

# A house where 'pretty' is the operative word

Owner Ellen Schraa has spent years restoring her Toronto Victorian home

**SHANE DINGMAN**  
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**38 Sorauren Ave.**  
TORONTO

Asking Price: \$2,995,000  
Taxes: \$7,128 (2019)  
Lot Size: 20 by 156 feet  
Agents: Nancy Lee Jobin,  
Sotheby's International Realty

## THE BACK STORY

"She has a style. This is not staged," Sotheby's sales representative Nancy Lee Jobin says about her most recent listing, a claim that would be hard to credit were it not for the lived-in feel of the otherwise utterly unique home. "Everything is French provincial – from A to Z – there's just nowhere that you see anything modern."

For the homeowner, Ellen Schraa, her overriding design ethos is simple: Is it pretty? And her affection for the colourful and ornate furniture pieces calls all the way back to her childhood.

"I remember being a little girl and having specific pieces of furniture. My family wasn't very well off, so we typically had pieces given to us," she recalls. "I must have been in Kindergarten or Grade 1, having one or two French provincial pieces and I loved decorating my room. I would push my furniture around the room so I had a different view every so often, and I would be so excited to go to bed that night because my view for falling asleep would be different."

When she purchased the house at 38 Sorauren Ave. seven years ago, it was a run-down rooming house with major structural issues on the rear addition. The renovation was a near total gut-job, a project that took three years. It transformed a two-storey house with a boarded-up attic and turned it into a three-storey Victorian gem with hand-curated finds in every room.

Restoring the house to its Victorian grandeur took some doing. Ms. Schraa had to find a place that would do custom baseboards to evoke the period. She had some



**A three-year renovation transformed a run-down Toronto rooming house into a three-storey gem with hand-curated finds in every room.**  
COURTESY OF MODERN MOVEMENT

chandelier medallions on site (painted over many times across the decades) but needed to find more; new doors had to be purchased and new vintage doorknobs found. (Luckily, she found a batch of crystal knobs from a Rosedale teardown that all matched). Behind existing dry-wall were the original archways between rooms, but an incomplete set of corbels (the ornate "corner" pieces where the arc touches the wall), so some had to be custom carved. She found a gas-fireplace specialist who would do a mantle that looked like one piece of carved stone.

"I'm not a designer ... but what I find is you have to decorate to the space," Ms. Schraa says. "During construction, I would just take a bucket, and I would sit on it, in the middle of a room and look around and try to envision what I thought I should do."

## THE HOUSE TODAY

The conviction to be different starts outside: The house is painted black with purple undertones – it's unlike anything else on the street (it used to be a dusty pink brick) and Ms. Schraa came to it after cycling through more vibrant colours on the virtual painting app on Benjamin Moore's website. Years later, she found the black cobble stones that feature in the front-yard landscaping.

The front door opens into a house that's painted entirely

white: white hardwood floors, white walls and ceilings. There's animal print throws on the floor, French provincial furniture and a vintage chandelier in every room. There are absolutely no builder-favourite pot-lights anywhere.

From the small foyer, there is a sitting room/dining space on the left and directly ahead is a hallway to the kitchen, basement stairs (basement is low, dry and clean but mainly for storage and utilities) and narrow Victorian staircase leading upstairs. In the front room there is a pale pink sectional in the bay windows, a decorative fireplace, 10-inch baseboards and 12-inch (original) crown moulding. The details are intricate, the finishes all in white, the art on the walls minimal the animal print leaps out.

Walking past a cute powder room, you arrive at the kitchen and family room at the rear of the house. The Fisher and Paykel fridge is white, the Bertazonni range is stainless steel and the faucet has a brushed nickel-looking finish, but the rest is white (including the quartz top of the counters and island) and glass. The wall opposite the stove and fridge is entirely upper and lower storage with more counter space.

The small living room is Ms. Schraa's favourite hangout spot; a red French Provincial couch, a sandy stone mantle on a gas fireplace with TV mounted above, and a wall of windows with walk-out to the backyard, too.

The house is a little more than

60 feet deep, and on a 156-foot long lot, there's lots left over for a large manicured backyard (and a two-car garage off the rear laneway). Dominating this space is an enormous, ornate, wrought-iron gazebo that looks like it has been there as long as the house has, but was actually a recent addition (it was Ms. Schraa's 50th birthday present to herself).

Back inside and up to the second floor is where the house fits most of its four bedrooms (although currently the front room is an office). There's a laundry room here at the top of the stairs, which you can walk through to a four-piece bathroom. The rear bedroom is 12 by 10 feet, but has a huge closet in the short hallway between it and the main hall.

The second bedroom, smaller than the rear one by just a few inches, has a long closet too, but the front room/study (15 by 16 feet) with its bay window has none.

Each room is white; each room has the perfect collection of charming antiques, colours and prints.

Some of the furniture Ms. Schraa had before moving in, but more was found scouring local antique stores. "I stole all my family's antique pieces – one of the cabinets in my study came over from the Netherlands, one of the dressers in the second floor bathroom came from mom's father's farm," she says.

There are a couple of wall-mounted flower-like metal light fixtures – more vintage finds – that were intended for overhead use but work well as sconces. All of these fixtures fit with Ms. Schraa's style, and she's happy to include them in the sale ... but if future owners are planning to remove them, she would be willing to take them back rather than lose them to a dump somewhere.

The fourth floor master suite didn't exist before Ms. Schraa moved in. She discovered that behind the attic walls there were high ceilings and lots of space. It didn't take much for the contractors to turn this level in to a master suite. The bedroom faces the backyard (complete with Juliette balcony) and is 26 by 13 feet, with half the space occupied by a closet and dressing area.

Ms. Schraa is an accountant by training, an expert in health policy and a professor in the School of Health Policy and Manage-

ment at York University. She expresses her style in her house, and her dress (literally). "I tend to dress in vintage and colours; I like wearing a lot of red and leopard," she said. Her closets are a panoply of colours and textures, and an inspiring collection of red pumps and knee-high boots.

A door in the dressing area takes you to the massive four-piece ensuite with standalone clawfoot tub, more chandeliers, and a strange little hallway to the front attic window; there's nothing in there other than light, a rare piece of undecorated space in the house.

## THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

Ms. Schraa wants to stay in the area, but she wants a smaller house (and she's hoping to purchase a country house, too). She loves customizing her space (in the next house, fewer chandeliers and more sconces) but she's ready for the next challenge.

The agent, Ms. Jobin, admits the pricing for the house is aggressive. "Everybody says 'Oh, there's never been a house that's been sold in this neighbourhood at this price.' That's because there's never been a house like this in this neighbourhood. What this neighbourhood does love is a Victorian house that has respected the heritage of the building, and she's done that impeccably in every regard."

Which neighbourhood is that exactly? On maps, it's in a spot claimed by both the Roncesvalles Village and Parkdale. Ms. Schraa gravitates to the shops north on Roncey, but her house is geographically much closer to Queen West and true Parkdale. She has pillows embroidered to cover both bases: one says "I [heart] Parkdale," the other, "I [heart] Roncey."

"This neighbourhood is definitely changing," says Ms. Jobin, and that includes the buyers interested in it. "People from North Toronto want to live in kind of a more urban setting where they can walk out. I'm talking downsizers here, that are moving from Rosedale, Yonge and Eglinton, moving downtown and moving here to be able to just walk."

The question is whether they will bring their Rosedale price expectations with their walking shoes.



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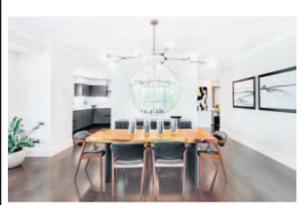
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