

# Globe Real Estate

You are the blueprint.  
**NATIONAL**  
H · O · M · E · S  
CELEBRATING 15 YEARS  
nationalhomes.com

## RENOVATION

# Taking a second swing at suburbia

Gordon Baron says he's rebuilding the slap-dash, design-impooverished 905, one home at a time



**CAROLYN LEITCH**  
cleitch@globeandmail.com

Gordon Baron lets his mind's eye drift across the vast suburbs of Mississauga and Oakville and sees potential profit.

Mr. Baron is a renovator who specializes in overhauling the suburban houses of people who buy them based on a builder's plans, then move in to find that it is dark, cramped and poorly designed. According to Mr. Baron, there are plenty of candidates.

"There are hundreds of thousands of these homes. There's not a shortage."

Mr. Baron is trolling for cli-

ents inhabiting the subdivisions that have sprawled across the 905 district. The homeowners who hire him would like to add more character and architectural detail to their houses. In many cases, they call on Mr. Baron to reconfigure the space, move walls around and bring in more light.

"There are a lot of frustrated people out there," he says. "People buy the floor plans - they don't realize what they're buying."

Mr. Baron launched his company, Lifestyles by Barons,

nine years ago.

Recently, he led a tour of a newly completed project in Mississauga. Homeowners Sally and Eugene Daiski called on Mr. Baron to overhaul their 14-year-old house from top to bottom. At 2,400 square feet, it felt small and closed-in.

Mr. Baron did not increase the square footage, but his transformation makes the homeowners feel as if they have expanded the space.

"This is the smallest house in the subdivision - now it has the biggest feel."

» SEE 'RENOVATION' PAGE 10



**Gordon Baron outside a home he re-designed and renovated in Mississauga.**  
PHOTO BY J.P. MOCZULSKI/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

## G10 Real Estate

The Globe and Mail, Friday, April 18, 2008

FROM PAGE 1 » RENOVATION

## 'Most people don't realize it until it's too late'

Inside the front vestibule, for example, Mr. Baron changed a small, unusable closet into a large functional one without losing space.

A china cabinet marks the entrance to the living room. "We purchased this, then we designed the walls around it," he says.

The cabinet not only makes a nice feature, it adds storage space. By building it in, Mr. Baron gave the cabinet the presence of expensive custom-made pieces found in high-end houses, he says.

The long and narrow living room was awkward and in-commodious, Ms. Daiski says. A solid wall was lacking any distinction, so Mr. Baron added a fireplace.

"People have nowhere to put their furniture."

At the rear of the house, Mr. Baron again found the rooms divided into small, closed-in boxes. He figures builders often make the rooms small because that way they can use the short spans which are cheaper to construct.

"The house was broken up - there were walls everywhere," Ms. Daiski says of the old layout. "It was very dark."

To open up the space, Mr. Baron knocked down load-bearing walls and reinforced the space with massive beams built into the ceiling. He also used decorative columns and arches as support.

"From a design perspective, the space was unusable."

Mr. and Ms. Daiski were also unhappy with the small kitchen and its lack of cupboard and counter space. Low bulkheads closed in the room and reduced costs for the builders because they didn't have to make the cabinets as tall, Mr. Baron says. The cabinets were also dated and poorly arranged, he adds.

"The 12-year-old kitchen looked 30 years old."

Now, the large island has more counter and storage space than the entire original kitchen had. A "floating" breakfast bar above the island creates more surface space but



doesn't make the room feel closed-in. The substantial cabinets are designed to resemble furniture.

At the rear of the kitchen, Mr. Baron was unhappy with the small set of sliding doors that led out to the garden.

"You're only making the space feel smaller and smaller."

He beefed up the quality of the sliding door and added a custom-made window over the top of it to create the impression that the kitchen has nine-foot high ceilings. A bay window with a seat overlooking the garden replaced a tiny window in the dining room.

In the centre of the house, Mr. Baron found that the space lacked light because the staircase was closed in. He opened it up and changed the finishes to create a grander feel.

At the top of the stairs, the owners found that the fourth bedroom was so small, it could barely accommodate a bed. "Where do you put a bed? Where do you put any furniture," Mr. Baron asks.

He tore out the bedroom to make the landing bigger and bring in yet more light.

Mr. Baron figures that much of the dissatisfaction among homeowners stems from the fact that they do not have the

design background necessary to pick a layout just by looking at a builder's plans.

"A room size of 10 by 10 [feet] is largely unusable space," Mr. Baron says. "Most people don't realize it until it's too late."

Similarly, Mr. Baron found that space was used poorly in the laundry room. While the room was 1½ storeys tall, the cupboards were small and inadequate. He took advantage of the room's height to add more storage space.

In the garage, Mr. Baron re-deployed the old kitchen cabinets to create a workshop for Mr. Daiski.



**Mr. Baron tours one of the homes his company has renovated. He says the original builders skimmed on design, the result being poor living spaces.**  
PHOTOS BY J.P. MOCZULSKI/THE GLOBE AND MAIL



they're going before the work is done," he says. "You do all of the course correction before you even start construction."

As an executive at Nortel Networks during the telecommunications company's glory years in the late 1990s, Mr. Baron was used to working 80-hour weeks. And when he left at the end of the day, he was walking through his own custom-built house during construction.

Mr. Baron realized then that he had a love of building and design.

As Nortel slashed its work force through layoffs, Mr. Baron realized that watching people around him lose their jobs was extremely demoralizing. "It ripped at me."

While Mr. Baron, 43, had reached some lofty career levels in his early 30s, he wishes he had quit the high-tech business sooner.

"At the end of the day, it was not everything I thought it was going to be. It was almost meaningless."

So when his job was eventually cut, he decided to launch his own design/build business.

At Nortel, Mr. Baron worked with a staff of 3,000. Now he has three employees and he works on site on every project.

"It took me time to shelve my ego," he says. "You roll up the sleeves very quickly."

Mr. Baron would like to enlarge his business and he sees plenty of opportunity in the bedroom communities surrounding Toronto.

Oakville is a particularly appealing market, he says, because there has been lots of construction there in recent years and the relatively affluent population has the money and aspiration for home improvement.

"That market demands exceptional quality," he says.

Meanwhile, he plans to hire more people to help with administrative tasks as the business grows so that he can get fully involved on the construction site.

"It's a huge change in lifestyle. I truly love this."