

SPEECH! SPEECH! SPEECH!

As a child, I had a flair for the dramatic. I grew up here [gesture behind], in one of the townhouses that used to be right over there. My favourite game was called Government Conspiracies and it went like this: if I noticed that my mother was briefly distracted, I'd slip out the backdoor, tip-toe through the backyard and around the side of the house to the front, where I'd pound the door with my fist and say, in the gruffest voice I could muster, **GOVERNMENT CONSPIRACIES, OPEN UP!!** (I don't know where I got the idea. Probably too much *X Files* and *Law & Order* before bed.) The game ended when one day, exasperated by my antics, my mother pulled me aside and said "Sweetheart, a conspiracy is something that the government doesn't want us to know."

My father used to say politicians: they're all crooks. My mother said don't vote, it only encourages them. They both complained loudly and often about the city. Theirs wasn't a libertarian skepticism, too cocky to consider the possibility of mutual support; rather, their skepticism came from a string of broken promises and bureaucratic neglect, of things offered, revoked, and then forgotten entirely.

The townhouses behind us, now in the process of being torn down, were built in the mid-1960s as a part of the neighbourhood's transition into public housing. The architects who designed the project originally presented a repair-and-replace approach in which new public housing units would be built alongside existing privately-owned houses, whose restoration would be prioritized as a part of the redevelopment. The intention was to create a neighbourhood that integrated public and private housing through a combination of new and old architectures, but a lack of funding for individual repairs led to wholesale demolition and the subsequent construction of a series of homogenous housing blocks, the kind the project's architects had been trying to avoid.

From this renegotiation came the Alexandra Park housing project, once considered a marvel of modern architecture, its winding pedestrian pathways designed to eliminate traffic, its grassy courtyards built to encourage an urban experience of nature, its low-rise townhouses faced inward to facilitate neighbourly exchange. Perhaps the vision was naively optimistic. Most of the images I've encountered of Alexandra Park during that time feature children: children holding hands, children looking up into the canopy of a budding tree, children perched against brick walls, conspiring.

By the end of the twentieth century, the innocent ideals upon which Alexandra Park had been built were crumbling, much like the brown brick facades of the townhouses. Now, more than half a century after it was built, Alexandra Park is undergoing another redevelopment, this one the result of a joint partnership between Atkinson Housing Co-operative, Toronto Community Housing, and Tridel, known for their award-winning luxury condos. The development proposal promises a mix of private and public housing, a new community centre, and zero community displacement, although the logistics of how those promises will be kept remains ambiguous. Once again, a repair-and-replace approach has been abandoned

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in favour of new townhouses and two new high-rises, one with units available through the public housing system, and the other with units available starting at 1.1 million.

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I don't know if this redevelopment is good or bad. Like most things, the answer is probably somewhere in the middle. I refuse the nostalgic impulse to say that everything used to be better the way it was. (I was there. It wasn't.) Maybe it's a good idea to tear the whole thing down and start over. But who gets to start over, and from where? Maybe this redevelopment is being executed thoughtfully, with respect to current residents and uncontaminated by the interests of private developers. I don't know. But let the record show that I remain skeptical.

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Nevertheless, things change, and these changes are worth noting. We're here today, on the weekend of the fall equinox, a time when day and night are briefly equal before we transition into a season of protracted darkness. Let's take a moment to look around and see things as they are, right now. They won't be like this forever. With these scissors I will cut these ribbons, a humble welcoming of a new era. Each cut I dedicate to a place I once called home.

A

V

This first ribbon is for the triplex under the Decarie Expressway in Montreal, where I lived at eighteen in a room under the stairs for 250 dollars a month. Years later, the triplex was knocked down to expand the highway. Then, just a few weeks ago, the triplex next door caved in on itself, almost as if it needed its neighbour for support. I dedicate this cut to anyone experiencing their first time away from home, whether forced or chosen, joyous or painful.

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This ribbon is for the apartment by the park, the first place I lived when I moved back to the city six years ago. A few months after I'd moved in, the apartment lit on fire, supposedly an accident caused by a plumber hired by the landlord to fix an old pipe. Ever the skeptic, I believe the fire was an inside job, an excuse to kick out the tenants and raise the rent. I dedicate this cut to anyone who's returned home after a long time away to find everything completely different, or everything exactly the same.

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This ribbon is for the little gingerbread cottage in the Village, built in the 1930s, where I was able to live comfortably through successive lockdowns and which is currently slated to be demolished to make room for something taller and more expensive. I dedicate this cut to all the freaks and faggots who can close the blinds and do whatever they want in safety and peace thanks to affordable housing.

G

This last ribbon is for Alexandra Park, these winding paths that raised me. This is where I learned how to ride a bike, and where, one evening while taking out the garbage, I saw two men behind the dumpsters, one man standing and the other on his knees. Thank you for seeing me through my childhood, albeit imperfectly. I dedicate this cut to all childhoods that have and will continue to exist here; the rich ones, and especially the poor.

Cason Sharpe, September 2024

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