

Investing in ? and respecting ? our collective heritage

by BROCK WEIR

When we have the chance to travel, whether it's a drive to a picturesque town or village a couple of hours away, or a long-haul flight to somewhere decidedly more exotic, many of us like to get a good idea of where we're going and what to do when we're there.

Most of us start out with a map or app, earmark a couple of delicious-sounding restaurants for a shortlist of possibilities should the need arise, and, if it's not a simple daytrip, a few potential hotels, motels, or rentals that meet all requirements for a place to rest your head.

If you're playing tourist, and that's always a fun role to be in, you'd likely hit the Internet for various points that tick your particular interests; your social media platforms to get tips from friends and strangers alike on the must-sees of city X; or look up a tour that takes most of the guesswork out of the equation.

Speaking strictly for myself, coming up with a list of places to hit is one of the best parts; the list never has to be etched in stone, but can be a great guideline on what's to come and all the possibilities that await you.

In planning my last really big trip a woeful 16 years ago, one which, in my final year of university, took me to five countries over two continents in little over a month, there were a lot of possibilities. While I was staying in one country significantly longer than the rest for work, the trip there and back was replete with options.

Despite new and exciting landmarks in London (the way there) and Paris (the way home), all of that took a backseat on my own loose itinerary to the sites that have stood the test of time. A trip to Windsor Castle, for instance, took up most of the day. The following morning's visit to Hampton Court Palace, the most intact example of a residence loved by Henry VIII, ultimately took about nine hours. And The Louvre? Well, despite my time budgeting, 11 hours only allowed me to see a fraction of the internationally-renowned palace-turned-gallery.

For me, there was a certain thrill in walking down the same halls that heard the footsteps of The Sun King, Napoleon, Elizabeth I, and her much-married father. Each place the work of its respective architect, they evolved over time as working buildings, with each successive custodian leaving their mark on it, contributing to its story, as does each tourist who continues to follow in some pretty hallowed footsteps.

They might be old, constructed to fit the needs of its contemporary reality, but have evolved with the times to meet our own.

How different it feels in Canada where heritage buildings at the Federal and Provincial level are sometimes viewed, or, at the very least, spun as an albatross rather than an asset that can be used to its best advantage.

In Ottawa, for instance, our iconic and instantly recognizable Centre Block and Peace Tower of the Parliament Hill complex have been closed to the public for years, and will remain so for the better part of a decade, as important restoration work is carried out behind the walls of one of our most notable landmarks. In addition to masonry work, tasks currently underway, invisible to us, include the removal of asbestos and improving safety and efficiency both from an energy and personnel standpoint.

?The Centre Block has outdated systems and suffered from crumbling mortar, damaged sculptures and stained glass, as well as aging water pipes,? says Public Services and Procurement Canada in their analysis of the work. ?Earthquake proofing and security needed to be addressed, and the original electrical system could not safely handle the modern technology required to support the operations of Parliament.?

Last month, at Queen's Park, the Ford government introduced a new act that would establish a secretariat to steer much-needed

renovations at the Provincial seat of government as well.

“The restoration project includes careful interior deconstruction to preserve heritage elements while modernizing building systems to address safety and accessibility issues,” said the Government. “In addition, the project will include securing and preparing a temporary place to conduct parliamentary business.”

Added Paul Calandra, Minister of Legislative Affairs: “Our government's proposal strikes an important balance between the need to leverage the infrastructure expertise, fiscal transparency, and accountability of the government with the independence and oversight of our Legislative Assembly. While much work lies ahead, I am confident the restoration of Queen's Park will make it a functional place of business for another 130 years and a symbol of our democracy of which all Ontarians can be proud.”

Now, both of these projects come with hefty price tags, but the need has been clear for years and the bottom line has grown with each passing interval of inaction. While some naysayers will always balk at the cost, apparently happy to see them crumble, these buildings belong to us, have storied histories, and, indeed, represent very important elements of our parliamentary democracy.

We might be a young nation compared to many others around the globe, but preserving these symbols should be as important to us as it is to the United Kingdom, France, and beyond.

Yet, despite the work being carried out at Parliament Hill and, soon enough, on University Avenue, no consensus can be found on just what to do about 24 Sussex Drive.

Once a very visible representation of our democracy at work, the official residence of the Prime Minister of Canada has been shuttered for years while the powers-that-be hem and haw about how much it might cost to make it fully habitable for generations to come.

Estimates from the National Capital Commission have pegged the cost of restoring 24 Sussex at \$36.6 million, a number that has only ballooned with each consecutive year the government of the day has kicked the football further down the line. With six other official residences in the nation's capital also in need of some TLC, including the residence of the Leader of His Majesty's Loyal Opposition, the total price tag for bringing these assets to where they should be is an estimated ? and eye-watering ? \$175 million.

Again, numbers that would have been much lower had repairs been carried out when needed, instead of the issue becoming a hot potato, with neither the incumbent Liberal government, the previous Conservative government, nor its previous Liberal government, deliberately missing the catch, waiting for someone else to take the lead ? and the blame.

Author Maureen McTeer, who came to know 24 Sussex intimately as the spouse of Prime Minister Joe Clark, has been a vocal advocate for decades of razing the residence completely and starting fresh with a building that would serve as a showcase for Canadian architecture and ingenuity.

It's an interesting idea, but I can't envision any other country contemplating either tearing down or letting fall the official residence of its Head of Government, whether it's the White House or 10 Downing Street.

In a society where so many things are sadly built to be disposable, our landmarks, particularly those that continue to or have the potential to serve us well, deserve better ? and to be seen through a more objective and less political lens.