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Housing in Canada



The Vancouver Special *Redux*

by Christopher Macdonald



Traditional expectations of home ownership are in Vancouver increasingly challenged by a housing market confined by geography and exacerbated by a continuing influx of external investment. In the face of this challenge, the creative reassessment of the circumstances surrounding the project of the single family house should become obligatory, including a thoughtful consideration of how our persisting aspiration for freestanding individual houses impacts pressing collective interests in "green" and ultimately sustainable development patterns.

Common to most Canadian cities, Vancouver possesses a substantial stock of postwar bungalows. Their modest size, however, has increasingly encouraged the "teardown" syndrome in which sanctioned redevelopment potential is optimized. However widespread this practice has become, more recently other opportunities are being recognized and cultivated. In particular the presence of the uniquely local *Vancouver Special* presents itself as a site for reappraisal and transformation. The Special is the outcome of a particularly lean-spirited impulse in the provision of infill housing during the 1960s and 1970s. Unusual in its tersely expressed structural frame, the Special maximized site coverage and provided inexpensive habitable space on a standard city lot. The consequence of affordability resulted in immense popularity with small-scale builders and immigrant buyers, proliferating across nearly the entire spectrum of the city's residential neighbourhoods.

More importantly, the Special takes advantage of current zoning practice and Vancouver's benign climate to create shallow foundations, lifting the usual basement up to ground level. The traditional basement suite characteristic of bungalows and prewar craftsman houses is granted, in this single gesture, a degree of unprecedented civility. The opportunity for a more direct relationship between internal living spaces and the adjacent landscapes of yard and garden allowed for an

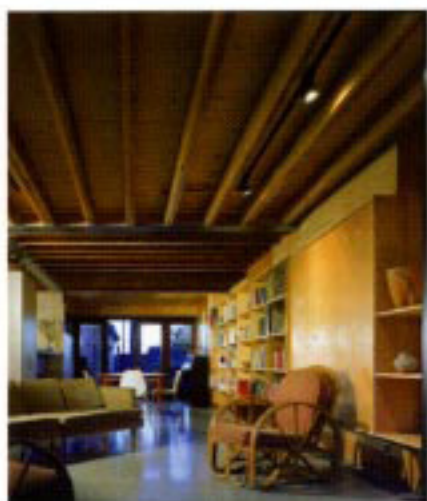
Above: composite photograph of original house (in the centre) in its context prior to the transformation. Clockwise from top right: the main living space; glowing front elevation of the renewed Vancouver Special; living areas on the ground floor with an understanding of the deconstructed aspect of an ubiquitous housing type; view of eating area; looking up the main stairwell.

efficient development of rental suites and at times an inversion of bedroom and living accommodations.

While habitually scorned by the local design community and eventually overtaken in popularity by the symmetrical-stucco-and-tiled-roof type as the choice of the modest builder's infill project, the Special nonetheless presents evidence of a decidedly modern and distinctly local ethos. In the project illustrated here, graduate architect Stephanie Robb, of Vancouver design practice Pechet + Robb Design, has embraced both the pragmatic virtue and the aesthetic potentials of the Special in the course of a major renovation project undertaken to provide a new home for her own family.

The project is founded on the entirely responsible premise of reusing the material artifact of the Special while subjecting it to a radical transformation and extension. Interior partitions have been excavated to reveal the spatial generosity that lurks beneath the Special's impulse to maximize structural efficiency and consolidate circulation and service needs. Areas of ceiling finish are withdrawn to further acknowledge the Special's carcass, while purpose-made cabinets are inserted—operating both at the scale of room enclosure as well as providing the local utility of built-in furniture.

The result is a stacked, loft-like spatial arrangement that accommodates the proprieties of children's bedrooms and out-of-sight storage with confidence and grace. The potential of the Special to engage



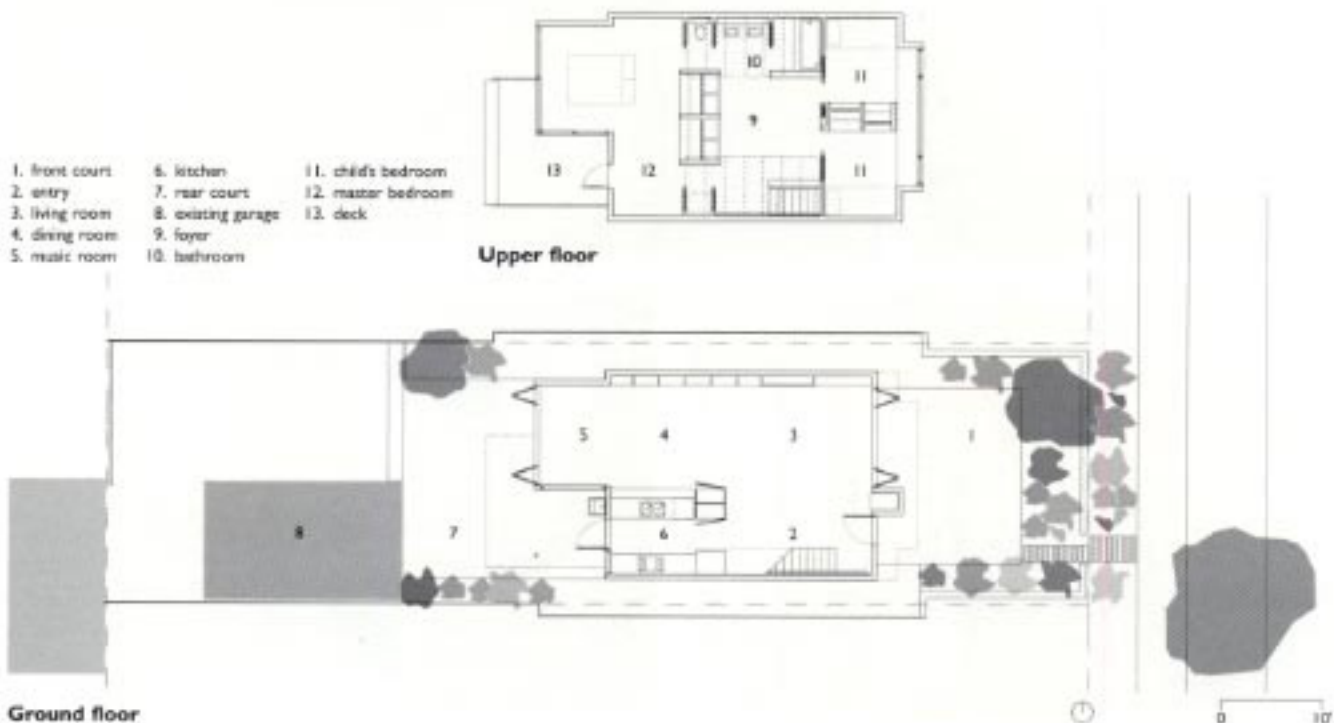


interior with garden spaces is also acknowledged, consistent with the sympathetic treatment of underlying structural framing that occurs as a motif within the design. New additions are clearly delineated in the context of the Special as found, and the wholesale upgrade of external doors and windows reminds us that current building prescriptions need not always inhibit design ambitions.

Pechet + Robb's characteristic wit and material restraint are evident throughout the project, as is the more serious and considered urbanism that may be observed across the varied scales of their practice. In a city that often assumes the obliteration of historical record as a matter of course, the project also declares a significant critical position: one that incidentally supports sustainable precepts of material reuse and local community resolve.

To the extent that this modest work reflects measured and articulate engagement with pressing local issues, it points to design activity as a form of ongoing critical research. As such—regrettably—it stands in stark relief against the schematic conventions of what constitutes so much of Vancouver's current housing practice. □

Christopher Macdonald is a graduate of the University of Manitoba and the Architectural Association in London, and is currently Director of the School of Architecture at the University of British Columbia. For a tantalizing glimpse of the Special's m.o. try Keith Higgins' site www.vancouver-special.com



Opposite: evening view from rear of house to the open and generous spaces of the living, dining and music rooms. Right: upper floor bathroom awash in ample skylighting.



Client: The Robb Family
Architect team: Stephanie Robb, Herman Kao
Structural: JPI Engineering Ltd.
Landscape: Judith Cowan
Contractor: Murray Wiseman, Jon Franklin
Area: 1,200 square feet
Budget: \$125,000
Completion: April 2002
Photography: Nic Lehouk

