



sparkle town

Vancouver's love affair with Bottle-Dash

BY **correy baldwin**

PHOTOS BY **andrea marván**

Why is it that the neighbourhoods of Vancouver seem to sparkle? It's not an illusion. Back when stucco was the preferred method for finishing a home's exterior, a curious phenomenon hit the West Coast and brightened up its suburban homes: bits of coloured glass, pressed into stuccoed walls, set there to glitter in the sunlight.

Indeed, beginning in the 1920s, Vancouver became Sparkle Town—a city in love with glass-studded stucco like nowhere else.

Stucco does not exactly have a glittery reputation, at least not today. We may think of it as drab, but in its heyday, this “drab” construction material was instead a source of impressive architectural creativity.

The stucco craze began around 1890, aided by the development of a stronger cement (known as “Portland cement”) and by the popularity of revival styles of architecture (such as Tudor Revival), for which stucco was a major element. It was also inexpensive and durable, and an excellent way to “modernize” your home.

“The two primary objects of modern stucco are: protection and beauty,” a 1936 article in the *Vancouver Sun* proclaims.



That's right: *beauty*. This was not just slapping cement to the side of your house. Done correctly, there was real artistry to stucco. Thrown with a stiff brush or broom, then smoothed down and shaped with a trowel, stucco could mimic a myriad of stone, or traditional styles, through texture and pattern. It also came in various colours, and with various aggregates—sand, stones or other materials—to add additional colour and texture, and create a sandy or pebbly look.

Traditionally, stuccos were coloured using sands, clays and natural pigments, resulting in earth tones, or at most sandy reds and ochre. Not so in the modern era: the California plaster entrepreneur O. A. Malone introduced modern pigments to the plaster industry. His plasters came in such vibrant colours that they were dubbed “jazz plaster” (this was the Jazz Age, after all). Now instead of just earth tones we could have pastel-pink houses, baby-blue houses, turquoise and fuchsia houses—*jazz* houses.

Alongside all this was something called “pebble-dash,” or “stone-dash”—small pebbles or crushed rock, and often small pieces of marble as well, applied to fresh stuc-

co as a final decorative element. As the name suggests, this crushed rock is “dashed” (or thrown) onto the fresh stucco, usually by hand with a scoop, then pressed into the stucco with a trowel.

Pebble-dash could be plain or bright, uniform or patterned. Especially popular was the “salt and pepper” variety, consisting of white quartz with black obsidian.

Far more rare, though not entirely unheard of, was to add bits of glass with the pebbles or marble, just to give a building that extra little something. When glass was included, this was known as “glass-dash”—or, more commonly, “bottle-dash,” in reference to the glass bottles that were crushed to make the material.

The glass came in a number of colours, depending on the type of bottle used. Most prominent were brown and green, from beer bottles and pop bottles. Milk bottles were used for transparent glass, and milk of magnesia bottles for cobalt blue (that's right: a great many homes were decorated with bottles of laxative).

This was modern stucco: take the more expressive side of pebble-dash—marble, pink granite, white quartz,



“It was indeed cheerful: The walls were covered with stucco that was mixed with fragments of broken glass, so that when the sunshine came in at the right angle it glittered and sparkled as though studded with diamonds.”

– NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE,
THE SCARLET LETTER

black obsidian—throw in some sparkly glass, and add some colour to your plaster (anything from beige to “jazz”). The possibilities were endless. Home decoration just got crazy.

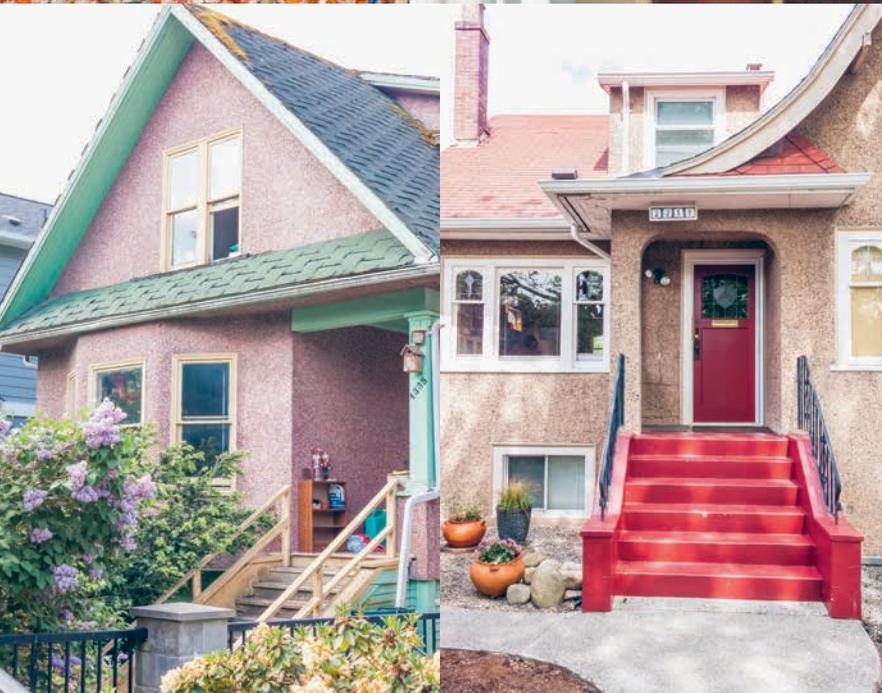
Bottle-dash itself was relatively obscure... except, that is, in Vancouver. For reasons that are not entirely clear, Vancouverites didn’t just embrace glass stucco, they were obsessed with it. The trend took hold and flourished here: nowhere else was bottle-dash used so abundantly, and so wholeheartedly. It seemed every new bungalow had it, the glass becoming not just an addition to the regular pebble-dash, but the main feature, the star attraction. After a decade or two of bottle-dash mania, all the suburbs of Vancouver were sparkling.

You can imagine why it was so widely adopted: the effect would have been utterly delightful—homes glittering in the sun, sparkling green and golden, colours dancing like sunlight on the ocean. If you wanted a home to lift the spirits, here was one way to do it.

Local historian Jim Wolf suggests that Vancouver’s love affair with glass likely came from the local construction industry’s creative tastes. “The mid-1920s local residential construction industry took a shine to marble-dashed stucco, as a variant to pebble-dashed stucco,” he says. But if the industry offered it, residents took it up with enthusiasm.

Perhaps the first company to supply Vancouver’s obsession for sparkle was Canadian Stucco Products, opened in 1926 by F. B. Falkner. Falkner initially set up his company in a small shed in the Marpole neighbourhood, with just one employee (“an elderly chap who, in part time, helped mix the materials,” according to the same 1936 *Vancouver Sun* article).

Just one year later, Falkner had expanded significantly, relocating to Granville Island next to Vancouver’s bustling downtown to operate a plant capable of producing industrial levels of plaster. Clearly business was good (although it’s unclear what happened to the elderly chap). Eventually, around the 1940s, bottle-dash was marketed commercially under the appropriate name “Sparkle Stucco.”



But hold on, you say: bits of glass, *on your house*? Was this really such a good idea? Should our homes really be capable of lacerating anyone who happens to rub up against them—small children, for example?

It's true, everyone I spoke with who grew up around bottle-dash homes remembers the scrapes and cuts. And yet, it should be noted that companies producing bottle-dash were well aware of this danger, and smoothed down the crushed glass in tumblers, dulling the shards and sharper edges, before using it. The resulting glass was still rather sharp, but not, on the whole, overly dangerous—scrapes were inevitable, but lacerations, thankfully, not so much.

“Contractors certainly didn't tamp down the glass to make it any less vicious,” says local historian John Atkin. “My suspicion is that houses were meant to have plantings at the base. And with the newer suburban houses there were no porches or decks, so scratches were minimized.”

Although concentrated in Vancouver and the Lower Mainland, bottle-dash was used throughout the region, and beyond. It crossed the American border, showing up in Seattle and along the Pacific Northwest. It spread with greater abandon, however, throughout mainland British Columbia, and across the Canadian Prairies.

Atkins has some ideas regarding this movement. “Canadian Stucco Products was started in the Marpole district, which had a large population drawn from the Prairies,” he points out, “and that might explain the connection and spread of the products eastward.”

Newer communities, he further suggests, tend to prefer modern building materials. This would help explain why the younger Western Canadian communities more readily embraced stucco, whereas Ontario and Quebec tended to favour traditional materials like brick and stone facings.

“The trades travelled around the Prairie provinces,” Edmonton architect David Murray confirms for me. Indeed, it's useful to remember that this was nearly a century ago, when fashions, as well as materials, would have circulated more locally, and more slowly.

Curious about how far bottle-dash spread across the Prairies, I canvas friends and colleagues. It shows up across Alberta: in Calgary, and in Lethbridge and Medicine Hat to the south, and up to Peace River in the north. It was especially popular in Edmonton—a city I once called home. It spread throughout Saskatchewan as well: Regina, Saskatoon, Prince Albert. Though by the Manitoba border, it seems to have fizzled out—only some Winnipeggers recognize it, and only vaguely.

When I ask people about bottle-dash, their memories are fond, and nearly universal: first there were the



scrapes, from falling against a stucco wall. And then there was the irresistible urge to pick off the glass. Coloured glass is hard for little fingers to resist, and it seems everyone got in trouble for picking it off.

“I had a favourite colour of glass that I would search for and try to pull out and keep when I was five,” a friend who grew up in Vancouver tells me. “I liked the ultra-rare pool-bottom blue as opposed to the darker blue. It was hard to find. After we moved out I took my ‘crystal collection’ with me.”

What was it about Vancouver that made it so receptive to the sparkle of bottle-dash? The West Coast has always seemed a joyful, optimistic place to me, its people fostering a carefree, uninhibited creativity—the kind of place where a glittery house would not seem out of the ordinary.

“It always felt like the West Coast to me,” another friend tells me, “because we used to hunt for beach glass, and it looked inspired by that.” What more of an explanation do you need than that? **U**