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WHAT LIES BENEATH

This user-friendly, pragmatic house once raised philosophical debate over the soul

The tiny, perfect home

By SCOTT WEIR

The Gothic cottage is a small, perfect gem of a house type that is repeated across Ontario. Examples of the Gothic cottage can be seen in other parts of the world, but if ever there was an architectural type that could be called "great Upper Canadian," this is it. Perhaps more than any other house form, when done properly, the Gothic cottage is, to my mind's eye, the very archetype of what a home should look like, the friendly face of architecture. But, when mucked about with or left to decay, a Gothic cottage can look like poverty.

The type is recognizable by its symmetrical storey-and-a-half façade and small gable centred above the main entrance. They can also be very small — a single storey with three rooms — or large, with two storeys, grandly scaled interiors and high ceilings. In towns such as Brantford, Stratford and Cambridge, they were constructed as large sprawling houses with lofty ceilings and generous proportions. In Toronto, many Gothic cottages were constructed as parts of rows in Cabbagetown, Riverdale and other areas of the core, where the working class lived in the mid-to-late 19th century. These days, clever renovators, skilled in the art of placing a Japanese maple or two, can transform them into irresistible tidbits for the Sunday floppy-hat set to coo over.

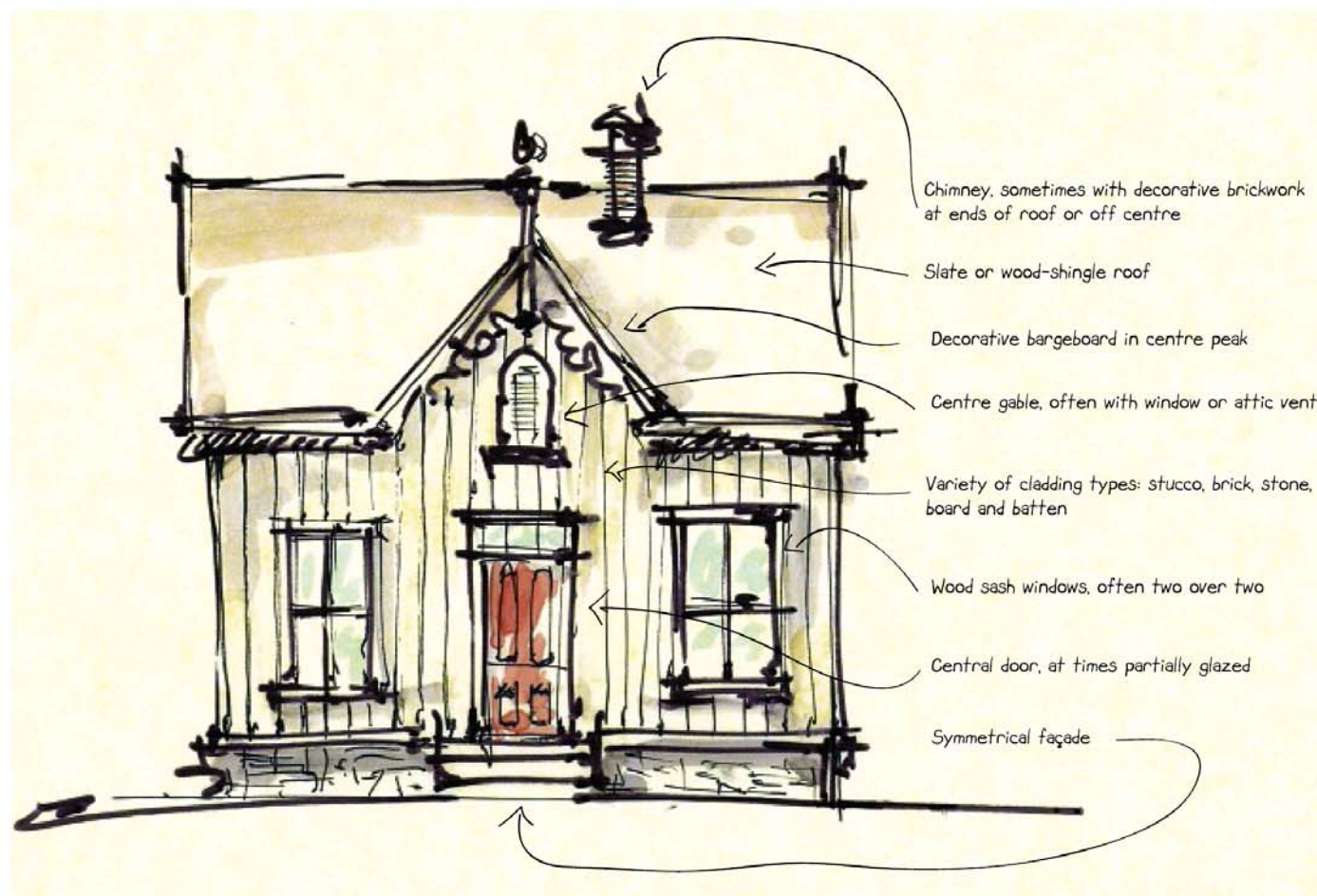
The original form of the house was a simple end-gabled box. And for a builder, there's nothing simpler than a house with a pitched roof, centre door balanced by a single window on either side, chimney somewhere up and to the right (and maybe a bit crooked drawn with purple crayon). But our forebears were soon disheartened to learn that ice and snow would crash down on them while they attempted to open their front doors. So the centre gable emerged, the peak directing snow away from the entrance stoop. Above that, in larger houses with second floors, an often highly ornamental window provided light into the hall or a bedroom. In smaller houses, it vented the attic.

Gothic was as much a state of being as a house style. Within the British architectural tradition, intense arguments raged over the proper and improper uses of certain Gothic elements, and misuse drew speculation about the decrepit state of one's soul. The discourse between classically informed designers and the followers of the Gothic could get even more violent, depending on the year.

While credit for the origin of this particular house type is murky, variations of the type were popularized by such architects as the American Andrew Jackson Downing. In the 19th century, North America was a continent flooding with immigrants, all requiring shelter that could be quickly built by an uneducated construction trade. Architects like Downing published manuals with instructions for builders and homeowners on how to assemble a structure, depending on their particular taste. The manuals included designs for fireplaces, decorative wood elements, plans, elevations and even landscape recommendations, showing layouts for grounds and types of apple trees that could be planted to supply domestic animals with feed throughout the year. Most importantly, there were lessons on how to take a tree and turn it into building materials.

One of these designs won an award at the 1851 Great Exhibition in London. Magazines like the *Canadian Farmer* published variations of it, modified by architect James Smith, and published them for use by the rural populace. The Gothic

The grace of a small elegant house is a wonderful thing. The pressures placed on a house by dense populations in and around it are enormous and constant; materials erode and finishes wear away. Over a lifetime, a house can lose everything that once made it elegant and interesting, as homeowner after homeowner tries to make it larger, warmer, easier to maintain and brighter. After a century or more of this piecemeal — albeit well-intentioned — alteration, what began as a beautiful exterior is often left shrouded under a thick disguise. This series examines several Toronto house types and describes their original façades.



ALL IMAGES SCOTT WEIR

Gothic cottages were often lightly built with thin walls and minimal foundations. As the materials aged, the wood rotted, the brick spalled and the windows let in drafts, creating eyesores like the home below. But if renovated and updated respectfully, like the homes at left, the Gothic cottage can become a noble little dwelling.



cottage and Gothic farmhouse were modified by Mr. Smith and quickly became the design of choice for farm dwellers. Outside of Toronto, these houses dot the landscape in large numbers, often referred to as Ontario farmhouses or Ontario cottages, constructed of brick, stone and wood. They often contain a large interior, with broadly proportioned rooms, wide central stair halls and ample light entering through large windows. Because the proportioning of the type was flexible, it could be stretched upward to accommodate maximum height in the bedrooms of the second floor. Similarly, variations could be applied to the basic frame, adding porches, trefoil windows, carved wood ornament and exotic materials.

But because they were often constructed by developers to house the working class, they were not always built using

materials with great longevity. Many of them were lightly built, with minimal foundations and thin walls. As the buildings and their materials aged, the wood rotted, the brick spalled and the windows let in drafts. What were once noble little dwellings became messy-looking embarrassments.

Energy-conservation incen-

What once were noble became messy-looking embarrassments

tive programs in the 1970s encouraged homeowners to replace their old windows with white aluminum thermal units. Buildings were often reclad in aluminum siding, angel stone and Insulbrick in an attempt to cut

down on maintenance or clean up a tired façade. The fanatical pursuit of a completely maintenance-free house drove homeowners to ruin many a fine building, and these simple cottages were at the front of the line. Enlarge a window, reclad the exterior, add a weird arport and the inherent harmony of the building becomes unrecognizable.

Many versions of this house featured bargeboard in the gable with a finial and drop at the peak. They were often built of wood stud construction, with the walls covered in either wood boards, brick, stone or roughcast

(an unpainted stucco). Depending on the time period, the windows can follow a variety of formats. The upper window is often an indication of the leaning of the house, pointed for Gothic, arched for Italianate.

Size is a challenge with these houses. Generally, they were constructed as two-bedroom houses, often with a living room beside and a kitchen behind. While it might sell in condos, 700 square feet in a house is often a challenge to inhabit. The great thing about these buildings is that they tended to be wider than the later bay-and-gable type, sitting on generous 22- to 28-foot urban lots. With width comes opportunity, and owners have creatively adapted their houses, digging the basement down a few feet to double the living space, adding a wing behind, creating courtyard spaces and intermediary zones between front of house and back,

and building up into the attic, raising shed dormers over the rear of the house.

The simplicity of these buildings demands that their proportions be respected or at least responded to in order to achieve the best effect. One of the most satisfying clusters of Gothic cottages is in Cabbagetown, where rows of beautifully presented façades negate the need for speed bumps. The type can run the range from a fine restoration in stucco and slate to aluminum siding, from brick to angel stone, from wood to concrete board with metal battens. The diversity of the materials makes the style rich, while the consistency of the form ties it all together.

Next instalment: The bay and gable house.

Scott Weir is an associate at architectural conservationists ERA Architects Inc.

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