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Renaissance man

A love for old Rosedale mansions led to the renovating and restoring of the majestic homes

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

John Emery's love affair with the splendid mansions of Rosedale goes back more than 40 years when many of the homes in this now upscale Toronto neighbourhood were far from grand.

"I've always been fascinated by the homes of Rosedale, but back then many of the old homes had been boarded up because the owners couldn't afford to fill the oil tank to heat them, and others had become rundown rooming houses," says Emery.

"At that time it was not a sought-after area," he says.

Emery, whose work in a commercial real estate development team included building the Toronto-Dominion Centre and the Scarborough Town Centre, started buying and restoring Rosedale homes, doing much of the work himself. In 1977, he founded Fairmont Properties Ltd.

"By day, I wore a business suit and in the evenings I put on coveralls and picked up a paintbrush," he recalls.

The initial plan was to restore Rosedale mansions to their former glory and rent them out as luxury apartments.

"I discovered that Rosedale was full of houses that were past their life cycle," says Emery, who still owns two of his original renovations.

He quickly learned that certain jobs, "like rewiring and plumbing" required skilled trades people, but when it came to understanding the architecture of a century ago, when many of the Rosedale homes were built, he discovered that he was the one with the keen eye.

Emery painstakingly restored the dilapidated homes, and soon other Rosedale owners were asking him to restore their homes, and if their home was past saving, they wanted him to build a reproduction on the site.

Initially he refused, but he soon realized that these were just more opportunities to use his vision to restore Rosedale's finest old mansions. His company focuses on historically correct renovation and replacement that he says has captured "the lion's share of the high-end residential market in Rosedale."

"The art of making new construction look old and old construction look new," is Emery's creed, he says, but achieving that goal is more difficult than it sounds.

TORY ZIMMERMAN/TORONTO STAR

John Emery is the President of Fairmont Properties Ltd. He and his team build, rebuild and renovate homes, many in the Rosedale area. This house, at 60 Bin-Scarth Road, is brand new. Emery's team removed the existing structure and spent a year building the new home. It has never been lived in.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TORY ZIMMERMAN FOR THE TORONTO STAR

This $6.3-million Georgian-style home at Binscarth Rd. in Rosedale is a brand new build that fits seamlessly with the neighbouring older homes.

One example of making new construction look old is a $6.3-million, 5,646-square-foot Georgian-style home that Fairmont constructed this year on Binscarth Rd., which fits right in with neighbouring homes, but is a totally new build.

For older homes, renovating bathrooms to bring them up to today's standards of luxury living is a big challenge, which usually involves gutting the entire interior so that bedrooms and bathrooms can be properly reconfigured.

He also ensures that the water flows silently by using copper pipes instead of plastic and encasing them in lead.

"That way if someone flushes the toilet while the ambassador is over for dinner, our homeowners can be confident that there won't be any sound," he says.

High ceilings and elegant corner mouldings are retained and Emery has even developed a special jig that will manufacture baseboards that accurately replicate the originals.

Modern day luxuries that are often added include

Old mansions updated with modern luxuries

heated bathroom floors, gas fireplaces and wine cellars.

Reconfiguring rooms can mean that windows have to be relocated, so Emery hires master masons who wash the bricks and use period correct mortar and install limestone sills. Whenever possible the glass used is "antique" with slight imperfections.

The classic roof of a Rosedale mansion is made of slate, but it is very expensive to replace so most homeowners opt for cedar shakes.

"They give a wonderful classic look," Emery says.

Kingsley Ward purchased a Rosedale mansion in 1996 and initially did what he calls a "modest mop glow" renovation involving painting and replacing the carpets, but after seeing Emery's work, he opted for a full renovation in 2000.

"Our home was fairly dated and Fairmont came up with classy, elegant and innovative solutions to update it," he says about the work, which took one year to complete.

Fairmont took an old atrium off the back of Ward's home and replaced it with a modern kitchen that opens up to the rest of the house, giving an airy feel while retaining the period feel of the home. The bricks that had been used inside the atrium were recycled and were used in restoring the brick work at the front of the home.

"They did an excellent job of matching old and new," Ward says.

One of Emery's favourite Rosedale renovations is Glenedgar, which had once been the home of Charles L. Burton, president of the Simpson's department stores in the 1920s. The home stayed in the Burton family until 2004 when Emery purchased it and began a one-year restoration that would see it retain its original timeless style, including a wood-panelled dining room and a grand staircase.

First class materials and attention to detail don't come cheap, however, as Emery estimates that it costs about $500 per square foot to do a restoration, and with many of the Rosedale mansions topping 5,000 square feet, the bill for the renovation alone can easily top $2.5 million.

John Emery strives to make new construction look old and old construction look new, such as in the bathroom of the brand new Binscarth Rd. house.