

What's happening at 5 Blackburn Avenue? A simple roof job with behind-the-scenes drama

HCF's executive director, Natalie Bull, reports on this summer's roofing project.

This summer, we replaced the asphalt shingle roof of HCF's headquarters in Sandy Hill with new asphalt shingles—a seemingly banal operation. However, some basic research opened up a line of inquiry that forced some careful thought about our conservation approach for the building.

When HCF acquired the 1905 Queen Anne Revival-style building in 2001, it had a black asphalt shingle roof. A recent wind storm had lifted a number of shingles, and our insurer offered to cover the cost of replacing the damaged area in the same asphalt shingles. We also had the option of applying the sum to install a completely different roofing material. Because most of the roof's shingles had hit the 20-year mark and needed replacing, we decided to apply new shingles to the entire roof.

So, what roofing material to use? There was evidence that the building had originally been roofed in slate shingles as suggested by their presence on the vertical faces of the gable ends. We clearly needed good information about the history of materials used on the building to guide our decision. Research by architectural historian Fern Mackenzie paid off: she found two crystal-clear photos of the building taken shortly after its construction. Jackpot!

The historic views confirm that slate was the original roofing material—and reveal the staggering number of changes this building has undergone in its 100 years. For one thing, the entire roof line had been drastically altered. Originally a high, steeply pitched gable roof, with a prominent gambrel-roofed (barn-shaped) dormer over the main entrance, and four pitched-roof bays on the other elevations, it was changed, at some point, to a lower, squatter gambrel design. Few of the roof planes and gables retain their original geometry, and the overall impression of the building is lower and heavier than the design intent. Was there a fire? Were there structural issues associated with the weight of the slates? We hope additional documentary and physical evidence will provide answers. But one thing is sure: the roof that once supported slate shingles no longer exists.

The photos reveal even more changes. The gable fronts had been elaborately finished with mock half-timbering (stucco divided into panels by wood mouldings, simulating the effect of medieval construction techniques) that emphasized the vertical nature of the building. The later introduction of the recycled slate to these surfaces results in a more sombre, weighty finish. The intended lightness, texture and whimsy so characteristic of the Queen Anne Revival style were further undermined by the loss of a towering three-storey entrance porch, and a delicate front/side verandah with slender vertical members.

Excited by these new findings, HCF staff took a long hard look at the options for an appropriate conservation approach. Should we reinstate a slate roof? Could we recycle the existing slate again to put it back on the roof? Even if we could, would it be appropriate to put slate on a roof structure so drastically different in geometry from the one that originally supported slate? Would the current roof structure even



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PHOTO : HCF

5 Blackburn Avenue in June 2006

accommodate slate? Were we morally obligated, as the Heritage Canada Foundation, to take a restoration stance and rebuild the entire roof geometry to its original configuration?

The issues were discussed with such conservation practitioners as Douglas Kochel, HCF governor and practicing conservation architect in Rothesay, New Brunswick; former governor Jim Bezanson, heritage planner in Saint John; and Caroline Guay, a conservation technologist from Public Works and Government Services Canada's Heritage Conservation Directorate, who led the project to install a new slate roof at nearby Laurier House National Historic Site. All contributed valuable advice that helped steer the decision.

Developing a Conservation Approach

Over the last year, the Heritage Canada Foundation has drafted a policy on Stewardship of Historic Places that will involve reviewing conservation and management plans for each property it owns. The goal is to ensure that all intervention decisions—from maintenance to restoration—are made with a comprehensive understanding of the building and a clearly defined use for its future. Addressing appropriate options for the roof of 5 Blackburn has been one of the first steps in the management of this property.

Because HCF was an early adopter of the Standards and Guidelines for the Conservation of Historic Places in Canada, we turned to that document for guidance. Standard 4 leapt from the page: Recognize each historic place as a record of its time, place and use. Do not create a false sense of historical development by...combining features of the same property that never co-existed. In other words, we should remember that while the original roof design of 5 Blackburn used slate shingles, the current cross-gambrel roof used asphalt; that the building has had an asphalt shingle roof as long as it ever had a slate roof; and that many of the features related to the slate roof—decorative half-timbering, prominent dentils—were even more significant losses to the building's character. From that moment, our thinking turned away from the complexity of taking 5 Blackburn back in time to its pitched-roof, slated appearance. Instead, we began to focus on bringing the building into the future in a way that acknowledges its extraordinary history of change and its current function, but also reinstates the intent of its original design.

The Queen Anne Revival style has been said to feature “busy” shapes and surfaces contrasted with “quiet” shapes and surfaces. In the historic photos, the roof surfaces themselves are “quiet.” What grabs your attention is the decorative treatment of the gables, and the profusion of porches and columns. Regardless of geometry or material, the planes of the roof should recede.

The Decision

shingles were overriding reason to go while we initially asphalt, we ultimately approximating the tone reasonable choice. the asphalt roof pale finish that recedes attention. Further, the lower cost of asphalt shingles (compared to slate or cedar) will make it easier for HCF to consider reinstating some of the detail and lightness to the gable surfaces to make them “pop.”

Further study and investigation are needed to fully understand the changes made to this building over time. Armed with that



The roof shingles and valley flashing were clearly at the end of their service life.

While new slate roof tiles or cedar considered, in the end there was no with either of those materials. And resisted the idea of reinstalling determined that an asphalt shingle and texture of the early slate roof is a Installed by European Master Roofers, restores the design intent for a simple, from the surfaces intended to grab



The unusual three-sided valley configuration, which survives from the building's earliest days, was retained and flashed with new metal.

information, we propose to host a design charrette where students, contemporary designers and conservation architects would be challenged to rethink the missing exterior features and develop a design for new work that is compatible yet contemporary.

I like the idea that our headquarters building could serve as a living laboratory to challenge thinking about heritage conservation practice, and help road-test the Standards and Guidelines with regard to new design in a historic context. At the Heritage Canada Foundation, we are committed to using every opportunity to “show our work” because good conservation practice is about applying a sound methodology, understanding options and achieving compatibility through case-specific design. If you want to be involved, or if you have comments and questions on the above, please get in touch!