main floor with only some walls removed to make the front bedroom an expansive part of the living space, and to open the hallway and kitchen/living spaces. The interior stairwell is in its original location, unusual for a Special. The stairs were surrounded by walls, and the original iron railing was removed and replaced with an open stairwell and glass railing system that facilitates the openness of the main floor.

Because the ground floor is below grade, this Special has a short flight of stairs up to the entrance door and a half flight up to the second floor inside. The ground floor/basement was a rabbit warren of small rooms and awkward spaces that made little sense, so the basement was gutted to the studs and configured into bedrooms to replace the removed bedroom on the main floor. The new configuration of ductwork allowed the basement ceiling to be even higher. The owner chose to renovate for a single-family dwelling without a ground floor secondary suite.

All systems were replaced including plumbing and fixtures, ductwork, and electrical. The drywall walls and ceilings were removed to enable the change-out so the interior walls and ceilings are newly finished. A new high efficiency furnace heats the home. Wood wall paneling was removed, but the beautiful inlay hardwood flooring was refinished and stained a rich dark tone. Part of the floor between the kitchen and dining room has been skillfully repaired and extended where a wall was removed.

The back and front porches are unchanged and the railings are original. The back porch was watertight and a new wood surface was all that was needed. The garage had previously been open, but they enclosed it and added the beautiful slat cedar doors. The roof was in good shape when the owner acquired the house in February of 2010, so the only changes have been the addition of insulation and skylights. The renovation was completed within three months and they moved in May of 2010. The windows are all original as the owner decided the best investment was in insulation.

The landscaping had a great deal of mature plantings that were retained and added to. The back yard had a concrete drive which was removed and replaced with a drivable grass surface. A chain link fence was also removed and replaced with a custom made fence around the back yard.



## 5. 3010 Alma Street

One block West of Dunbar at W. 15th Avenue

These new homeowners, a family of six, wanted to find a home large enough to accommodate enough living and storage space without compromising aesthetics. They discovered this home and fell in love with its ceiling heights and exposed beams. While this Special is much smaller than the 5,000 sq ft 1929 Tudor home the family moved from, the open plan has proven to be a more liveable space.

The previous owner/developer bought the 1961 Special two years ago from original owners with the understanding he would retain the house. The interior was gutted to the frame, as it contained asbestos drywall. The tar and gravel roof surface was replaced with highly reflective silver metal to prevent solar gain. The 2 x 6 rafters were retained and insulated with expansive spray foam to retain the ceiling heights (vs furring down). The exterior brick is original and was painted with a durable, masonry stain. The vaulted ceilings were created with new, exposed glue-lam beams that run the length of the house. The previous structure had some exposed beams running N/S, and concealed ones above the ceiling running E/W. To carry the structural load of the new beams, vertical posts were installed ground floor to roof, and full shear walls had to be added. During the deconstruction of the house, the developer found the original exposed "beams" were 3 laminated 2 x 10's that had been veneered to match the wood paneling in the house.

A ground floor suite, installed by the developer, was removed to make this into a single family dwelling. It would be simple to re-enclose the foyer and return the ground floor to a suite. The bedroom facing north had been made into a kitchen, and was walled in to add another bedroom. Aside from sleeping four children comfortably, the ground floor also provides water and mountain views, which are especially striking in the winter months when the trees lose their leaves.

The original garage had a flat roof which had become a birdbath as it didn't drain properly!. The City allowed the developer to move it eighteen inches south and add an extra three feet. The original carport slab was used, foundation walls for framing were added, and a new floor surface sloping toward the lane was poured for drainage. All the 2x6 framing lumber of the original garage was re-used for the roof.

The previously covered back deck was converted to an open deck with stairs with open risers for light to penetrate the ground floor. Light travels throughout the house now with the addition of skylights and the high angular transom at the south end of the hall.