

An infill innovator builds smart Strathcona homes

'On Halloween we get 300 kids up our stairs'

TREVOR BODDY
FROM FRIDAY'S GLOBE AND MAIL

Every city has leftover or under-used pieces of land in inner city neighbourhoods. In Vancouver, most inner city intensification has been either been neo-heritage re-building in and around the shells of historic houses, or else the banally predictable forms — and awkward interior spaces — of the up-and-down duplex we call the 'Vancouver Special.'

When it came to building his own urban home in the city's oldest neighbourhood, architect Bruce Haden wanted neither neo-heritage nostalgia nor the decidedly un-special Vancouver Special. "No-one else was designing or building the kind of place I wanted to live in," says Mr. Haden, sitting at the dining room table of his own design in the townhouse spawned by these sentiments. "I wanted to show that a contemporary design could fit well into the historic context," says the architect of what was his largest project of his independent practice — he has since become a partner at the firm of Hotson Bakker Boniface Haden.

"I love Strathcona, because it is the only Vancouver neighbourhood that is both high density and street-oriented," says Mr. Haden, having lived for several years a couple of blocks down Hawks Street from the six-unit townhouse development he put together with Heather Tremain and Robert Brown of Resource Rethinking Building. While Strathcona has ebbed and flowed over the years — largely depending on influxes of the drug and prostitution trades from the adjacent Downtown Eastside — Mr. Haden liked the idea that corner variety stores persist in the area, respects its vital ethnic mix, and was drawn by the fact that it is home to many professional artists.

The project was sparked when a corner lot occupied by the long-established Koo's Garage became available. Mr. Haden and the developers soon decided that the high-ceilinged garage could be converted into two loft-like townhouses of about 1,100 square feet each, with four all-new units running from there through the former parking lot to the corner. Bruce Haden dubbed the project "Koo's Corner," and picked the south-facing 850 square foot corner townhouse for himself.

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The homes at Koo's Corner in Strathcona, finished in 2002, applied imaginative infill design to a regenerating neighbourhood. (*BRUCE HADEN*)

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Designed in 1999 and opened in 2002, Koo's Corner is one of Vancouver's earliest attempts to shape a more sustainable small urban development. Densification and continuity with the infrastructure of an existing community are both good environmental moves, as is the re-use of the old automotive shop's roof structure and walls. Home to too many knock-downs, Vancouver may be Canada's worst offender in having a 'throw-away' attitude to older commercial buildings and houses.

The three townhouse units have asymmetrical roofs, the south-facing slope's angle set for maximum efficiency for its solar collectors. These have now been installed on two of the three townhouses, supplementing domestic hot water. Floor and stair boards throughout are recycled from surplus 'glulams' — those ubiquitous west coast laminated beams. The glue binding each of the laminated layers in these composite beams was dissolved, and the contained character-filled boards within were salvaged. Finishes and built-ins avoid off-gassing materials, and Mr. Haden designed the garages to double as workspace/studios or even bedrooms, as the city gets less car-dependent.

Speaking of cars, the telling details of Bruce Haden's character are revealed in both his choice of automobile, and how he has customized it. Mr. Haden drives a Smart Car, but he has ordered custom side panels — in three shades of grey. In this he links to such west coast architects as Arthur Erickson, who long argued that the best colour palette for rainy Vancouver is grey-on-grey.

Koo's Corner would not have been possible had the Vancouver planning department not reduced a requirement for six parking spaces to five. Mr. Haden feels that relaxation of parking standards is one of the best ways to encourage densification and renewal in neighbourhoods like Strathcona. He offers this comment on the city's EcoDensity initiative: "We should start thinking about maximum parking spaces rather than minimum." He notes that many of his neighbours do not drive with so many transit options nearby, and that street parking remains easy. "We need a model of 'small equals sexy.'"

While there is a Bronfman Foundation-sponsored program called "Living Colours" that provides historically-accurate free paint to Strathcona residents to preserve their houses, Mr. Haden avoided these period hues in picking the yellow-ochre colour that dominates Koo's Corner. Similarly, his architectural forms are scaled and arrayed to complement the area's older wood frame residences, but there is not a stitch of period whirly-gigs or doodads in their detailing. According to the designer, the architecture is "respectful, but not imitative of the local vernacular."

One of the ways this is achieved is pushing out and boxing the major south-facing window of his own unit, to provide a vertical element to match the upright "Carpenter's Gothic" of nearby Strathcona houses. Another is to set the smallest of the six new residences — the architect calls it the "knuckle" unit — back from both the former garage on one side, and the three townhouses on the other. This provides a visual break between the respectfully-recycled and the un-apologetically-contemporary looks that flank it.

Now that he has been living there a few years, Mr. Haden's only regrets are that he did not make dual-flush toilets standard, and that the city did not relax front yard requirements so that the glass-roofed and -sided balconies could have been extended out a foot or two further, making room for a table and chairs for street-side dining on summer evenings.

The architect summarizes Koo's Corner's success in community building with two observations: "All six units share one ladder and one shovel," and "On Halloween we get 300 kids up our stairs."

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