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ARCHITECTURE

St. Catharines' hidden art & crafts treasures

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ST. CATHARINES, ONT. — It's hard to tell whether the whooshing noise rising up from behind the stately homes on Yates Street in St. Catharines comes from the rushing water of Twelve Mile Creek or the incessant traffic along Highway 406. Perhaps it's the mournful cries from the ghosts of a thousand steamer ships, which, during the 1800s, carried wheat, lumber and iron along these waters.

What is definitely evident, as architect Harald Ensslen and I pull up in front of a delicately composed home of brick and stone, is that some of the province's best examples of arts and crafts architecture are right here in this city of ancient — and current — canals.

Mr. Ensslen has invited me here on this warm late-summer day to recreate part of a house tour the Niagara Society of Architects organized in 2002. The tour was in conjunction with a gallery exhibit at Brock University that featured the work of Arthur Edwin Nicholson and Robert Ian Macbeth, two of the Niagara region's most talented architects.



Mr. Nicholson, who was born in Buffalo, and Mr. Macbeth, who immigrated from Inverness, Scotland, partnered in 1918 after firmly establishing their individual reputations. (The latter was responsible for completing Andrew Carnegie's Skibo Castle in 1912.) In 1930, they dissolved the partnership, but practised individually in the St. Catharines area.

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Harald Enssien outside the Mix home, where the current owners have hung Roycroft wallpaper to match the dinnerware in the 1925 home.

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The impetus behind the successful exhibit — a smaller version of which was displayed at St. Catharines City Hall earlier this year — was to remind people that architects design homes, too, Mr. Ensslen says, even "small, 1,500-square-foot" ones.

In the early 21st century, it's commonplace to "do it yourself." Big-box chains suggest anyone can build or renovate a home if they open their wallets and seek a little in-store advice. But in the early part of the last century, that was practically unthinkable.

"People hired architects to do houses because that's what you did," says Mr. Ensslen, a 1973 University of Toronto graduate. "And now, housing is such a commodity, [yet] people spend more on their home entertainment systems. . . . But the idea of hiring somebody and giving them \$10,000 or \$20,000 to design their house is beyond the pale," he laughs.

His words begin to ring true as we walk along Yates Street, admiring homes. There's the 1928 Cecil G. Horton residence, with its tall, tapering chimney, dramatic roofline and cut stones outlining a tiny arched window. And the "perfect corner house" at No. 52 (currently for sale at \$349,900), which practically rubs up against the sidewalk yet, thoughtfully, offers privacy via an entrance placed perpendicular to it.

We go past an example of Mr. Macbeth's solo work — an exquisite 1937 Prairie-style bungalow — and of the duo's late-period work, a rather wild 1928 Italianate job (proving that arts and crafts was a philosophy allowing for the incorporation of different architectural styles rather than a strict set of design rules). Then we come to the 1922 Henry Taylor residence, now owned by Moira Freshwater and James Wakil.

Waiting for our hosts to answer the doorbell, we admire the house next door, also a Nicholson and Macbeth, for its unusual wavy brick courses peppered with the odd "clinker" brick, and ruminate on how these houses were designed with pedestrians in mind rather than speeding automobiles.

"Welcome to the Addams Family house," jokes Ms. Freshwater as we enter her dark, cozy, masculine and highly original residence. "The only thing that we've touched really are the bathrooms," she continues, and then points to the all the dark wood.

"Why would anybody rip this out?"

Built by a successful brewer, the home once had a doorway in the library that led directly to the house next door, where his daughter lived, so he could visit and play cards. The half-timbered home presents itself as a small cottage to the street then secretly tumbles down its ravine lot at the back. Other notable features are the massive, solid limestone fireplace in the walkout living room in the basement living room, and the highly detailed wooden curtain in the adjacent hallway.

Our next stop is Glenridge Avenue and three neighbouring homes, the first of which was built in 1929 for judge Harry Binns and is now owned by Herb and Alice Schutz. Here, it's the extra-wide, wood-panelled reception hall that is most striking. When the many doors leading to various rooms are closed, they blend into the woodwork and practically disappear.

Next door, purists Murray and Silvia Miles have imported and hung Roycroft wallpaper to match the dinnerware in their 1925 home, built originally for lawyer A.E. Mix. They've also added a seamless family room addition, employing a "local stucco master," and continued the copper roof.

"It's the one really nice, bright room," says Mr. Miles, who, like myself, considers architectural drawings to be works of art and has many framed examples in his home.

At our last stop, the former 1926 LeRoy Peart residence, Mr. Ensslen and I marvel at the majestic two-storey living room with its "choir loft" balcony, and again speculate on why it has become so rare today to employ architects to design smaller houses. We decide that perhaps it's not for lack of desire, but rather because today's professionals are never sure how long they'll stay in one community.

"It's also a kick-the-tire kind of mentality," Mr. Ensslen adds. "Going through the design process takes a couple of years, and people don't have the patience or the time. They might be moved before the two years are up!"

Here in this pretty city of canals, however, the relationships between Nicholson and Macbeth homes and their owners seem very well entrenched indeed.

Dave LeBlanc hosts The Architourist on CFRB Wednesdays during Toronto at Noon and Sunday mornings.

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