

2014 PALLADIO AWARDS

Exterior Spaces: Gardens & Landscapes

**WINNER: VIRGINIA BURT DESIGNS INC**



**PROJECT:** A TALE OF TWO HOUSES,  
CLEVELAND, OH

**ARCHITECT:** VIRGINIA BURT DESIGNS,  
INC., TORONTO, CANADA

# Back to the Land

**F**or two wood-framed houses that stood side by side in Cleveland, OH, late 2008 was the best of times and the worst of times. Built in 1897, these “grand old dames” exhibited quite different levels of upkeep; one had fallen into such disrepair that it was considered a fire hazard, while the other’s lack of clear visual clues and circulation were a much easier fix. The owners of the latter house saw

potential, however, and purchased the former with hopes to renovate. When structural and technical reviews revealed that the house was too far gone, serendipity stepped in.

“The clients were contemplating the next step when an article on ‘deconstruction’ appeared in the *New York Times*,” says Virginia Burt, CSLA, ASLA of Toronto, ON-based Virginia Burt Designs. “The clients are very much about an environmental response to sustainability and reconstruction,



**OPPOSITE:** Virginia Burt Designs recycled and reused an 1897 property to create new context for the clients' remaining, neighboring home. The stepping stone path is constructed of reclaimed and salvaged sandstone sidewalk from the deconstructed house.

*All photos: courtesy of Virginia Burt Designs*

**CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT:** The house next door was deconstructed timber by timber, brick by brick, stone by stone, slowly exposing the north elevation of the clients' home.

At the base of the front steps, the stone wall is inscribed in Gaelic. The translation is "100,000 welcomes."

An antique hitching stone post marks the entry walk – of clay brick inlay within a bluestone band.

Large specimen evergreens, latticework, arbor and sheds screen views of the apartment blocks beyond.





**LEFT:** A freestanding reclaimed masonry wall frames the kitchen garden (left) while providing structure and direction for the front entry walk. Mature trees and specimen evergreens to the left and right of the walkway soften the house volume.

**BELOW:** The clients' daylily collection enlivens the stepping stone path.



rather than demolition. It is ideal to have clients who are willing to do that. To salvage, reuse and recycle breathes new life into the property and the surrounding community – which is then inspired to do the same.”

Piece by piece, the clients began to dismantle the house and hired Burt to design a garden on its footprint, reusing as much original material as possible. Upon reviewing the remaining house and salvaged stone foundations, woodwork, windows, trees and sandstone paving materials from its neighbor, Burt devised a sunken garden, summer house and arbor to unite old and new. The solution required just ten trips to the landfill. “We saved more than 200 trips,” says Burt. “We were able to salvage the foundation stone and timbers for the exterior garden construction, and the rest for steps and railings. The remainder was taken to local furniture makers and restoration and recycling places, where it was repurposed.”

The project allowed the clients to address long-standing circulation issues and visually integrate a contemporary renovation and garage addition from 2005. Prior to the garden renovation, visitors regularly confused

the front and side doors. “The house that remained had entry on the side and we realized that there was an original carriageway that came off on the west side of the house, where entrances used to be,” says Burt. “Carriageways were abandoned in this area in the 1920s, and a street was added so that the house became inverted - the back became front and vice versa, hence the entry became the front on the side.”

In place of the existing Cedar hedge and old porch, Burt created a new circular drive and entry walk, and denoted transitions between garden rooms with clay brick inlays, supplied by the Belden Brick Company of Canton, OH. A shed and arbor structure to the north blends the property with the surrounding neighborhood. “Views back towards the house finally made sense,” she says. “Suddenly the north elevation and its gambrel roof can be seen for the first time since the 1920s. This is one of the wonderful aspects that are so unusual about this property.”

Excavations of the property revealed several surprises, from foundations, footings

and utilities to a balloon frame comprised of single pine timbers 30-ft. high. The original foundation stones became new freestanding garden walls, while the old sidewalk was repurposed for stepping stone paths and flooring for the new arbor. All sound timbers were preserved and reused as brackets for the porch roof and studs for a matching pair of garden sheds, where the clients store more than 200 Italian clay pots. An original sink became integrated into a potting bench, while specially selected mature trees and large specimen plants were installed to create a sense of longevity.

The tale of two houses, one standing and one deconstructed, garnered Virginia Burt Designs its first Palladio Award. It is, however, just the beginning. “The more words that are printed,” says Burt, “the more exposure projects like this receive, the greater the impact.” — *Lynne Lavelle*