



Dave's mom, Louise LeBlanc, outside the Park Plaza Hotel, 1952 and again, 60 years later.

A bow to the original Architourist



DAVE LEBLANC
THE ARCHITOURIST
daveleblanc@globeandmail.com

“Coady Sweets.”

The sweet shop is long gone, but the faded and flaking “ghost sign” with the Coca-Cola logo still clings to a brick wall at the corner of Coady Avenue and Queen Street East.

While I’d usually take note of such a sign, photograph it, and move on, this particular one always brings a smile to my face. Coady, you see, is one of the first streets my mother, Louise, lived on when she came to Toronto from Shediac, N.B. in 1952 at the tender age of 20. She came in pursuit of her high school sweetheart, Emery, who’d come to the big city to work, and the two were married the following year.

Sometimes when I pass that corner, I wonder what the shop looked like inside and what sort of confectioneries my mom bought; at other times, I think of the major influence she had on me and my later love of architecture – which I have the privilege of exploring weekly here in *Globe Real Estate*.

My mom, who will turn 80 in just a few days, has always loved architecture, especially residential design. While she never studied it at school (she was forced to leave high school to help raise some of her 10 siblings), I remember a small library of books on the histories of Jarvis Street, Cabbagetown, Rosedale, Sunnyside and Scarborough in our 1970s living room, and that certain people, such as David Crombie, Jane

Jacobs and John Sewell, were important to her because they respected our city’s architectural treasures.

“Architectural treasures” would not be the way she’d describe the places she and my father rented during their first few decades in Toronto. Many of them were basements, many had nasty landlords and most were in the then-dilapidated part of town now known as Leslieville.

During a recent brunch at the George Street Diner, my wife and I asked my mom to recall her early housing history while I secretly ran my digital recorder under the table. “It was a long time ago, you know,” she began with a laugh. I took that to mean that the following might not be in the correct order.

She started on Jones Avenue, then went to Coady. Once married, it was to a basement at No. 3 Pape Ave., where she became pregnant by late 1954. “[The landlord] didn’t want children there,” she recalled, so it was off to Beech Avenue in the Beaches with a “nutcase” for a landlord. To Wayland Avenue near Gerrard and Main streets, then a brief foray into the semi-paved wilds of Scarborough for a wood-panelled and sauna-equipped basement apartment, which was abandoned since there was “no place to go shopping” for the car-less couple. Back to Leslieville to Dagmar Avenue (before Dundas devoured part of the street when widened) and then, by the early 1960s, to a little two-bedroom house on Newport Avenue, which barely held two adults and four children.

In 1969, a year after child number five came along (me), my parents purchased their first house on Springdale Boulevard. It was from there, some years later, that my mom and I began our architectural excursions. They weren’t

intentional: As a kid with bad allergies and asthma, I needed to see a doctor at Bay and Bloor for weekly injections. I’d take a half-day off of school, and on days my dad couldn’t drive us, my mom and I would get on the subway at Coxwell and, after the 15 minutes at the doctor was done, we’d go exploring.

Walking in Yorkville or the Annex, she’d point out ornate front doors, fancy gates or other nuggets my little mind could easily wrap around. One of our regular stops was the Manulife building on Bloor East, she remembered, where I’d marvel at the golf-green-perfect lawn or the orderly row of columns.

Then, when I got older, I found my love: modernism. While I’m sure she would have preferred continuing our exploration of Victorian Toronto, she indulged me when I started asking if we could go and stare at the strange cluster of black towers at King and Bay (Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s TD Centre) or visit the newly opened CN Tower ... again. There were also trips to the Science Centre, where I was just as fascinated by the building’s descent into the valley as with the giant Tic-Tac-Toe machine. While she may not have understood why I liked these things, I’m sure she smiled just the same. Much later, when I lived in Montreal in the 1990s, my mom and I got to play architourist again, exploring the Vieux Port or Mies’s Westmount Square.

Always an avid reader, it would have been a real treat for her to be surrounded by books on history, art and architecture. What she doesn’t realize, however, is that she was my first teacher in those very subjects. So for that, and for a great deal more, I’d like to thank the Original Architourist and wish her a very happy 80th birthday.