Facades

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Abstract
If there was one fact about my father it was that though he hated finishing things, he loved beginnings. For a builder, this was disastrous. My childhood threads its way through a myriad of unfinished projects, of growths, of ideas being born but then slumbering into incomplection. It had to do, to some extent, with poverty. We were poor, so that we had to improvise. But it had more to do with impatience. My father loved to plan. I would wake early in the morning and he'd be sitting on the roof, an island of melting tar surrounding him, and he'd be staring into space. I'd speak to him and he'd reply as though we had been in a lengthy conversation and had just arrived mid-point.
Façades

I could not for the life of me remember where that door actually was. And that didn’t just puzzle me, it worried me. It made me interested in the notion of memory itself. In what it is you remember, but also what it is you forget. In going back to try to work all that out I found myself writing a piece about the house that was also an essay on memory. 

David Malouf*

If there was one fact about my father it was that though he hated finishing things, he loved beginnings. For a builder, this was disastrous. My childhood threads its way through a myriad of unfinished projects, of growths, of ideas being born but then slumbering into incompleteness. It had to do, to some extent, with poverty. We were poor, so that we had to improvise. But it had more to do with impatience. My father loved to plan. I would wake early in the morning and he’d be sitting on the roof, an island of melting tar surrounding him, and he’d be staring into space. I’d speak to him and he’d reply as though we had been in a lengthy conversation and had just arrived mid-point.

‘Dad? What are you doing?’ I might say, and he’d shake his head.
‘Anyway’, he’d answer, ‘that’s where the door will be?’
‘What door?’

He would sigh impatiently, as though reproaching me for not paying attention. ‘The door. After I build the window display.’ And he’d stand and dust off his trousers, pick his way across the perpetually leaking roof, and come back inside. ‘Come on, we have to plan this.’

In the store we’d stand, hands on hips, and stare up at the sagging ceiling. Sometimes he’d take a screwdriver from the display case and poke it through the gyprock. A stream of water would pour through. ‘Get a bucket! Get a bucket!’ he’d shout, as though I should have anticipated the emergency.

‘Why didn’t you tell me what you were going to do?’ I’d snap and run to fetch a bucket from the window display. In our hardware store, nothing was new. Everything had been tried and tested by us first. Customers would look at a rust stain on a watering can, or finger a crooked crowbar, and my father would respond irritably, ‘Well, at the price I’m selling it to you, why are you complaining?’ It got to the stage that customers who knew us well sometimes asked us for the ‘rusty’ nails – the nails that Dad and I scavenged from building sites, and sold for half price.
The bucket in place, we’d watch the yellow stream of liquid pour forth from ceiling, and continue our half imagined conversation.

‘You see, son, I can build right up to the footpath. That’s a lot of extra space. I think we should build a window display out perpendicular from the shopfront, and then across, and then back to the store. Like a courtyard. Later we can throw a roof over it and knock down all the walls. Then, voila, the store is twice its size.’

‘Voila’ was not a word I enjoyed. It meant a lost weekend. Essentially we had to build quickly. We couldn’t afford the construction permits, but Montreal, in those days, had peculiar laws. If the inspectors came by and you were in mid-construction, and if you didn’t have a permit, they made you tear down what you’d built. But if a project was finished, they couldn’t ask for your permit. So every Friday after five – which was when the inspectors signed off for the weekend – Dad and I would go into frenzied building. The objective was to bite off just what we could chew, chew like hell, and have the project wrapped up by Monday 8 am. So the small four foot square shack which my father had put up in an empty field, grew monstrously and inexorably. It developed limbs and tentacles which would snake out in all directions, but always according to some imaginary map my father charted in his head. A wall would shoot out, then veer left, then left again, and suddenly it was a square. ‘It’s a courtyard’, my father explained to one frustrated inspector, when the man argued that the building was incomplete because it had no roof. It would have to come down.

‘It’s a what?’

‘A courtyard. Very fashionable. We’ll have plants out here.’ A month later we threw a roof over the courtyard.

The inspector ranted. ‘This is not a courtyard. It has a roof!’

‘It’s a covered courtyard’, my father explained, patiently scraping the rust and tar off some six inch nails.

‘Where’s your permit?’ the inspector shouted into my father’s calm imperturbability.

‘For what?’

‘For this. For building a cover on your courtyard!’

‘What building? It’s finished.’

‘It’s always finished with you. But it’s always different!’

Slowly the building swelled outwardly, inwardly, upwards and down. A cellar emerged beneath the courtyard, and a balcony above. Eventually the balcony would become our home, since the store was a tad crowded for a family of three, and unreasonably noisy given the constant construction. But the building never stopped.

When I was eight I was sent to summer camp. On my return two months later I couldn’t find the front door into the house. ‘It’s over here’, my father added helpfully. ‘Beside the courtyard.’ I don’t think any European could have lived next to as many courtyards as I did.
One year, when we ran out of timber, my father pulled out the second storey balcony. My mother, blissfully unaware that he’d done this, went out to hang the laundry up and stepped through the roof. ‘It’s a skylight’, my father explained to the inspector. ‘For the plants.’

The inspector quit, taking his frustrated bulk into a different line of work. He became a union agitator and loved to drop by on weekends. ‘Building a courtyard?’ he asked once.

‘A what?’ my father answered. ‘It’s a shed. Can’t you tell the difference between a shed and a courtyard?’

They laughed and disappeared inside for a lemonade while I knocked together another false roof.

The problem for me was wanting to finish something. Our greatest arguments were over the need to put handles on a set of newly built drawers, or installing a door on a room we’d just built.

‘It can wait’, my father would say.

‘But it’s a toilet.’

There was no winning with him. He had that distant look on his face – eyes turned towards the new beige carpet my mother had insisted he put down.

‘We are not recycling that green carpet’, she told him a week before.

‘But it’s perfectly good.’

‘It’s outdoor carpet from the balcony.’

‘What’s your point?’

‘It’s synthetic! From the Mini Putt you demolished for your cousin Claude.’

‘Who’s going to notice?’

‘I will!’

My mother had that look in her eye and my father shook his head resignedly. ‘There’s no winning with her’, he said.

That evening they went out and bought a new carpet which we installed the next day. It was an extraordinarily lavish purchase for my father to make, but when I pressed him his plan became clear. ‘It’s eleven feet across’, he whispered. ‘The room’s only eight and a half. That leaves one and a half by eighteen divided by two. That’s eight mini rugs I can sell for welcome mats.’

‘Dad’, I explained patiently. ‘No one uses beige pile carpet for welcome mats.’

‘I’ll sell them two for one.’ A week later they were gone. The inspector had bought a boat and my father had convinced him they were waterproof.

‘For God’s sake, Dad. They weren’t even Berber. It was a deep pile carpet. He’ll kill himself.’

‘I’ll give him a discount on non-skid paint.’
My father’s notion of non-skid paint, it needs to be said, was to toss a couple of handfuls of sand into the liquid. When I scoffed he reminded me that he’d invented pre-mixed sand and cement, which was true.

‘You didn’t invent it’, I corrected pedantically, ‘you mixed them.’

‘Same thing. Was it available before? Well?’

‘No’, I said reluctantly.

‘Did that fellow from Bemix concrete come here and buy some? Did he ask me if I had a patent? Did they patent it the following year and become millionaires?’

‘Okay!’ I shouted. ‘That still doesn’t justify selling a pile rug to an amateur sailor.’

‘Speaking of carpets’, my father continued. ‘I have an idea.’ He grabbed me by the arm and dragged me outside. A customer was trying to come in the front door but my father blocked his path. ‘What do you want?’ he barked.

‘I want some grass seed’, the customer mumbled nervously.

‘It’s a bad time to plant’, he said and locked the door. I heard the customer mutter that it was spring but we were already ascending the makeshift steps which led upstairs. My stomach was churning. He had that look in his eye. My mother was away for the weekend, and the house was ours.

‘Where am I standing?’ my father asked when I entered the living room. His feet were planted on the new carpet – my mother’s day-old pride and joy.

‘On the new carpet, in the living room, behind your favourite chair’, I mumbled hastily. It wasn’t the right answer and we both knew it.

‘Anyway’, he said, ‘as it stands now, I have to stay in the store all day long. And in winter, since the heating’s so expensive, it gets a bit cold. So where am I standing?’

My heart tried to stuff itself into my brain. ‘In your store?’ I squeaked.

‘Voila!’ he shouted triumphantly.

‘Dad, you don’t know what you’re saying.’

‘Yes I do. I said “voila!” He pointed at the new carpet.

‘This should be right over my office. If I cut a hole through here, I can lower a ladder into the store, and ...’

‘Voila’, I said. My brain was trying to stuff itself into my bowels. ‘Dad. You can’t cut through the new carpet ...’

‘Yes I can. I got a new delivery of power saws today, and a brand new drill ...’

‘No, no. I mean, you must not.’

‘She won’t notice.’

‘You want to cut a hole through her brand new carpet, in the living room, and you think she won’t notice.

‘I’ll make it a trap door. I can cut the carpet, glue it back down, put the door on a hinge ...’
'I'm not helping with this one.'
'My son', he cajoled, using his most wounded tones. 'My only boy.'
'Don't bug me. I'm not cutting a hole in ...'
'My arthritis ...'
'It'll be the least of your problems.'

I suppose there was no way for him to know that the first hole would fall over a support beam and a tangle of wires which he could not shift. The second hole was much more discreet, and both could just about be covered up by the recliner. In truth, except for the deep clear cut through the brand new pile carpet, it was almost possible to pretend it wasn't there. Except for the electric bell my father installed just above the hole.

'When a customer comes in', he explained to my weeping mother, 'the bell will go off and I can go down. Don't you see, I can spend more time up here with you.'

My mother swallowed her sobs and stared at him with her clear brown eyes. I'd never heard her speak through clenched teeth before - until then I must admit the phrase was merely a metaphor to me - and the experience was not pleasant to observe. I believe she said something lame to the effect of 'Is that supposed to be a consolation', but something in her voice suggested there was a more pointed comment to follow. Luckily the bell rang and my father disappeared through the hole in the floor and he quite wisely didn't return again until dinner time.

It took a while to get used to the bell. At first, during mealtime, we would involuntarily shoot our food across the table whenever it went off unexpectedly. My father had hot-wired it with the same sort of urgency that he put up illegal walls, and not without purpose. The bell, he seemed to know, had to go up before my mother came home, or it never would.

'She's like the inspector', my father explained to me as the sparks flew from the small generator he was trying to bury beneath the carpet.

'Does it show?' he asked.

It looked like a bright green goitre. I assumed his question was rhetorical, and when he set fire to the carpet, it pretty much was.

'I'll put it in the store', he reassured.

What was most extraordinary about the process of metamorphosis was that it never seemed alien to us. We quickly accommodated the changes, came to know them, and were surprised when other people found them odd. To us there was nothing unusual about a thief accidentally poking his head up through the trap door thinking it led to the roof, while we sat around watching The Brady Bunch. There was nothing odd about having relatives emerge from a myriad of entrances, so that Uncle Robert entered
via the roof, Auntie Maggie popped up through the floor, and cousin Denise dropped in through the fire escape. It was like living in a Vaudeville set.

What I never expected was that this impermanence would affect my recollections. That when both my parents would be gone, and when I needed most to remember, there would be no boundaries to cling to, no doors to open because I couldn’t find them, no solid frameworks of any kind – just façades. I know from life that this is true for everyone – and yet I can’t help but feel this impermanence is peculiar to me.

My last sight of my father was as he struggled down the hole in the living room floor, his hands hooked into arthritic claws, disappearing as though into a submarine. I flew back from Australia some years later, but too late. He was lying in a coma – neither here nor there. And I begrudged him this consistency for unfinished business. I resented that he hadn’t waited for me to say goodbye. That even in death he couldn’t finish things – that he left mid-phrase. But oddly, when I finally felt strong enough to visit the dilapidated store from which they had moved after I had gone away, everything made sense. Somehow, it hadn’t changed a bit.