

Recalibrating Your Mind's Eye

by BROCK WEIR

Okay, now it's time to bust out the pumpkin spice.

In this space a few weeks ago, I dug in my heels, placed myself squarely against the grain, and refused to welcome autumn prematurely, just because Labour Day was freshly in the rear-view mirror.

It's not that I dislike the rise of fall, quite the contrary. It's simply a matter that summer weather, as we have come to define it in Canada, is in decidedly short supply in our part of the globe and there were still a few weeks to milk the season for all it was worth.

I hope you all made the most of it ? I certainly did my best.

The last few weeks have been a matter of spending time with family, re-connecting with friends before so many adopt a hibernation stance once the cool weather starts to descend, and, in between attending local and community events that are part and parcel of this time of year, even stealing an unexpected bonus beach day.

A particular highlight of this in-between season, however, took place this past Thursday.

September 17 was my birthday and while I've never been keen on birthdays ? less a matter of getting older and more of an aversion to being at the centre of attention, however briefly ? a real highlight was stepping back in time with my mom.

On the eastern arm of a small residential crescent in Etobicoke sits a yellow and grey mid-century-modern split-level house. When it was first built in 1957, it was just one of many such models on the street. Unfortunately, it's now something of an endangered species as its 60-plus-year-old brethren are gradually replaced one by one by modern houses with varying aesthetic appeal.

People might pass by the house every day without a second thought, but that's never been the case with me. My family lived in the house from the time it was built until the early 1970s. While they may have moved just down the street to a more manageable abode, it was a home that has always remained close to the hearts of members of my family who lived, loved, laughed and lost within its walls.

When subsequent family gatherings inevitably turned to reminiscences, more often than not the memories shared were focused squarely on the home that was.

There were stories of joyous Christmas mornings, sibling squabbles, personal challenges, and even some tragic events that family members would prefer to never relive. But whether the reminiscences were happy or sad, they were always painted with a brush so vivid it was easy to envision these second-hand memories as if they were your own.

If we happened to be in the neighbourhood in the intervening years, we would often drive by the house. There never seemed to be much activity inside, the exterior rarely changed, and, at first glance, it felt like a silent, unmoving repository of memories.

Until this past spring, that is.

When I was recovering from hip replacement surgery in March, I lasted for nearly a week inside before I suddenly felt like I would suffocate without a change of scenery. Sounding the alarm to my mom, she came up and we went for a drive ? a route that, once again, turned right down this crescent. As luck would have it, there was actually activity outside and I encouraged my mom to pluck up her courage, knock on the door, and see if she could cross that threshold again.

It was a difficult decision, but she forged ahead as I waited in the car nursing my wounds. She was in there far longer than I thought she would be and, when she came out, she did so with a rain check for me ? good for a tour of the house when I was back on my feet again.

A few things got in the way between March and September, but everything aligned this past week for me to cash in the tour ? and I'm so glad I did.

Imaginations can be a powerful thing.

Listening to the stories told over the years by my grandmother, mom, aunt, and uncle, I only had their words to go by. My brain, my mind's eye, filled in the visuals.

?What would the reality be like?? I silently asked myself as we approached the home. ?Would my second-hand memories be confirmed, or would it be a jarring yank back to a reality that was never really mine??

As it turns out, the memories that were shared with me over the years, along with two or three visual references in the form of slightly faded snapshots, were translated in my brain surprisingly accurately.

The unchanged tile in the front hall was somehow identical to what I envisioned, as was the layout of the kitchen and the living room. The biggest misses were the central stairway, which was much shorter than I imagined it to be, and the locations of the dining room and what was once a screened-in porch.

Sitting in the living room of a home that, until that point, had been such an important but unknown part of my life, my mom and I casually shooting the breeze with the current homeowner was nothing short of surreal ? as has been the process of the subsequent days where the second-hand memories stored in my brain are being re-imagined, re-configured, and retrofitted to reflect the now wonderfully-real, well, reality.

I sensed it was a similar experience for the 85-year-old homeowner as well, who sat us down, took out his smart phone, flipped on the Voice Memo option and had my mom dictate her memories of growing up within the walls they have called home for more than half-a-century.

There were, of course, memories of the ?new? family all around the place. It was briefly unsettling to go into one of the upstairs bedrooms and seeing a framed photo on the wall of ?strangers? sitting on such a familiar-looking front porch, to pick one example, but of course they were ? and I can only hope that the memories my mom was able to share last week will be shared with the next generation of children who were raised within, sparking memories and filling in blanks of their own.

It's often said you can't go home again, and while that is undoubtedly true in many cases, I'm particularly grateful to have had the opportunity to revisit a building that wasn't technically my home, but is nevertheless an inextricable part of my heritage and a foundational root of my own family tree.

We're fortunate enough to live in communities that value their histories, but it's often the everyday histories, often the stuff that's overlooked as inconsequential, that can tell stories more evocative than we could ever imagine. It's all around us if people take the time to document it.

In a community that is growing as fast and rapidly as Toronto, and a community where post-war houses are seen as rather disposable, I was grateful for last week's opportunity ? and to experience a part of my own history ? a built history where time is not necessarily on its side.