

# Old idea floated as heritage fix

## ‘Powerful’ revitalization deals might slow pace of demolition

Michael Bruce used to build new homes on the west side as a way to keep busy after retiring.



*RICHARD LAM/PNG* Michael Bruce stands in front of a character home he is restoring on East 10th Avenue. Bruce is turning the home — which was built in 1904 and is seen below in a photo from 1924 — into two separate strata title homes, with a vintage-styled coach house at the rear.

But these days, the Point Grey resident has gone in a completely different direction — to the east side of Vancouver, renovating heritage homes.

“I used to build craftsman-style houses that were copies based on these houses. But over time, I found it to be more profitable and more interesting to me not to be building from scratch,” he said. “There’s such a lot of history in (heritage houses). It’s a shame to lose them.”

His current project, at 458 East 10th Ave., is converting a heritagedesignated house built in 1904 into two separate strata-title homes within its walls. He’s also building a new heritage-style coach house at the rear of the property. But unlike a laneway house, which can only be rented, a coach house can be sold.

When Bruce’s project is finished, instead of one owner, there will be three living on a standard city lot, 10 metres by 37 metres.

To build the infill house, Bruce applied for and was granted a density bonus under the city’s Heritage Action Plan, a program designed to deter owners from demolishing heritage homes.

But Bruce believes he might be one of the last applicants in Vancouver to receive permission to build a coach house on a small city lot, saying it appears the city has stopped granting the necessary exemptions for similar projects.

Under the current zoning bylaws, side yards must have a five-metre setback from the adjacent property. But this is impossible on a 10-by-37 lot, which typically has a setback under two metres. So these types of developments are only possible if the city agrees to make an exception. Don Luxton, the city's heritage consultant, said those types of revitalization agreements were restricted after a bulletin April 1 from the planning department specifying the rules involving smaller lots.

"We have a number of houses (in the application process) caught up in that policy shift. We're not talking about thousands of projects. It's a couple of dozens a year at most," he said.

"It's important to understand (a heritage revitalization agreement) is one of the most powerful tools we have to conserving heritage buildings. Any policy that restricts those negotiations presents a challenge for preservation."

Developer Joel Silverman recently finished a heritage triplex, converting a single home in Kitsilano into two units along with a coach house in the rear.

"The real successful projects are give and take. You get a bit more density for keeping the heritage. It's a win-win," he said.

"But if I was to apply for my permit today, it would be rejected out of hand. From what I understand, that permit avenue isn't open anymore. What they're doing flies in the face of all the lip service the city gives to anti-demolition and retaining heritage houses."

Silverman said given the climate at city hall, he doesn't plan to try to restore any more older homes and instead will look for other development projects either in Vancouver or Calgary, where his business has also been operating.

Despite complaints from applicants who say their projects have stalled in the planning stages, **Vancouver senior planner Anita Molaro insists there have been no changes at city hall.**

"We are still pursuing the retention of character houses as per our policies as well as the interim policies established under the Heritage Action Plan," she said. "We haven't changed the rules since 1998. People have misinterpreted what they could do."

Molaro said the city continues to consider a variation to protect heritage houses. She said owners could be granted density bonuses to either build an addition to existing heritage houses on small lots and an infill house at the rear of a heritage home on a larger lot.

The city was not able to give the exact number of coach houses already built in the city, and of these, how many were on smaller lots.

In 2015, there were 212 permits issued in single-family residential zones that retained a pre-1940 house. And of these, 67 per cent allowed additions and alterations to the original house. Ten per cent of the projects also included a heritage revitalization deal.

**Between 2011 and 2015, 29 heritage designations and 45 heritage revitalization agreements were approved. Despite conserving some homes under the current rules, hundreds of heritage homes are torn down each year in Vancouver.**

Last year, of the 951 demolition permits issued in Vancouver, 368 were for houses that predated 1940. So far this year, 157 character homes have been demolished.

**Architect Michael Geller said more character homes could be saved from demolition if the city takes a broader approach by allowing a second house to be built and sold at the rear of the smaller lots. He said this also provides an affordable housing option for potential buyers.**

“There’s a lot of builders who would be interested in this, provided they could sell the infill house,” Geller said. “It would do two things: help conserve a lot of lovely older character houses and result in smaller single-family houses in established neighbourhoods.”

Molaro said the city is now studying suggestions from a recent stakeholders meeting and will consult with the public come fall before bringing recommendations to council by early 2017. The city is specifically looking at areas of concentration in the city of pre-1940 homes in single residential zones and reviewing zoning schedules.

“We are continuing to process permits and support heritage retention,” she said.

Elizabeth Murphy, a former property development officer with the City of Vancouver, said the city also needs to undo damage it did in 2009 when it brought in laneway houses. (Since 2009 there have been 2,297 permits for laneway houses issued in Vancouver.)

At the time, she said, the Vancouver Heritage Commission recommended laneway houses be an incentive offered only to owners of character homes, but the city ignored that request and made that option widely available.

“You could build huge maxed-out boxes without consideration to the streetscape, so you would have a monster house out front and a mini monster house at the rear. It just further exacerbated demolition of character homes,” Murphy said. “The city needs to reverse some of the things they botched.”

Murphy said while the city decides on its next steps, interim measures are desperately needed to stop the demolition of character homes.

“Otherwise,” she said, “there will be nothing left to save if the current pace (of demolitions) continues.”