

# Resale Homes

## ARCHITECTURE



Left, the laneway building; nothing was done to camouflage it. Inside, bamboo floors connect the open-plan living room and kitchen. Below, the walled terrace that adjoins the living room.



## Hidden terrace is laneway home's special core

A classic of children's literature inspired Toronto architect Michael Taylor to turn an old dairy into a perfect residence



**JOHN BENTLEY MAYS**  
THE PERFECT HOUSE  
jmays@globeandmail.com

One's idea of a perfect house can come from anywhere. It can spring from one of those deluxe folios the architectural press churns out so prodigiously. More commonly, the inspiration is a structure actually seen and admired – a chateau in France, perhaps, a Georgian mansion in the English countryside, or a chic, streamlined villa by some master of the modern movement. A much less common source – in fact, I'd never imagined it until last week – is the classic literature of children.

The book I have in mind is Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*, published 99 years ago and never out of print since.

I learned how it could shape design sensibility from Toronto architect Michael Taylor, principal in Taylor Smyth Architects, when we talked in the converted laneway dairy he has called home since 1997.

"I remember being fascinated by this book as a kid," Mr.

Taylor said. "Children find this walled garden, transform it, and transform themselves in the process. Here's what I thought was great: that we always look for special spaces we can make our own. It can be as simple as taking a table and putting a blanket over it and going underneath it – and, suddenly, you're in your own realm. That's what this [building] is for me: a special, hidden place."

Mr. Taylor's perfect house began its career as an industrial structure almost 100 years ago, when the part of west-side Toronto it stands on was still largely devoted to truck farming. Residential development engulfed the building around the time of the First World War, and it became just another abandoned relic of Toronto's vanished agricultural past. In the 1980s, when laneway living in Toronto was still a novelty, the old dairy was converted into a residence and had several owners before Mr. Taylor acquired the property.

The heart of the 2,200-square-foot house is the beautiful, small, high-walled terrace, full of flowers and robust vines, that adjoins the living room. "It was a room of the building originally," Mr. Taylor said. "Someone took the roof off and put planting beds around the perimeter.

"The great thing about this



Architect Michael Taylor in his 2,200-square-foot house, which was once an industrial building. KEVIN VAN PAASSEN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

space – what really sold me on it – was this walled garden. It's a special place, a haven from the hustle and bustle of the city. When you're sitting down out there, you don't see the neighbours at all. You feel you're in a little courtyard in Italy. So this is my favourite space in the whole house."

But it was the whole building, not only the terrace, that appealed to Mr. Taylor's yen for a hidden place in the midst of the city. Walking down the

laneway, the visitor would probably never take the plain brick structure for a home.

No architectural cosmetics have been applied to camouflage the patched, weathered exterior.

"Of course, there are downsides to living in a laneway," Mr. Taylor acknowledged.

"It doesn't get plowed in the winter time, you don't get garbage pickup, the pizza guy can't find you easily. But you make an adjustment in your

thinking about what a residence needs to be. In this case, you accept the fact that the outside of the building is not going to make a statement about who you are. You don't want it to make a statement, you don't want to attract attention.

"I know that if I put money into reworking the outside, there would be graffiti on it. I've accepted this rough, urban grunginess as a given."

Previous owners had made

the first stabs at turning the interior into a home, but Mr. Taylor's revisions have been thoroughgoing.

The garden has been finished by trimming the planters with light slate and flooring the space with Brazilian cherry. Continuous bamboo floors connect the open-plan living room and kitchen.

Remarkably, for a dwelling this densely packed into the urban fabric, natural light comes in from all sides, opening up the interior and creating within it a sunny intimacy.

But if the house is a refuge akin to the one in *The Secret Garden*, it's also a platform for the busy conviviality enjoyed by Mr. Taylor and his partner, retired dancer James O'Connor.

"We don't have a cottage," Mr. Taylor said. "We love to entertain here, especially in the summertime – barbecues and dinners and all of that.

"The flow of the space works well for each of us. It's a great entertaining space, and the nature of the space makes us want to share it with our friends.

"There's a great flow back to the dining room, into the living room, out to the deck. That's what a residence should be: a place where you celebrate your friendships, where you feel great about being with other people."