

Architect Michael Taylor's modernist Harbord Village home gives a respectful nod to a Victorian streetscape.

A contemporary house that is polite to its elderly neighbours. While proud of its modernity, this grey-patinated zinc-clad house doesn't seem out of place in its Victorian brick neighbourhood.

**John Bentley Mays**

Last week, I was surprised to learn that the district west of the University of Toronto's St. George campus had acquired a name: Harbord Village. (I had always thought of it as "the student quarter," when I thought of it at all.)

Outside the imaginings of the residents' association – a vividly heritage-minded group, I gather – the area has never been a village. It was just a spot in the residential sprawl that swept westward from Spadina Avenue in late Victorian times, burying truck farms and livestock lots under new avenues and middle-class housing.

As a visit to any part of this zone suggests, the homebuilders active in this 19th-century surge drew on picturesque, high-style models for their mid-market productions – among other sources, the steeply vertical Gothic family house and the deluxe Second Empire cottage.

The result of this borrowing, as we have it today in Harbord Village, is street after attractive street of modest houses that translate upscale architectural lingo into a popular, marketable vernacular. It was a hit with consumers 120 years ago, and (after a long slump) it's a hit again today.

I heard the (to mo) new name of the area when I dropped by a dwelling recently put up there according to plans by Michael Taylor, partner in the Toronto firm of Taylor\_Smyth architects.

In crafting this house, Mr. Taylor, a member in good standing of our town's tribe of talented modernist designers, had to maintain a tactful balance between conflicting realities. On one hand, there was the desire of his clients, one of whom is a builder, for a thoroughly contemporary dwelling. (The builder in this couple considered going with Victorian revival styling, but then abandoned the idea.)

On the other hand, there were certain facts on the ground that had to be taken into account. These included local loyalty to the old streetscapes of the neighbourhood, as well as the insistence by the streetscapes themselves that they be taken seriously. They are strongly sculpted arrays of porches, bay windows, gables and intervals, in other words; not rows of bland or demure facades that could be easily ignored.

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SECTION C

## Globe Real Estate

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ARCHITECTURE

### POLITE, BUT NO APOLOGIES

Architect Michael Taylor's modernist Harbord Village home gives a respectful nod to a Victorian streetscape PAGE 2

In a neighbourhood traditionally inhabited by university professors and their students, this 3,000-sq.-ft. contemporary home has an interior that is bright, expansive and deftly, economically detailed. ARND BRONKHORST

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Mr. Taylor's solution, built out in his 3,000 square-foot, three storey house, is not a compromise: The streetside face is a straightforwardly modern composition of undecorated, jauntily stacked boxes and crisply defined right angles. The materials used here for cladding are similarly up to date: burnt-black brick, dark zinc, and a ground-floor expanse, almost as wide as the house itself, of Trespa, a super-tough laminate that mimics (in this case) the appearance of warm wood, but that doesn't have wood's vulnerability to weather.

While unapologetic about its modernity, however, the house-front is notable polite to its elderly neighbours.

The natural hardness of the grey patinated zinc cladding, for example, has been aged by a blush or red, which makes the material seem, like the Victorian brick round about it, a bit weather-beaten.

The sheets of blond Trespa that cover the garage door and the main entrance, as well, aim to help the building nestle into its old blond-brick context – though here Mr. Taylor's bid to be considerate perhaps goes too far, insofar as it has left the house looking too “woody” for its situation in the heart of a big city.

But more effectively than the coloration of the exterior, Mr. Taylor's subtle carving of the façade picks up on features that lend charm and interest to the streets of Harbord Village. There's a hint of a bay window, a conspicuous porch, a knowing allusion to a Gothic gable – none of it patronizing, all of it an acknowledgment that contemporary architectural styling still has a thing or two to learn from the pleasing formal rhythms put in play along our streets more than a century ago.

Though Mr. Taylor's fashioning of the exterior is the most interesting aspect of this project, I could hardly end this review of it without a glance at the fine open-plan interior. It is bright, expansive, and deftly, economically detailed. Light floods into the middle of the building from above and the living room area is lit by a tall, very wide glass wall that slides away in good weather, giving on to the small back garden.

My favourite place in this house, however, is at the very top. Currently home to a piano and not much else, this third story studio and its terrace could someday become an ideal urban refuge – an alluringly lonesome eyrie boosted above the streets.

It seems far from the city, yet it's very close.

It's a luminal space, that is, of the sort many city-dwellers like to retreat into occasionally – even those who love the avenues of friendly neighbourhoods such as the one now known as Harbord Village.