

# A layered home that honours its owner's family history



**DAVE LEBLANC**  
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1 COMMENT



A tea crate handed down to Mark Sakamoto by his grandparents sits prominently in his home.

WANDA ELY

Imagine if a small quantity of rice was all you had in the world.

Imagine, further, that it was you who chose that rice – leaving family photos and other heirlooms behind – because you were so uncertain of your future, staying alive was your only concern.

Author Mark Sakamoto didn't live this, but he's reminded of it every day. On the way to work, when he's chasing his two young daughters around, when he's listening to music or chatting with his wife, Jade, on the built-in sofa that architect Wanda Ely designed for him, a humble wooden box serves as

reminder.

On the simple Japanese tea crate lined with tin to keep the rice dry, Mr. Sakamoto's grandfather Hideo painted "SAKAMOTO" in kanji characters onto the face of the two boxes he and grandmother Mitsue packed in 1942 when the Canadian government "evacuated" them from the Celtic neighbourhood of Vancouver to tiny Coaldale, Alta., to work on a sugar-beet farm.

"Evacuation is quite a polite word for it, it was a war-crime," says Mr. Sakamoto, softly. "Both my grandparents were Canadian, they were born in Canada [as] Japanese-Canadians and they lived a very rich, cultural life."



A built-in sofa lines one of the 'super-public' areas of the home.

WANDA ELY

Mr. Sakamoto's 2014 book, *Forgiveness: A Gift from My Grandparents*, which won CBC's Canada Reads in 2018, sheds much light on these crimes. It's a tough-yet-necessary book that, while dark in places, reveals its author to be a very grateful person. Grateful for the "grit" he inherited from both sets of grandparents (his other grandfather, Ralph MacLean, was Scottish-Canadian and a POW under the Japanese); grateful for his own successes; grateful for the gift of a house renovation that places his grandparent's humble rice box in a place of honour.

In fact, the book and the box were the only two things Mr. Sakamoto handed to Ms. Ely when the project began in 2015, she says: "Mark said, 'Here's a book I wrote and if you want to know about me it's a good place to start.'" Ms. Ely, you see, always starts by getting to know her clients, deeply; since anyone can hand her an inspirational picture in a magazine, her desire is "to make sure that this house isn't just 'let's get the most out of this layout,' but 'let's make it special and beautiful and bespoke for who Jade [Mark's wife] and Mark are.'"



Random metal dowels in the wooden screens create the appearance of raindrops.

WANDA ELY

It is special indeed. Step into the foyer and there is so much light, so many secret peeks into other spaces, one forgets one is standing in a typical, narrow semi-detached in Toronto's Bloorcourt Village. The eye lands first on Ms. Ely's wooden screens – one offers a tantalizing glimpse into the dining room while the other semi-obscures the rice box – which look either like bamboo stalks or raindrops due to the randomized, floating metal dowels. And because there's nothing more tedious than revealing a home's entire contents all at once, to the viewer's right there is a wall that hides a built-in, serpentine couch.



The wallpaper behind the rice box is a tweaked version of van Gogh's *Almond Blossom*.

WANDA ELY

The wallpaper behind the rice box draws the visitor inside. A colour-tweaked version of van Gogh's *Almond Blossom*, the delicate brushstrokes and soothing tones cradle the box – which sits on an ultrathin piece of bent metal – and offer the symbolic protection of a tree. To further set the area apart, Ms. Ely had the walls and ceiling here painted dark grey, and specified a change in flooring material.



The green, patterned backsplash tile brightens the kitchen.

WANDA ELY

Beyond this sacred middle area, a step down takes one into the kitchen, which pops the visitor out of his or her reverie thanks to the leafy-green, fan-patterned backsplash tile. The flooring changes in the dining area to a herringbone pattern, which Ms. Ely suggests recalls a Japanese “tatami mat.” The level, paint and flooring changes all help break up small spaces to create “layers,” she explains.

“Layers of history, layers of light and space, layers of privacy and public, and we were really trying to draw on and reinterpret some Japanese ideas.”



The herringbone floor in the dining area is meant to evoke a Japanese tatami mat.

WANDA ELY

It helps, too, that the Sakamotos had already owned the house for a decade when they met Ms. Ely. They knew what they didn't like. They'd lived on the top two floors and had a tenant on the main floor, so they knew what had to change when their daughters came along. They wanted “super-public” areas where “60 people would feel super-comfortable,” says Mr. Sakamoto, but they wanted semi-private and fully private spaces too, so Ms. Ely created a family room on the second floor along with the kid's bedrooms (for instance, one daughter occupies the couple's old dining room) and an adult “oasis” on the third with a creamy-white ensuite that Ms. Ely describes as “Japanese Zen awesome.”



The third floor includes this creamy-white ensuite bathroom.

WANDA ELY/HANDOUT

It suited the couple so well that when Ms. Ely first presented the entire concept (executed with the help of project leader Scott Norsworthy), they were so excited that “Mark had to leave the room” to contain his joy, laughs the architect.

“I will never forget that day,” Ms. Sakamoto says. “Our minds were just so blown.”

Throughout the home, there are many treasures for the eye to land upon, such as a painting that incorporates a few lines from Mr. Sakamoto’s grandfather’s farm ledger as well as the couple’s wedding invitation, a map of shipwrecks near the Magdalen Islands (grandfather McLean was from there), and many vintage family photos.



Meaningful decor features throughout the home.

WANDA ELY

But, again, Mr. Sakamoto underlines that the humble wooden box is the most important item: “This is such a wonderful piece in so many ways,” he finishes. “My grandma’s father would always say, ‘The only thing that’s important is what you put in your head and your heart – everything else can be taken away.’”

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