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Cottage makeovers

By Peter Mitham

Grandfathered zoning makes it more practical to renovate than build



Older cottages along British Columbia's coast have the potential to be remade into stylish getaways boasting modern amenities in rustic settings. Modern makeovers emphasize the traditional role of cottages as retreats while restoring relationships with the natural world, something the modest styling of many older cottages ignored.

Take the example of a vintage cottage on Thetis Island. Owned by Gil Hardman and Kathy Kennedy since the early 1980s, it was previously a doctor's residence, but the architecture didn't exude health and well-being. The examining room was devoid of natural light and was serving as a laundry area and mudroom. Other rooms were too dark, small and enclosed, robbing the house of the breezy light that

distinguishes cottages from workaday urban dwellings. The kitchen was galley-style, and the master bedroom was cramped by two neighbouring bedrooms, neither of which viewed the sea.

When a new foundation was needed, Hardman and Kennedy saw the opportunity to update the entire building.

Renovating was chosen over rebuilding because Island Trust regulations would have prevented a new cottage from being built as close to the water.

"The cottage had been standing there for 30, 40 or more years, so it seemed silly not to use what was perfectly allowable and just renovate what we had," Hardman explained.

Above, before: Like others on the Coast, circa-1950s cottage on Thetis Island was built closer to the water than modern rules allow

Top, after: New foundation, new roof and new windows were added and view sitelines were improved

Interior, after: The dark interior was opened up and updated with stylish cabinets, countertops and lighting

Vancouver architect Frits de Vries was enlisted to assist with the cottage renovation. The owners knew they wanted to make better use of the space and open it up but de Vries - who won a Governor-General's Award in 1997 for his work on North Vancouver's Municipal Hall - soon improved on their vision. Staying within the existing footprint of the house, de Vries made changes to the layout that gave the house a lighter, brighter feel by taking greater



For those with the cash to spend, there are larger properties up and down the B.C. coast that could benefit from the same principles.

A case in point is a former fish farm warehouse on Hardy Island that de Vries redesigned for a U.S. client. The giant structure may not be everyone's idea of a cottage, but de Vries, working with Blue Ocean Construction of Vancouver, preserved much of its original character in transforming it from an industrial site to a rustic retreat. The building's massive post-and-beam construction and original wood floors were salvaged to frame the open-plan living space of the makeover. The big vacation home is heated and powered with a combination of solar panels and an airtight woodstove, backed up by propane and an electrical generator.



advantage of its scenic seascape potential.

De Vries made sure bedrooms at the front of the house connected with the back of the house, which looked westward down the shore. Windows opened up living spaces overlooking the waterfront and made the home more conducive to entertaining.

Use of space

De Vries said the Hardman-Kennedy project illustrates how even small changes can improve a space. De Vries said most existing cottages can be reconfigured and upgraded to better suit the owner's needs. "There's definitely a market for making better use of the space with very few additions," he said.

This is especially true of older cottages which often fail to make the most of the prime locations in which they're situated.

Given restrictions on new developments in the Gulf Islands, realtor Li Read of Re/Max Realty of Saltspring believes there are significant opportunities for people to renovate older properties. Older homes often have grandfathered features that can't be repeated in new homes, guaranteeing their status as unique properties. A renovation can add modern flair to the heritage characteristics of the original building, and enhance its value.