

Leaving homes to wither on the vine

by BROCK WEIR

Until very recently, I thought my days as a commuter were over.

For the last decade or so, I've lived fairly close to the office so the trip in to the newsroom was only a five-minute drive or 10-minute bus ride away.

That all changed at the end of January and the beginning of February upon moving, and my main base of occupational operation was significantly further away.

Now, I most often tend to get to work through public transit.

It's a fairly straight shot to the office now. In the mornings, it takes one bus route to get to Yonge Street before transferring to the rapid transit that shuttles thousands each day up and down one of our busiest corridors that are not part of the 400 series of highways.

The way back is a different route, through some rural-adjacent parts of King Township on the way back to the outskirts of Woodbridge.

Either way you slice it ? or, more appropriately, travel it ? I was not looking forward at the start to the length of time it would take to get from Point A to Point B and dreaded it each morning. I know, I know, this is something many of you face at least five days a week, but I was out of practice, last having a commute like this in my days as an Ottawa resident a decade-and-a-half ago, so indulge me for a minute.

The first few times felt a bit tedious. Bar from one isolated incident of on-board violence between what appeared to be a less-than-happily-coupled couple, nothing out of the ordinary ever happened, no day varied from the last, and this passenger went on autopilot ? with significantly less consequence than when Keanu Reeves and Sandra Bullock had the same feeling in Speed.

But I digress.

Over the weeks and months, I've found a few ways to spice things up.

In the 90 minutes it takes me to get to the office in the morning and the 60 minutes it takes me to get back ? I don't understand the math, either ? I've polished off a few books that have long been languishing on my nightstand, used the time wisely to better coordinate the day ahead, and although I'm not yet friendly enough to be on a casual conversation basis with my fellow passengers, I've started to take notice of their patterns.

It's been interesting to note how they spend the time of their morning commute when there is very little else to do. In my observation, they maximize that time. On each trip, there's invariably someone who is relatively new to this country who uses the time to reconnect with friends and family back home through Facetime, WhatsApp, and various other platforms.

Sometimes these conversations are in English, more often they are not, and, if it's a particularly crowded commuter day, all these languages sometimes come together into a symphony of diversity which always strikes me as a hallmark of the Canadian experience.

I'm not ashamed to say that it warms my heart.

From what I'm able to pick up, these conversations are very upbeat with my seatmates often excitedly sharing tidbits from their day,

which are greeted with equal enthusiasm with those whom they're talking to. I like to imagine that both parties are jazzed by the future and everything that could very well be in store for them in this place they chose to call home.

Recently, however, I had the odd sensation of being the only person on the bus for the first leg of the day's journey. As loud as the bus itself was, the comparative silence was deafening. To add insult to injury, I picked that day to start a new book and it just wasn't grabbing me.

Putting it away after a few stops had gone by, I hadn't before realized there were so many reminders of the other side of that optimism.

Appearing on the horizon every few blocks were homes that were boarded up, sagging, left to the elements, or otherwise abandoned.

Some, duty faithfully done to the generations of families that once called them home, were languishing on their foundations awaiting a bulldozer or wrecking ball, all in the name of new residential or commercial developments.

Others were condemned to death row in the name of progress, earmarked for demolition in order to make way for road-widening projects.

Further former homes were wedged between those still harbouring families from the cold, yet were nonetheless boarded up, mouldering and leaning for any number of reasons, holding their secrets close to their buttresses.

One house was a dwelling I had never noticed before, despite having probably passed it a few hundred times in my lifetime having lived in York Region for at least 35 non-consecutive years stood out. Characterized by (deliberately) sloping roofs, gothic windows, and other features of interest, it was not hard to imagine its halcyon days as the well-kept home of a well-to-do family that had since departed for greener pastures, leaving this one to the fate of development.

Mind you, I'm not opposed to development in and of itself, but this one gave me a particular pang.

All told, on the morning route which takes me through Vaughan and Richmond Hill on the way to Aurora there were no less than 13 homes that were either abandoned or sold and left to rot while planning applications made their way to the system. On the evening route, which takes me from Aurora through Richmond Hill, King Township, and finally Vaughan, there were 11 ? with one dwelling that could have been Number 12, but it was hard to tell for the dumpsters in the driveway.

As our housing crisis continues unabated, I couldn't help but despair that more than two-dozen homes in this limited corridor were deliberately left to languish rather than being put to good and practical use, even if on a temporary basis.

Construction is an inevitability across Ontario, particularly as communities scramble with varying degrees of success to address mandated or endorsed housing targets, which means the number of existing homes left to wither on the vine will only grow ? years before anything is approved or ready to take their place.

In the meantime, in order to alleviate these pressures, although the homes on my daily commute are likely too far gone for any practical use (and, I would imagine in many cases, deliberately so) what incentives could be put in place for property owners, builders, and other stakeholders to provide upkeep to these dwellings for those in need of housing options until it's actually time for the buildings to make way for something else?

Seems like a win-win all around to me, but, at the moment, a huge missed opportunity for all concerned.