

THE EXCAVATION, THE STAIR AND THE BED

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The light, though certainly daylight, is dim. A figure, just illuminated, is squatting behind a hole in the gravel ground; in it newly laid ABS pipe, plumbing fixtures, and rubble walls as backdrop. It is an unlikely interior. This scene is one of very few recorded for posterity; the installation of the basement floor-drain and the sewer main. Not insignificant a moment. Nor a minor feat. The original of the former did not exist in the mud-slab floor. The latter replaced a long, leaking “connection” between two male flanges, one of the few instances justifying adherence to the exclusive coupling of male and female. Who knows how long the house had been sinking into the sewage-soaked mud. Long enough to crack the foundation, the ground-floor exterior wall, and give the house a damp feel. And so, there, after the gutting, excavating, and even deeper trenching, to contain that primal joining, was the umbilicus of our re-imagined home.

This photo has been kicking around ever since, on tack-boards, amongst papers here and there, but looking at it now I see it differently. I realize how much has changed in me, and in turn, how much has passed in order to accomplish this change. Even though I can feel myself back in that crouch, tired, arms resting on knees, fingers intertwined in front, wondering: why would anyone want a photo of this? Even though I knew that this moment was the result of considered decisions in service of a reasonable goal—to make a home that worked for our family—it was a moment overwhelmed by the comprehension that the work just completed had only reached the point when the planned work could really begin; a moment glossed over because, if foreseen, we may never have started. And certainly, one in which I did not see any symbolic potential in the floor-drain. However, time has, by this point, done its job. The amnesia that follows all labour pains has set in. The photo luckily holds fast a moment in the ongoing work, and a past self, so that I can see how much the house holds, that the pipes are not just plumbing, nor is the excavation just a hole in the ground.

To excavate, by definition, is to remove, expose and lay bare, unearth; an excavation, what is left, is both an absence and a newly revealed presence. To excavate and lay a foundation is the usual first step of building. Even for a renovation it is prudent to ensure the base is sound. We dug below the old floor, to reach clean ground, adding valuable headroom. The solidity of the rebuilt, and now dry, basement

penetrated upwards such that work on each successive floor could be undertaken with confidence. The basically good bones of the house were brought back to health. There followed many other excavations: through layers of finishes, generations of provisional services, damage that had to be traced back to its cause.

So, now it is time for another excavation. Time to excavate time—the work done and the living held in our house—to uncover what was then obscure. The photo has made time evident. Our first priority was the practical, the solution to the contingent or pragmatic; now we have the vantage point and the luxury to explore the affect of care accrued over decades in one place; time *to dig*—an atavistic act, an idiom for loving—deeper into our home.

A chapel, long since gone, reportedly occupied this lot. This house, like its immediate neighbours, is an Edwardian four-square, with all the features of the type as found in this city. Ours is a semi-detached house, each with a two-square share. It is unprepossessing and homely; a plain masonry box, two and a half floors—the half in the roof space—with a wooden porch and trim, and a second-floor bay window. It was built in 1912 as infill, probably speculatively, and not at all well.

Many compromises were made at the outset to sound construction practice. This is most evident in the staircase, a dogleg so steep and narrow that two people could not think to pass, and anyone five-foot-nine, say, would hit her head mid-first flight and again at the landing. So constricted that it demands a habituated reflexive posture to use safely. An instance of preoccupation or haste might have consequences. The wooden treads are deeply grooved, and scarred by use and many generations of finishes; they are loose and creak loudly even when scaled by the cat. Common sense would have it be the first thing to go, but it remains, since replacement was beyond us. It is the pebble in the shoe, Coyote's anvil overhead, the restraint. Choosing to keep it has been an existential declaration. The stair has kept our inhabitation in check. Kept us honest about, not only how we move, but also what we want or even need to have. Its dimensions limit all items that must go beyond the ground floor. One concession has, however, been made for safety's sake (and because one house can absorb only so many curses). The overhead steps have been dismantled and moved forward to increase head height and reduce head trauma, floor-space having been freed by changes over time. And, now stripped down to the original walnut varnish of the main flight and battleship grey of the rest, the stair brings its century of constant use into sight and underfoot—a humbling force.

Throughout its 103 years, the house, along with the neighbourhood, has withstood the tides of fortune. The once-comfortable working-class village became less desirable; houses and buildings were subdivided as cheap rentals; it was a neighbourhood in transition. We found the cheapest house on a hardscrabble street. Regardless that it was intended as a single-family home this one has seen many variations of family; even ours was, at first, an extended

family. The house had seen tough use. The resulting oddment of small rooms, awkward hallways, multiple kitchens and bathrooms, an all-in-one bed-sit, with the accumulation of patched and improvised utilities and entrances revealed the many demands.

In our imposed vision, a dialectic of reason and fancy, the number of rooms has been reduced while contrarily, plumbing has proliferated. We have released a diaspora of fixtures—compact installations of white ceramic or stainless steel—from the usual shared layout allowing each to exist independently: two WCs, predictably; more unexpectedly, sinks in the bedrooms, a separate shower room open to the closet hallway, and an oversized bath in a cedar-lined sauna. Management of water and waste, originating in the basement, continued gestating through the floors to finally provide amenity; largish accommodating rooms with natural light, and small particular ones to ensure serviceability and private retreat; domestic negotiations simplified and family harmony much increased. The result proved more than the sum of its parts.

While structural masonry can be wonderfully sturdy and allow internal flexibility, it is still a small house and needs something more, such as a view. A view invites. It is a pleasure to be offered one to look at in passing, or one that merits more intent examination; to be permitted to gaze, even tempted to stare. Views have the power to arouse curiosity, provide contrast, and evoke movement through congruence: across a space, around a corner, up or down a staircase, through windows and doors, beyond a railing, or over an edge. Rooms and the living within them are further animated, made more complex, and given a bit of relief because something beyond the immediate is present—seducing, leading, suggesting further reaches or the next project. Space and life are less without a view.

Looking through the boughs from the third floor, the paved back garden below, cool and enclosed, is barely visible. There is a table with chairs and benches enough for a sizable gathering. The last step is all that can be seen of the oversized stairs that descend from the kitchen. The counter used for outdoor cooking is dappled in light, the borders overgrown, greens and greys and bars of blue. It is far enough away to be a view, to be glimpsed, anyone in the garden would be unaware of being seen or overheard. From below, the angle of sight is so steep that privacy is ensured to those above. The tree does the rest, shielding us from more distant gazes. When looking outwards the branches screen the neighbouring houses, when up, the topmost can be seen against the sky. Some of these views are enclosed and others expansive. Looking back reveals the interior scene—the workroom, through an interior window the staircase, and on to the bed. This roof deck, the last “great work,” is the aerie—lookout, roost, and the lungs of the house.

There is a vast distance to traverse between excavating the basement and reposing on the roof deck, several floors and years each full of decisions. The blue floor is a milestone on the way. It marks the point when the practical turned to the pleasurable. After ensuring the

house was sound, converting the basement to living space, repairing the stair and replacing the bathrooms, we laid blue linoleum throughout the ground floor. Three rooms became one: a sitting-cooking-dining social room. Here the dogleg stair redeemed itself by eliminating the need for a hallway, so that the full width of the house was liberated to be all room. It is our biggest and busiest room, but unified by blue, balanced with cool and calm. Blue is the colour of space, harmonious and serene; also of longing and distance, expanding and receding. The blue (ultramarine, to be precise) is an amazingly good colour for a floor. Easy to live with, bold but not overwhelming — floors have to be lived with for some time — the blue floor has been able to contain all this activity and cleans up well. Even better, it has the element of surprise. In contrast to the outdoors the blue is below. After we pass through the green front yard, it greets us at the threshold with a complicit air; it is a welcoming vista. We are home. Our eye gazes over the length of blue and out the back windows to green again. The stairs may keep history in sight, but the blue floor eliminates it. Layers of carpet, hardwood, lino, asbestos tile and even newspaper used as underlayment (one headline announcing the assassination of the Czar) were removed to reach the structure, so that the new floor could be laid, seamless, timeless, and very present. We had finally been able to add a layer of delight and a measure of graciousness.

Locating the new is never simple or discrete. Remaining in situ through the time required by a staged renovation is a game of sorts—pieces moved within a fixed perimeter over many plays. “Hipbone connected to the backbone”—a living Rubik’s cube—“Backbone connected to the shoulder-bone,” as the gospel song goes. Strategizing, visualizing outcomes, each move affects every other; each move relegates a piece out of play. The “master bedroom,” our bed that is, was the piece in constant play, always on the move. It is the antithesis of the biggest and best in the hierarchy of bedrooms, or of Homer’s mythic, unmovable bed built into a living tree, both symbolizing authority and the sanctity of marriage. Ours is not fixed, but it too has a tree. It has moved so that daily life could continue, each location transparently revealing which building decisions and demands of family were current. The tree has revealed time in another way. While the bed has found its way back to the top floor, the weed sapling in the back yard has grown well passed the roof. The view from the one is into the other. In all this flux, fidelity abides, constancy embraced by a tree.

It was not love at first sight. Neither this house nor the neighbourhood was a clear choice, and staying for nearly three decades has been more a reconciliation through a series of rationalized eventualities than a plan from the outset. Rather it has been a slow awakening of affection and loyalty as ambition and commitment grew. This quickening filled the years and house with constant movement; back and forth over mindlessly repeating or demandingly uncharted ground; spiralling upwards and downwards, out and back in, sometimes

dizzily and at others tediously. But we stayed—held, contained. And, given that monogamy is just one choice among many and various experiments, what does it mean that so many manoeuvrings were undertaken to stay in the one house?

It meant achieving a state of being at home. At home there is space for being in the present, but maybe just as necessarily for having access to the past and openness to the future. There is room for evolving negotiations of the self—to be part of the family group, escape from it, or just be—to be inside or to be outside but always to be housed. If nothing else, we all know now that a place can be bashed about and put back together again. Inevitably change in an intimate setting can feel and look violent. But it is the willingness to make change in the face of such discomfort that gives rise to attachment. Combine this attachment with an attentiveness to and cherishment of the ordinary, and love can result. You fall in love with what you care for.

We are frequently identified with our houses. We have ideas of how to live and try to find a house we think will support our life. But the house has its own logic and we end up its creatures, even as we reshape it. The house is both the parent and child in this family romance. Either may force a vital connection or, through a determined nature or immutable structure, affect a slow moulding. Each embodies its ethic of vision and constraint though the role alternates in a continuing dialogue. This is definitely not “living large,” but perhaps it is living deep. Certainly it is not living tentatively. As the ergonomics between body and space evolve, so do self-understanding and an aesthetic—one in which surprise and reliability, excess and austerity, have their place. The house becomes a domain of intimacy, collective effort, and memories everywhere; security gained through long inhabitation, and authority earned by outlasting troubles, to eventually belong to the place.