



Even a mansion can be a greener home

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I am standing in what was once Saidye Bronfman's favourite room, a sunwashed marble-white sitting room in the Westmount mansion she and her husband, Seagram's founder Samuel Bronfman, bought back in the 1920s.

But this old house, built in 1906 on a quiet, well-appointed street on the southern slope of Mount Royal, has been thoroughly hollowed out, so that only the walls, windows and plywood floorboards remain. The gardens Saidye Bronfman tended and loved to admire from this room have been mostly pulled up, and there are construction workers, heavy equipment and supplies everywhere.

I can't help thinking, what would Saidye say if she could stand where I am now? I have to guess that if she spent an hour or two, as I have just done, listening to her grandson Stephen Bronfman, architect Andrea Wolff and contractor Garry Garbarino explain how they are giving this property the greenest makeover that any century-old home its size in Canada has ever had, she or anyone, could really say only one thing: "Bravo!"

Sure, it could be argued that living in a mansion is not the greenest choice. But somebody with means was going to live in this house, so better it be someone with a strong environmental conscience, and an unwavering respect for heritage.

Stephen Bronfman doesn't just talk the talk. He gives generously to environmental causes and has been an active board member on the David Suzuki Foundation for the past 12 years. Even his business interests, the Claridge Food Group, for example, tend to lean green by investing in companies like SunOpta, which produces a line of organic food products.

"I've always believed in practising what you preach," said the disarmingly low-key Bronfman, 44, as he donned a construction helmet to lead us on a tour.

Building or renovating a new house that truly qualifies as "green" is a major challenge, but imagine trying to renovate a home classified at Westmount's highest heritage rating to today's strictest environmental standards.

"I bought it because I knew that at some point I'd have a family and I would want to move in and preserve it, and bring it into the next century," he said. "We wanted to do a green project, but at the same time, I want it to look like a 100-year-old house, not something glowing and gleaming that looks like it was built five minutes ago."

Bronfman also wanted to make it a showcase of energy efficiency and sustainable construction practices. The house is being renovated, in fact, almost rebuilt, according to LEED standards, the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design program that gives points for energy efficiency, water conservation, and using sustainable materials and processes during and after construction.

So Bronfman set out, not to demolish, but to carefully dismantle and rebuild the castle-like, brick and stone house. Two smaller buildings on the property, a two-storey "garage house" built in the same era as the main house, and a "pool house" built a couple of

decades later, are also getting a thorough green makeover.

The gardens around the house have been pulled up so pipes for a geothermal heating and cooling system can be laid. (Bronfman insisted on the preservation of most of the old trees and some of his grandmother's favourite plants, like the 100-year-old lilac bush she carefully tended.)

A "newer" wing on the ground floor of the house, a dining area added in 1928, has been removed and in its place will be a two-storey addition. The ground floor of that addition will be a large modern kitchen and living area for Bronfman's young family. Much of the rest of the property will be used mainly for entertaining on a large scale; the garage house and pool house will include guest rooms. Because of its unusual size and use, the property will be registered with the LEED program as commercial/institutional new construction, rather than residential, which means more rigorous scrutiny and higher performance standards.

Getting that certification doesn't just mean installing double-glazed windows, using Forest Stewardship Council-certified wood and replacing all the insulation (they'll be using a soy-based spray-foam to insulate, by the way). It will also mean solar panels on some of the roofs to heat all the water needed in the home, installing a planted green roof on part of the building, using 90 per cent recycled materials in the drywall, and recovering rain water and run-off for use in toilets and for irrigation. Porous pavement will be used in the driveway, and on all cemented areas, so that rain water is filtered and goes into the groundwater, rather than flowing to the sewers.

Once all this is in place, all the salvageable materials that were removed, like the hand-carved oak panelling on the interior walls, will be carefully replaced.

The goal is to have the whole property, when finished, look as much as possible like it did before, but ready to use about 50 per cent of the energy and water that a house this size would normally use.

Bronfman concedes that much of what he is doing may be beyond the means of the average homeowner. But he believes the construction industry needs to be pushed to embrace green building practices. And homeowners of more modest means, he says, would be smart to get informed on green options and start demanding them so they eventually become the norm.

"Energy costs are not going down," he said. "Every citizen owes it to themselves, to their pocket books and to society, to (demand that builders and renovators) manage these energy issues better."

Have you given your own castle a green makeover? Tell us what you've learned at www.montrealgazette.com/greenlife or email me at mlalonde@thegazette.canwest.com.

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