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HOMES E

Lots of potential for Special treatment

VANCOUVER SPECIALS:
Once reviled, these homes are great makeover material

BY LENA SIN
STAFF REPORTER

Like many of us, Suzy Hupfau grew up loathing the "Vancouver Special" — that architectural eyesore of brick and stucco and lions on guard. So it was with great disbelief that Hupfau, 35, not only found herself living in one, but the owner of one in the winter of 2005.

"We had huge reservations. Huge, huge reservations. I grew up like everyone else with huge disdain for the Vancouver Special," says Hupfau.

But like so many young couples struggling to step onto the property ladder, Hupfau and her husband, Ian Cumming, gave up the dream of a pricey Craftsman home and resigned themselves to an eastside Vancouver Special that no one else had even bothered viewing.

And then they hoped to reinvent it — even on a small budget. Cumming, an art director for a video game company, started re-imagining the home with computer sketches and got more ideas from architect and family friend Margot Innes.

A few months later, the couple, working with Tasa Construction, pulled off the transformation by simply painting the exterior, installing graphic new window frames, a matching black door and a new aluminum railing on the second-floor balcony.

They also added a skirt roof over the front door to protect it from the elements. The reno was completed for just \$33,000.

"That's less than a kitchen and we were so pleased with the results," says Hupfau, who's now happily committed to the house.

Vancouver architect Stephanie Robb was among the first to champion the Vancouver Special style.

With its clean, boxy shape, Robb says the style can easily be converted into a modern dwelling.

In 1999, she bought an eastside Vancouver Special with the inten-



Suzy Hupfau and husband Ian Cumming revamped the exterior of their Vancouver Special (right) by painting, installing graphic new window frames and a matching black door and aluminum railing on the second-floor balcony (above). — SUBMITTED PHOTOS



tion of renovating it. But, interestingly enough, the city refused to issue a building permit.

"At the time, the city wasn't encouraging retention of Vancouver Specials for renovation. They were just hoping they would go away," says Robb. "They wanted us to tear it down and I flat out said no."

After 13 months of negotiation, Robb finally got her way and immediately started to transform her Special into an understated, modern home.

The exterior of the house was inspired by mashrabiyas, which are intricately carved, wooden balconies common in Islamic architecture. As such, the dominant feature of the front exterior is a wood-clad bay window that protrudes from the second floor. The ground

floor was also opened up by installing large, accordion doors that open onto the patio.

And the front and rear of the house was re-stuccoed and painted a warm grey.

Inside the house, Robb was inspired by cabin living and pared down the interior into an open-plan space with exposed wood framing. The entire renovation cost \$125,000 in 2000, although Robb estimates it would cost closer to \$400,000 in today's prices. (To see more photos of Stephanie Robb's Vancouver Special makeover, visit www.pechetandrob.com and click on "Lakeview Home" found under the "Buildings" tab.)

For those on a budget, Robb suggests painting the house and investing in a landscape designer to create a very good garden. For more



Architect Stephanie Robb made over the exterior of her Vancouver Special (right). It now features a wood-clad bay window that protrudes from the second floor and the ground floor was opened up by installing large, accordion doors that open onto the patio.



extensive renovations, she suggests hiring a qualified building designer or an architect through the Architectural Institute of B.C.

Elana Zysblat, programming director at the Vancouver Heritage Foundation, is holding a tour of renovated Specials this fall to convince non-believers of their potential.

"We're strong believers of their contribution to our architectural story. There's definitely so many of them and they've survived the test of time," says Zysblat.

These working-class homes were initially built to maximize space within the existing building code and were mostly aimed at new immigrants.

But they're functionality is still clearly relevant today with the focus on green living.

In fact, the Special could be seen

as the original "sustainable" home with its large, ground-floor suites capable of housing extended family, laundry lines drawn across the upper deck, or yard used for growing fruits and vegetables.

"It has a lot of elements that can be used in our quest for sustainability," says Zysblat.

Plus, what could be more green than a makeover in favour of a tear-down? "They have a terrible reputation, but that's what's making them turn into a trend. The people who've bought Vancouver Specials intentionally are very keen and very inspired and very passionate," she says.

The Vancouver Heritage Foundation's tour of Vancouver Specials is on Sept. 26. Look for our preview of the houses on the tour in Sunday Homes on Sept. 20.