

Constructing the Colours

a workman's notes – Evan Kroeker, 2003

Coxwell Avenue is standard Toronto material. Walking up it from the shore of Lake Ontario to Danforth Avenue, you pass through a seamless mash of neighborhoods that reassembles the globe in spiced and scented miniature. At a corner convenience store, Hindi is spoken to buy a low-rate overseas calling card, across the street, Portuguese. When it's heard at all, the English here is usually broken. The trendy, urban-renewed *Beaches* neighborhood isn't far but this bit of inner-city is still real—no good coffee, no newsstands selling *Loaded* or *Paris Review*, and cell phone conversations are rare.

The day plays out here more at human than business pace. An east Indian merchant smokes in front of his imported goods shop and suveys the street. A police cruiser eases off the station lot, two quiet shadows inside and their coffees, hats and lottery scratch-offs.

A red streetcar scolds a Pontiac with three dings of its bell. A Greek lady in a diner sets down a plate of souvlaki before resuming her story about a funeral back home. An Asian child, banished with his older brother to the front porch so mother can have an hour's peace, wails and beats on the door.

An old Muslim cleric sits very still in front of his house in his white frock as kids of every stripe and size laughingly, teasingly and with altogether no notice of him, make their way to and from school. These are sights that greet me, a rookie builder, every day at my new job.

Coxwell is standard material, hitting all the targets of an east Toronto street, but with at least one twist. Rising on the lot at #157 is a new house that no passer-by can help stopping to see. It's tall, thin and mostly blue, with some red, green and brown thrown in, arranged in rectangles and squares and looking like a Partridge Family tour bus gone king size—and vertical.

By 7:30 a.m. the late-July heatwave stirs and rears its sticky head. It's the peculiar Great Lakes swelter that Chicagoans, Clevelandites and Detroiters all know, that the city takes up and throws in its own contributions of CO₂ and smog to supersaturate the air with a cruel, moist haze.

I'm nervous. I barely know the boss, John, a thin 50ish guy with a trim beard, warm smile and the vague look of a children's entertainer. The sunbaked crew has been at it a week; they seem like good guys from the start—an impression that holds remarkably accurate for the rest of the job. A sense of fun and even silliness is one of the first things I notice here. W.C. Fields and Charlton Heston are heard bargaining for plywood or calling for the nail gun. And I notice a kind of unspoken *no yelling at every passing girl to sleep with you* policy, a big contrast from my last crew.

It's Johnny Cooper's (sometimes called *Other John*) and my job to knock together the steel scaffold that will surround the place. A few tons of it lie in pieces on the muddy, sloping ground at the foot of the 7ft. piers the house rests on. Putting it up is about as simple as it looks, like a life-sized tinkertoy. The only real logistic is the twists & turns each piece makes on its journey up through the matrix of hatches, braces and materials before it's hammered into place, as the whole thing rises toward the treetops. That makes it a whole-body workout.

The four steel columns sit on concrete piles that go 47ft. down to bedrock, I'm told. John explains that this was a creek bed, unstable ground, and says this is why the narrow, but deep and wooded lot has stood unsold for 30 years. On top of them rests a box-joist of heavy beams made of *Paralam*, a wood-waste product stronger than steel for its weight, and so hard the nail gun can't fire into it. On it the main floor and the walls are up. I set about the work, kind of flat-footed but eager

[BREAK]

"Whoa Beecher look out!" I squawk a couple of weeks later, but only in time for him to flinch and catch the falling 2x10 I'm supposed to be holding—*just holding there*—on the neck and shoulders. It glances off him with a grim-sounding *thock*.

Is he hurt? I don't think it hurt him, but god!

I'm sitting above him and Big John, 35ft in the air, straddling the north wall of the house, heart pounding. *I'm fired right?* a voice rings in my head. But Beecher's already taking a puff on his cigarette and forcing a smile, and the boss gives a small shake of the head.

"What were you *doing*?" he asks, and I start to explain that I was trying to pass the nail gun to my other ... hand under the ..., but his expression says, *Never mind, I've got bigger worries*.

Beecher LaPierre is a cheery guy, about 5'7" with a surfer's blond crop of hair. He's been a carpenter for 20-odd years, a smoker nearly 30, and by everyone who's worked with him's account, as skilled a pair of hands as you'll find in the city. His second most striking feature after a disarming, ready smile is that there are no more than 4 or 5 teeth in it. On my first day he bought me a coffee. You couldn't pick a less deserving guy to clobber.

One morning at the top of the scaffold, a 50lb brace slips from my tired grip. There's a second of silence, then a series of heart-stopping sounds that translate into English as,

if KLANG this thing KLANG hits anyone KLANG ... they're dead and so are you KLANG KLANGLE THUMP!

This potential skull crusher is somehow unheard (!) by the others who are operating power tools and hearing the radio. Even before my heart stops beating like a rabid

squirrel's, a new resolution takes form in my mind—*nothing can slip again, even if you have move like a b-movie robot from now on, nothing can slip again—EVER*. And maybe by no more than sheer luck, nothing else does.

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Passers-by can't help stopping and saying something. And as the building gets higher, the interruptions become more frequent and emphatic. I'm sure every construction worker fields the odd "what you fellas puttin up?" and "how high's she gonna go?", but as August wears on, the house begins to work like a giant sodium-pentathol injection on the neighborhood.

A hunched woman plodding by with her groceries proclaims it in a heavy slavic voice "Very utilitarian," and seeing us smile, repeats sternly "very *utilitarian*," and continues on her way.

A teenager in gangwear asks "uhh, is that an apartment building?"

John: Nope, it's a house.

Gangster: How many apartments are in there?

A leopard-skin woman and nervous man-friend stop the boss on the sidewalk to ask if he can do countertops and sinks. Holding a heavy tablesaw, he answers yes but doesn't have time today. She entreats him with an offer of "kesh, all kesh, just one countertop, just down the street." *Sorry*, John shakes his head, but already her companion is chattering *he'll do it, he knows how to do it, don't worry*. But she ignores him and pleads some more. "Kesh, I pay you kesh ..."

"Why did you choose those colors?" a jogger breaks her stride to ask. "I didn't," I say without belligerence, but she jogs away and seems offended. A scruffy guy from the assisted-living house down the street strolls onto the yard and beams, "I WANT WHAT THAT GUY'S ON." One day as a gaggle of schoolgirls mills by, its alpha-teen calls to us on the roof, "Don't jump! Think about the kids!" A few hours later she repeats it on the way home.

Kids, it turns out, are unanimously taken by the house. Smiling parents stop to tell us a few times a week; babies coo, toddlers ask "can we go in there?", pre-teens want to climb onto the roof or they lapse into a transfixed daze. This makes Rohan smile on his visits. *Simple and happy* is the motto he's uttered to me in an earlier conversation, and who are better judges than kids?

Women under 90 are the other demographic that shows universal enthusiasm. But men, especially tradesmen scrutinize the façade with general reserve and sometimes out-and-out disapproval. A ruddy-faced guy who's been drinking asks, "How much you payin somebody to live here?" "Thousand dollars a month," I think of quipping but I'm a bit scared of him. Then he asks if I want to buy any tools, but I shrug and he goes away.

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Capping the second floor wall on the north side where the stairs run is a beam made from eight 2x6s stacked on one another, running the length of the house. Tying them together are 8 or so truss rods that look like massive steel bolts without the heads, that are fixed by nuts and washers on both ends. I've torqued them on, and a few days afterward it pops into my head to ask Big John, his head in the plans, the reason for this mass of lumber. Looking up he says, "It's overbuilt," and gulps the thick, green phyto-juice he brings in a mason jar.

The boss is a tall drink of water, in his 50's, and since shaving his beard halfway through the job, a ringer for Clint Eastwood. He says the comments he gets are a welcome switch from his earlier incarnation as Fred Penner, and we all laugh at him, realizing *that's who we've been working for!* He's a perfectionist, and this has him taking tools right out of my hands from time to time to show me how to do something properly. But one day I'm caught by surprise when he moves me aside as I'm hitting some nails the gun didn't fire all the way in. Lashing murderously with his funny Japanese hammer he says, "You're using too much finesse. This is framing, it's just brutal, eh."

An unheated struggle has been taking place for the airwaves. Beecher owns the site radio and he established "classic rock" from the beginning, but a few weeks in, John, who can give the names of *The Buckingham*s in their order of birth, is losing patience for the daily diet of *Rush* and *Def Leppard* (and so am I), and he invokes executive privilege to switch to "all oldies" format. But this isn't exactly a solution; now the momentum-killers are Paul Anka and Frankie Valli. When enough groaning is heard the dial is switched back. And then back again. When we finally hit equilibrium, the campy extremes of both stations give the crew a curious boost, and *Black Sabbath* and *The Carpenters* are sung-along to with equal verve. And up, up goes the house.

The outside is clad with a material called MDO, medium density overlay. It's really half-inch plywood that comes with a resin soaked paper layer and can be painted before it goes onto the house. At some point Rohan mentions that his vivid color choices come from his love for the *Group of Seven*, a bunch of painters from Canada. Each 4x8 sheet—and for that matter, every single piece of the house—is hauled up by hand and/or rope, and by the time the scaffold hits the 6th or 7th level this gets to be a challenge. The wind is an added hazard as the sheets are levered over the topmost brace.

"A gust of wind can put you in the neighbor's driveway like that," John snaps his fingers. "And we don't have permission to go onto their property to scrape up your pieces."

I take his point and although at least three of us wouldn't argue if someone called us *pipsqueak*, me included, we all feel like linebackers after a few turns at the top of the rope.

Covering the joints of these 4x8 sheets are cedar strips called batons, held in place with stainless steel nails. One day when I'm alone finishing the last of these and reflecting on

the outrageous cost of these nails—\$190 for a small box—a visitor asks so politely for a peek around inside that I break the rules and let him in. It's the end of the framing stage and he asks what's left to do.

With the air of a veteran I tell him it's pretty much ready for sheetrock. He looks puzzled. "You mean ... after the wiring."

"Er ... that ... would be right ... I guess," I say, in a sudden bad mood at my blown pretense. *But you didn't know these nails were stainless steel, did you wise guy?* Later that day I lean against a post and casually tell the boss, "So I guess the wiring's next." No, he says, wiring's gonna be all exposed—it goes on after the sheetrock.

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Oddly, the house that's generating so much talk around the neighborhood—and as of this web posting it's been seen in print and on television across the country—is one of the smallest on the street. Weighing in at 800 sq. ft., it's roomy by European standards and by Asian, simply vast.

Trekking up the stairs each day I try to picture how or *if* my wife and I could adjust to the space, re-shuffling in my mind our belongings, merging rooms' full of furniture and accessories. *What could go where? Maybe the whole third floor could be our closet. I could sell the music gear ... the TV could go in that corner ... no, the second floor could be the closet ... or actually, some stuff could go out in the backyard if we hid it under leaves ...*

Finally it hits with shovel-in-the-head force: *I have too much crap!* And this colored box that's already given me an education delivers its final lesson.