THE ARCHITOURIST

The lost art of tuckpointing reborn in Toronto

This process, popular in the 19th century, involves using lime-based mortars and results in a wall dressed in a sharp grid of thin, raised 'ribbons' between each brick

The semi-detached, Second Empire homes at 62 – 64 Charles St. E., Toronto, built by contractor Arthur Coleman and painter Thomas Smith in 1885.

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Busting the Toronto clouds at more than 50 storeys each, the twin columns of Casa II and Casa III chart the course of a new city.


AQUATECH

The twin columns of Casa II and Casa III.

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And while the Casa trio – Casa I, at 46 storeys, is across the street – are striking for the stark geometry of their wraparound balconies, another set of straight lines much, much closer to the Charles Street sidewalk deserve the attention of harried passersby.

As often happens with new developments, significant commitments to the love and care of old buildings were secured by the city from developer Cresford before building permits were issued. And while that's not news in itself, the semi-detached, Second Empire homes at 62 and 64 Charles St. E., built by contractor Arthur Coleman and painter Thomas Smith in 1885, now boast an excellent example of the lost art of tuckpointing.

Crisp geometry like this hasn't been seen on a brick wall for perhaps a century. Not to be confused with run-of-the-mill pointing or repointing, tuckpointing (the terms are often used interchangeably, which is incorrect) involves a multistep process using lime-based mortars that results in a wall dressed in a sharp grid of thin, raised "ribbons" between each brick.

The Charles St. homes boast an excellent example of the lost art of tuckpointing.

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"It's to give the impression that the building was built with very tight joints," says Barkley Hunt, 43, of Hunt Heritage Ltd., one of only a handful of people in Canada who can tuckpoint according to methods developed in England in the early 18th century. "And really it's not – the joints are really big – but it's purely cosmetic."

All the rage by the "second decade of the nineteenth century," writes historic preservationist/educator Michael Shellenbarger in a 1993 essay titled Tuck Pointing History and Confusion, the method was necessary because of the "poor quality of bricks, especially in London." Uneven and of odd sizes, tuckpointing was a way for the middle classes to achieve the look of the "expensive rubbed, gauged, and pressed" brickwork of "royalty or the very wealthy." By the mid-19th century, tuckpointing was also used "increasingly" in the conservation and restoration of "old decayed work."

Because most homebuilders involved in the construction of Toronto's Cabbagetown or The Annex (and most neighbourhoods built during the Victorian boom) came from the United Kingdom, tuckpointing became standard practice here, despite our better stock of brick.

Antoni Pijaca instructs a student on the fine art of tuckpointing.

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Indeed, when award-winning, Melbourne-based master tuckpointer Antoni Pijaca came to Toronto to teach members of the Architectural Conservancy of Ontario, Hunt Restoration and ERA Architects in March, 2017, ERA's Scott Weir took him on a tour of his Cabbagetown neighbourhood, where the Australian says he was "able to show him remnants of tuckpointing on most of the brick houses there.

"Unfortunately most of the brick was sandblasted and the tuckpointing is missing."

A lot of that happened, adds ERA's Daniel Lewis, during the "renovation craze of the 1980s."

So, will tuckpointing take off in the 21st century? Despite some Charles St. "sidewalk superintendents" dismissing Mr. Hunt's hard work on the Coleman/Smith semis by labelling them a "dollhouse," Mr. Hunt thinks "we'll see more and more of it" because of its historical accuracy. It might, unfortunately, be out of reach except for those with very deep pockets: Mr. Hunt estimates it costs $50 to $60 a square foot for tuckpointing, compared with regular repointing at $15 to $20.

That's because the process is complex: Mr. Hunt and his crew start by steam-washing all brick (and stone) to remove carbon and algae stains; this also opens up the brick's "pores" to accept a colour-wash. Next, old mortar is removed to a certain depth using an Arbortech saw. After that, damaged brick is replaced, sometimes by flipping back to front.

Barkley Hunt of Hunt Heritage works on a tuckpointed brick exterior.

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If the building was originally tuckpointed, evidence of "stopping mortar" (more on that in a moment) on the brick faces should be found. If so, powdered pigments are mixed to match and then dumped into a witches' brew of alum, stale beer and crystalized rabbit hide glue for the colour-wash process, which can "reek" because of the beer.

Finally, the two-step mortar application begins. Joints are filled with newly-tinted stopping mortar applied flush with the brick's face, even smearing onto the face a little. When Mr. Hunt first started almost a decade ago, this liberal application freaked him out: "To some people, it looks kind of rough, but this is how it was done; I was saying 'God, this is awful, it's the opposite of everything I've been taught!'"

Tools and ingredients used in tuckpointing.

ERA ARCHITECTS

Before the stopping mortar is dry, a straightedge is used to carve a groove (called a scribe or housing) down the centre. It is into this channel that the bright, lime putty ribbon is "tucked in," slowly, with a tuck iron. While it's still soft, a "frenchman" (ribbon knife) is used to carve away excess to create the crisp, straight line.

On a big wall, this process can take weeks. When complete, however, a sort of mason's *trompe l'oeil* has been achieved: "The linear-ness and the lighter colour of the ribbon, it changes the look of the brick," Mr. Hunt says. "I don't know how, and this happens over at the [former] Selby [Hotel] too, you can see the wall just comes alive."

Tuckpointing gives brick exteriors an eye-popping look but is an expensive process.

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With a secret mortar recipe designed with our freeze-thaw cycle in mind, it's a good bet Mr. Hunt will be one of only a few bringing life to Toronto's heritage walls for the foreseeable future. Whether or not he can convince penny-pinching homeowners to pony up is another question.

"It's definitely different to look at because people just aren't used to it," he finishes. "It's difficult to convince people to spend money on the front of their house, whereas a kitchen might sell itself."

Hunt Heritage is in action at the former Selby Hotel on Toronto's Sherbourne Street or on Instagram @huntheritage. Melbourne's Antoni Pijaca is found @tuckpointer. Hunt Heritage and Daniel Lewis of ERA won a 2017 "Award of Excellence" for their work on 62 – 64 Charles St. E in Toronto.