

# When my parents moved on, it fell to me to turn my childhood home back into a house

**Michael Leclair**

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I lived in an eastern suburb of Montreal called Anjou for the first 22 years of my life. My academic and social life was on the other side of the city, so I spent endless amounts of time commuting back and forth.

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Anjou was inconvenient and unfortunately my home got caught up in my disdain for its location. As a self-centred, restless and moody teenager, I became disenchanted with its small size, which afforded little privacy, and the one tiny bathroom I had to share with my parents. I was shy and self-conscious as well, so even my father's meticulously landscaped backyard was no place I wanted to be, surrounded as it was by the prying eyes of a multitude of neighbours.

In 1983, I left home to attend university in Halifax and I couldn't have been happier. I was tired of living in Montreal, of commuting, of routine, of the confining walls I felt my home was putting on the rest of my life. I had become coolly detached and had lost any emotional affinity I had for it. I was determined to move on and never live there again.

After more than 50 years in the same house, age and health issues forced my parents to move into a retirement complex last summer. They picked out key belongings they wanted and left the rest in Anjou.

Based in the Toronto area at the time, I found myself doing a lot of commuting back and forth in the months leading up to their move. But what happened shortly afterward can best be described as some karmic "never-say-never" conspiracy.

The convergence of a new business opportunity in Montreal, the recent sale of my Oakville condo and the urgent need for renovations to my parents' home resulted in me considering the unthinkable: I realized, reluctantly, that the house in Anjou offered me a chance to save a lot of travel time, stay close to my parents as they got settled and have a temporary base to live and work.

So last September, exactly 30 years after I vowed to move out for good, I moved back into my childhood home.

On the first day back, I felt sorry for myself. I really didn't want to be there. I walked through each of the rooms, unenthusiastically taking time to gaze at familiar photos and souvenirs of many vacations and family get-togethers scattered everywhere. It felt weird to be there alone.

I began the slow process of boxing up the stuff my parents had left behind, and then started depersonalizing the house itself – ripping up old carpets, stripping away 1980s wallpaper, filling cracks and updating walls with fresh coats of paint.

Maybe I needed the stillness, solitude and absence of distractions to be fully vulnerable to what happened next.

What began as a focused, schedule-driven renovation project ended up being a serendipitous excursion down memory highway. Memories began flooding back, overwhelming me at first because I wasn't expecting them. The kitchen, with its inviting aroma of my mom's cooking; the den where my dad and I watched *les Canadiens* most Saturdays, and where my buddies and I would watch the sexy movies of *Bleu Nuit* on a snowy TV screen; and, of course my bedroom, where I spent hours sleeping and dreaming and where I discovered my creative flair for photography, painting and writing.

Even such mundane outdoor tasks as parking the car and clearing snow from the back porch reminded me of ball hockey games, playing catch and washing my dad's car under his watchful eye. The backyard – the place that held no refuge for me as a teen – came alive again with memories of watching the opening of the 1972 Summit Series on the patio and camping-style sleepovers with my friends, when we'd mischievously wander the neighbourhood in our pyjamas.

As a kid I didn't have a smartphone always ready to capture moments. It took coming back, retracing my childhood footsteps, to trigger these prized memories that I had tossed in the trash bin as if they were somehow impediments to my further progress. I wonder if I ever would have accessed them again if I hadn't returned. Perhaps I had been too eager to leave, too immature to fully appreciate what these memories meant to me. Perhaps they had needed to mature before I recognized their value. Thank God my brain never emptied the trash bin.

I found myself polishing door knobs, scrubbing floors and applying painstaking touch-ups to areas only the most discerning eye could notice. Consciously, I was invigorated by the need to honour the effort and pride my parents had put into our home. Unconsciously, I was letting go – eliminating all vestiges of our presence there – so that the next owners can start with a clean slate.

After seven months, I've finished what I set out to do. The place has been neutralized, all signs of personalization removed and listed for sale.

I am thankful for the opportunity to re-appreciate the childhood my parents created for me. They turned a house into a home. Now it's time to invite a new family in so that they can create a home and memories of their own.

*Michael Leclair is still in Montreal, reassessing his living arrangements.*

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