

## CITY & COUNTRY HOME

### DECORATIVE ARTS



**Milton G. Grew, Architect**  
MRAIC, AANB, AIA

architecture  
contract management  
interior planning

*by Peggy Savage*  
*photography Vytas Beniusis*

**T**he earthy fragrance of pine scents the air inside the narrow red brick building on Main Street in Erin, Ontario. These are the offices of Gotham Inc., where a fragment of Ontario's architectural heritage, a Canadian folk art known to the uninitiated simply as "gingerbread," is returning to life under the skillful guidance of Joe Colucci.

The origins of gingerbread are rooted in 15th-century England, when builders first used solid oak bargeboards to cover and protect

**Above: Joe Colucci's original gingerbread designs trim Mario Del Grande's house in Caledon, Ontario. Designed by Milton G. Grew, its gables display a non-repetitive pattern in a free-form scroll. Right: Daughter Christina frequently watches her father study architectural drawings and prepare preliminary sketches.**



## THE GINGERBREAD MAN

rafter supports that jutted through walls under the gables. The boards served both to keep out rain and to discourage nesting birds.

By the mid-1800s, Victorian crafts-

**Below: Interlocking ball and dowel spandrels run between reeded porch posts. Accommodating gridwork to varying openings is difficult, says Colucci. Right: A Gotham design hand-turned newel post.**

men, indulging their penchant for ornament, had seized upon the functional boards and cut and carved them with whimsical, lacy, Gothic-style patterns before installing them in every nook and cranny of their homes, inside and out. The Victorians may have prized rigid moral and social conduct, but in home decor they were anything but straitlaced. They decorated with sentimental flourish, and this "carpenter Gothic" folk art became ours when English immigrants superimposed it on the rugged Canadian landscape.



Colucci, 42, a self-taught artisan and the owner of Gotham Inc., is supervising its renaissance, so that Canadians may again enjoy the exuberance gingerbread adds to an otherwise plain gable, veranda or interior space.

The idea of re-creating Gothic homes—and consequently the name Gotham—occurred to Colucci in the late 1970s when he and his wife, Trish, bought and restored four Victorian houses themselves. Contractors were easy to find for much of the restorative work, but, he notes, "these homes were characterized by a plethora of curved, turned, fretted and carved woodwork, and I

could find no one who was capable of crafting replacements."

Initially, the couple patched and adapted with antique pieces salvaged on their travels. From this process, Colucci gradually learned how the original craftsmen had fashioned the intricate designs. By 1980, the couple's passion for Victorian spandrels, trim, grilles and brackets could no longer be satisfied by personal projects alone, and they willingly abandoned comfortable Toronto careers in sales and administration to settle in Erin, population 2600, and establish their link with the last century.

Joe Colucci, soft-spoken and self-effacing, admits he never conformed to the corporate sales world in any case. His BSc and business diploma were put to new use as he learned to design, plan and sell an art form for which he had only visual clues. "We drove around the U.S. and Canada, photographing the state of the art. Nineteenth-century woodwork examples were all over. There must have been thousands of woodworkers when settlers began building here."

While the tools of the craft and the basic woodworking principles have remained the same, Colucci says, the