

HOMES • RESALE & RENTAL



A work of art

Paul Denys used the precision of a detective and the heart of an artist in duplicating the heritage porch on the front of a modest home in Lowertown. **Jennifer Campbell** reports.

Jean-Claude Bergeron runs an art gallery out of his heritage home. And thanks to the meticulous work of a local carpenter and heritage restoration expert, the front porch to his home is now a work of art.

Indeed, the well preserved home itself also has artistic touches. Built in 1898, it only had two other owners before Simone and Jean-Claude Bergeron bought it in 1984, so it escaped much of the heritage rape and pillage that went on in homes of its kind in the 1960s and '70s.

A decorative rail of spindles still runs across the wall between the sections of the double parlour, now used as the gallery; also remaining are the original hooks for the long velvet curtains that would have separated the rooms in another era. Mr. Bergeron has even been offered the original curtains by one of the former owners.

The ornate, distinctly Victorian front porch was one of the few things that was removed at some point in the home's history. When the Bergerons bought the home, it had a wrought iron railing and posts leading up to a little balcony of a bedroom on the second storey. While tidy enough, the more modern porch took away from the elegant building's understated appeal.

Since they had to do little besides cosmetic changes on the inside, and because they had to make some improvements to the entrance because of their commercial art gallery, the Bergerons decided last spring to rebuild the front porch to match its original splendour.

"The stairs weren't solid so we had to do something any way," Mr. Bergeron said. "We



Armed with this century-old photo and a magnifying glass, Paul Denys worked out the detailed plans for restoring the porch.

decided to do it right. Now, it's a work of art."

The porch is the craftsmanship of "master builder" Paul Denys. While he is a certified general carpenter who is in the process of completing his architectural technology diploma at Algonquin College, he also has the sensitivity of an artist.

The finished porch, complete with an elaborate, covered balcony, has more than 1,000 wooden pieces in it. A look at a photograph from 1898 and then one from 2000 shows Mr. Denys' work is an exact replica.

"Without that photograph we couldn't have done this work," said Mr. Denys of the black-and-white family photograph, which features the Victorian veranda and balcony.

Mr. Bergeron got the photograph from Mrs. St-Amour, granddaughter of Alphonse Rochon, the home's original owner. Known as the Rochon

House, it was designed by Oscar Beaudry and built for Mr. Rochon, a wood carver.

With his father Flavien, Mr. Rochon carved much of the sculpture work, including the decorative carving around the sanctuary, of the Notre Dame Basilica.

The note with the home's heritage designation claims Mr. Rochon was responsible for much of its "exterior embellishment."

When Mr. Bergeron hired Mr. Denys, the two scoured the city's older quarters looking for verandas of similar vintage. They found nothing. Mr. Denys expanded the search to Perth, Smith Falls and Montreal, but still found nothing. "We couldn't find many porches that were as intricate as this one appeared to be."

With little else besides the photo, he set to work with the precision of a detective. Using a magnifying glass on the surprisingly clear photograph, he



The restored porch at 150 St. Patrick is as intricate as the long vanished original and captures its glory.

solved the puzzle of how each piece went together.

Proportions were a mystery that took hours and hours to crack, but eventually, Mr. Denys came up with scaled drawings he thought — hoped — would work. With his fingers crossed, he sent them to a millwright who produced the hundreds of pieces.

"Turns out we were spot on," said Mr. Denys, as he peered through the window on the second floor of the Bergeron home. "It was quite a challenge because the classical sizes are quite different from today."

In all, the project took six months to complete. Mr. Denys started drawings in April, applied to the city for a variance in May and got approval in July. From then until October, they worked at finding the right materials, having the intricate pieces



Left: Jean-Claude Bergeron (owner). Right: Paul Denys (builder).

turned and then putting the thing together.

Mr. Bergeron himself painted the veranda white, as it appeared in the original photos. While he may someday change the colour to something more muted, he wanted to see how it would look in white.

The next step in the project will be to finish the deep cornice of the building. A metal

fixture across the top of the home now hides much of the original work, which remains mostly intact underneath.

The Bergerons may tackle that part of the reconstruction in five years, once they've paid for the costly first phase. They did receive a small grant from the heritage branch of the city, which covered about 10 per cent of the total cost of the expensive project.