



*"Time exists in order that everything doesn't happen all at once...
and space exists so that it doesn't all happen to you."
- Susan Sontag*



BETWEEN US

a letter from London

A MOVE ACROSS THE POND PROMPTS ONE WRITER TO THINK ABOUT SPACE IN A NEW LIGHT: WHEN WE NEED MORE OF IT, SOMETIMES IT'S BEST TO GO SOMEWHERE WHERE IT IS IN SHORT SUPPLY.

by Malwina Gudowska & illustrations by Shen Plum

Shortly after my husband and I moved into a 347-square-foot London flat late last summer, my brother-in-law and his wife bought a 2,500-square-foot house in Airdrie. Their soon-to-be-built master bedroom and walk-in closet will be the same size as our entire apartment. The rest of the house will be a beautiful maze of bedrooms, a mudroom (a mudroom!), dining room, laundry room and two-and-a-half bathrooms. After the inaugural trip to our tiny closet that houses a sink, toilet and shower (the term “bath-room” is a stretch), my husband proclaimed (and tweeted) that, as you sit on the toilet, it’s possible to simultaneously stick your entire head in the sink

while you open the shower door with one hand.

I grew up on the vast Saskatchewan prairie in a house where I had the entire upstairs floor to myself, but I was regularly exposed to the European way of living—small apartments home to lots of people, sometimes three generations under one roof—when I visited family in Poland. But it wasn’t until I moved to Calgary 14 years ago that I became acutely aware of space. The first time I drove from my rented house in the northwest community of Ranchlands to the University of Calgary, I remember thinking how big and expansive the city was, and how you could ride into the sunset along Crowchild Trail. Back then, parks weren’t crowded,

restaurants—even hot spots like Pongo and the original Mercury—weren’t jam-packed and there was always some place new to discover. (Of course, it’s possible that my overwhelming and romantic sense of space could be attributed to having just moved from a much smaller city and being on my own for the first time.)

But after a decade, as the city became more populated and urban sprawl marred the surrounding landscape, Calgary began to close in on me. Coffee shops became overcrowded, often with familiar faces I didn’t want to see. I knew the fastest routes to and from places, which meant there was little chance of discovering something new. Friends moved to the suburbs to lay claim to a little space, which in turn created more space between us, and, by now, I tried to stay clear of Crowchild Trail.

In *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, geographer Yi-Fu Tuan writes, “Place is security, space

is freedom: we are attached to the one and long for the other.” In the book, published in 1977, he looks at how the meaning of space often merges with that of place—“what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value.”

This sounds simple enough, but “place” is a bit of a loaded concept. For a location to become a place, we have to pause and live there awhile. So “place” is often associated with security and stability (Airdrie for my brother-in-law and sister-in-law who had been searching for a house to settle into). But we can also experience that pause (Calgary for me) as a threat to our movement and freedom.

Tuan also notes that space doesn’t necessarily equate to spaciousness, just as density doesn’t always equal crowding. Like most things in life, these concepts are personal and relative. And so, when Calgary began to close in on me and I had to find space, I moved to an island that can fit into Alberta more than six times over, and to a city with a population eight times the size of Calgary.

What living in London for the past six months has taught me is how quickly our idea of space—and how much of it we require—can change. Often, having more makes us crave it less and not having any at all makes us yearn for it. Just as rush hour on the London Tube when my face is under a stranger’s armpit makes me wish for nothing but space, I’ve found myself wishing for anything to fill the space between one destination and the next while driving along Deerfoot Trail.

How we interpret the idea of physical space differs greatly between Calgary and London, but when it comes to other forms of space—lapses of communication because of language barriers, inequalities between classes and how we get from Point A to Point B—our cities are not so very different.

THE SQUARE FEET BETWEEN US

When Anh Chu, a fellow Calgary expat, moved to London a year-and-a-half ago, she went from owning a house to renting one with four other people. “I felt like I regressed. I went into a spatial regression,” says Chu. “I moved from a home into a room and I didn’t know the rules of living with other people. I kept my door closed all the time so I could have some personal space, and my friend took that personally and was closing herself off.”

Chu, 30, spent a year living in the house mostly because rent was cheap and her friend was there. Plus, like a seasoned Londoner, she was out a lot, discovering new spaces all around London that made up for the physical space she lacked at home, she says.

Sharing a flat with multiple roommates or renting obscenely small flats is common in London because most people want to stay close to the action but can’t

afford high rents. According to an article in *The Independent*, one-bedroom flats in London have shrunk by 13 per cent since 2000, to as little as 300 square feet. This is quite short of the Parker Morris Standards, a 1961 report on housing-space standards which recommends a minimum of 480 square feet for two-person flats in the U.K. (When we first moved to London, we were so desperate to find a place, we considered renting a 277-square-foot studio.)

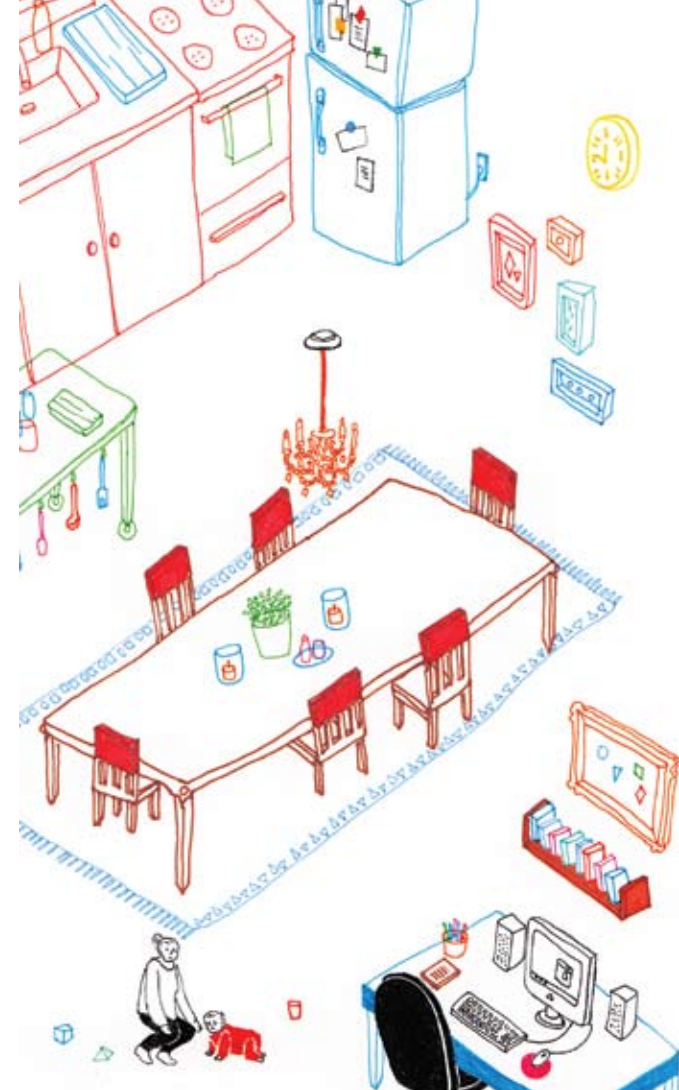
In Calgary, we lived in a 980-square-foot condo but were always asked when we were going to buy a house, as if our sizable condo wasn’t really a grown-up home. We were also the only couple among our friends who didn’t have a backyard and lawn.

According to Geoff Ghitter, a postdoctoral fellow at the Institute of Sustainable Energy, Environment and Economy in Calgary, our city’s physical state is a reflection of our values. “If you live in Calgary and you don’t have a car, it’s a tough city,” says Ghitter. “And when you combine that with a value set, a preference for large houses and large lawns, that preference dictates the form of our city.”

There are, of course, plenty of Calgarians who value proximity to the inner city or a short commute to work over a big house and lawn, just as many Londoners, motivated by more space and cheaper rent, opt to live far from central London. But my experience has taught me that the real difference between Calgary and London is that success is often measured by the size of your house in the former, whereas in the latter, it’s measured by how short your commute is, and by your postal code.

Comparing European and North American homes is not that simple, says Byron Miller, associate professor of geography at the U of C. Yes, we consume and utilize space in North America differently than do Europeans but there are a number of factors—land prices and availability, income levels, government subsidies—that have to be considered. “In Europe, there is much more emphasis on quality of space as opposed to quantity,” he says. “In North America, there’s been an emphasis on quantity of land and quantity of space for the past two to four decades but we are starting to see the consequences.” With the introduction of programs such as Plan It Calgary, which seeks to incorporate sustainability into future growth, the city is looking at creating a more compact city, Miller says.

“Quality” in London also comes into question when you’re talking about a decrepit flat with mould growing in the bathroom, shoddy wiring and windows so thin you can hear someone whispering outside. And that’s where the local pub comes in! I finally understand why Londoners spend more time at the pub than at home. We



have fully embraced Saturday afternoon pub marathons, Sunday roast dinners and weekly pub quiz nights.

THE DISTANCE BETWEEN US

While mattress shopping in London recently, I met Andrew, a Londoner, who has been to Canada numerous times to visit his uncle in Toronto. He went on for a solid 20 minutes about how much he loved the country. “Nice people,” was the top reason for his affection, as was personal hygiene (who knew we were so clean?) and how Canadians have the luxury of walking on the sidewalk without the fear of stepping in dog poo or getting body-checked by fellow pedestrians. He was so charmed by Canada that even the idea of driving rather than walking to the corner store amused him. But the things that Andrew found amusing always angered me when I lived in Calgary.

“The forms of cities are always in relation to the original transportation system,” Ghitter says. “London’s form was established over centuries originally as a walking place so, naturally, things are in walking distance; Calgary has grown up with the car.”

My brother-in-law and sister-in-law’s 40-kilometre commute from Airdrie to downtown Calgary will take about 30 minutes by car. Our 5.4-kilometre trip into central London is the same by Tube, or an hour by foot.



Although there are many times I have wished we had a car to make travelling just a little bit easier, there's something to be said for learning the art of finding the fastest and most efficient route, whether that's by foot, Tube, bus or bicycle.

Londoners are borough snobs who judge a person by what area he or she lives in. I have been asked where I live more often than what I do. And because it takes so long to travel from one area across the city, forget seeing friends more than once every few months if you live in Hackney, in east London, and they live in East Putney (don't let the name fool you, it's in the southwest part of town).

But even with the convenience of their cars, Calgarians are the same and rarely venture out of their quadrant. In the YouTube video, "Sh*t Calgarians Say," a low-budget account of things supposedly heard frequently in Calgary, a young man wearing a Flames jersey, beer in hand, says to his friend, "I will never see her again; she lives in the southwest."

THE LANGUAGE BETWEEN US

When *Globe and Mail* columnist Elizabeth Renzetti moved to London eight years ago, she had to learn a new language: "English, as spoken by the English," is how she described it in a column written shortly after

moving back to Toronto last summer.

Diction can also create space between people. Thanks to years of watching Hugh Grant movies, I was schooled in "shag," "fag" and "football" already, but thanks to Renzetti, I never answer, "Good, thank you" when a shop girl asks me if I am "Yawrite?" (The appropriate answer is "Yawrite?" back at her.)

"Jumper" for a sweater still fazes me, as do "dungarees" for overalls and "Maccy D's" for McDonald's. (I remain mystified about where the "a" comes from.)

And although I will never adopt an English accent that comes and goes à la Madonna (and I've come across plenty of expats who have), mom has become "mum," "a lot" is usually "loads," and I never make the mistake of asking for takeout or to-go (it's "take-away"). And just as easily as I switch "hoodie" to "bunnyhug" when I visit Saskatchewan, I will make the appropriate changes when I'm back in Alberta as well.

THE CLASS BETWEEN US

One of the first lessons fellow expats taught me was the meaning of "middle class" in the U.K. "Middle class is actually what we consider upper class in North America," explained my American friend over brunch one day, as if the information was vital to my living in London. Not long after, it was in the news that Andrew Mitchell, a British politician, had gotten angry at a police officer who refused to let him cycle through the main gates of Downing Street. Mitchell was allegedly overheard yelling, "Best you learn your f***** place...you don't run this f***** government...You're f***** plebs." In case you weren't familiar with the word (I wasn't), "pleb" is a derogatory term for a person from a lower social class.

But you don't have to go to Downing Street to be put in your place. You can be reminded of the gulf between social classes without leaving the comfort of your own home. Week after week there's yet another magazine or newspaper article about being middle class, complete with diagrams, charts and quizzes. "How Middle Class Is Your Christmas?" was a front-page *Times* headline in December. More recently, the *Evening Standard Magazine* ran, "Who Wants To Be Middle Class?" in which two writers gave tips on how not to be middle class because, you know, everyone else is doing it. In the middle of the page was a chart comparing items—dishes, paint, coffee, candles and strollers—based on which class consumed and used which brand. FYI: A Jo Malone candle and Bugaboo stroller will get you middle-class marks in London. According to the *Evening Standard*, plebs freshen up their homes with Glade candles and push their pleb babies in Maclarens, while the upper class favours Cire Trudon

candles at £60 (\$94) a pop and £1,417 (\$2,214) Stokke strollers.

But all things are not equal in Alberta either. According to a recent study by the Parkland Institute and the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Alberta is the country's most unequal province and Calgary its most unequal city. "The top one per cent of Calgarians saw an increase in real income of \$570,000 between 1982 and 2010, while the bottom 90 per cent saw an increase in real pay of only \$2,000 over the same 28-year period," according to the report. Our city's top one per cent brought in 26 times what the bottom 90 per cent did in 2010 alone.

"This (inequality) gets reflected in Calgary's landscape," says Miller. "In a few areas, the wealthier are concentrated...while the rest of the population is struggling to get by." Think of areas such as Elbow Park or Mount Royal where well-to-do residents get the best of both worlds: suburban-style living in large spaces, close to downtown and right around the corner from plenty of high-end restaurants and amenities, while others have to sprawl ever-outward. It's not always a choice to move to the suburbs, adds Miller. "What people want is not always what they can afford."

THE SPACE BETWEEN FRIENDS

A friend from Calgary living in Berlin recently posted on Facebook, "I miss recognizing people when I go places." A fellow Canadian expat living in the U.K. replied: "It's liberating," which prompted the response, "It is liberating 95 per cent of the time." After that exchange, I realized that watching back-to-back episodes of *Friends* and *Cheers* was perhaps a sign that I, too, missed going where everyone knew my name (or I theirs, at least).

With Skype and FaceTime, living in a new country is much easier now than it was a decade ago—my husband and I can actually "see" friends and family when they call. We often spend our afternoons (their mornings) watching our nieces and nephew get ready for the day; we have a nightcap with friends while they make their dinner; and we get to see friends' babies change from week to week. There are also family members to whom we speak more often now that we are away. For some reason, our being here prompts a need to connect in a different way than when we were in the same city.

In *The Poetics of Space*, French philosopher Gaston Bachelard wrote, "The cleverer I am at miniaturizing the world, the better I possess it." And perhaps that's the paradox of space: sometimes, creating more makes you feel like there is less, and when there is less, you feel like you have more. At least that's what I tell myself these days. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to fight for a seat on the Tube. **S**