



OPEN HOUSE

CONTEXT IS EVERYTHING

→ When brand and communications strategist and author Lee Jacobson moved into a newly built modernist midrise overlooking a scruffy park nearly 14 years ago, the surrounding Bathurst and King area was an urban wasteland. Now it's one of the most sought-after — and contested — neighbourhoods in the city

Story **Gordon Bowness** | Photography **Nicola Betts**



What initially attracted you to this place?

I bought it from plans. The building was being developed by Howard Cohen [of Cohen and Alter, now Context Developments]. There was nothing here back then. But you could tell a building set in a park was going to be amazing and unique. I love my view of the park and the skyline. It's like sitting in front of a stage. In the summer I'm in a tree house. In the winter, I have a better view of the city and all the buildings going up. Luckily, I'm one of the few people I know who likes the CN Tower.

You used to write a National Post column called "Design Classics." Name some of the classics in your home.

The Eero Saarinen Womb Chair — great for reading in. The Hans Wegner dinner table and chairs bought at an antique mall going out of business in Port Hope, the Eileen Gray side table, the Marcel Breuer Wassily Chair and the Noguchi lamps.

You've got a serious design background — masters degree in architecture and urban planning from MIT, founding board member of the Design Exchange, general manager of Bruce Mau Design — and a high-powered consulting firm, and yet you have a weakness for...?

Souvenir buildings. I have draw-

ers and drawers of them, touristy souvenirs... everything from the Leaning Tower to the Toronto City Hall. Though let's just say I have enough Eiffel Towers. It started when I had a summer job at MOMA in New York and developed an interest in pre-Colombian ceramics that depicted buildings.

Do you have an overall design aesthetic?

I like to mix up styles; it's not all mid-century modern. I spent a lot of time finding the different old bar stools, for example. I like the idea of the patina of history, of building up layers. It's about context. A home for me is like a diary, everything is chosen by me, everything has a story behind it that has something to do with my life. Like that book over there, *A History of the World in 100 Objects*; so I guess my home is like *The History of Lee in 10,000 Objects*.

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→ **LAYERS OF HISTORY** Ever-changing views of downtown augment the design classics in Lee Jacobson's home, such as the Eero Saarinen Womb Chair (opposite page, at right), the Hans Wegner dinner table and chairs (this page, top left) and the George Nakashima chairs (top right). The Wedgwood teacup pendant lights in the kitchen (next page) are designed by Andrew Jones.



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Tell me a story about one of your classic pieces.

I think two of my favourite pieces are the signed 1953 George Nakashima chairs. You can tell these were made by hand because the spindles are carved not turned. I grew up in Philadelphia and my family would drive to his studio in New Hope. It was just something

→ **6000 NEIGHBOURS** Lee Jacobson co-founded a neighbourhood association to upgrade Victoria Memorial Square (top), the park in which his home is situated.

you did. His place had this amazing Japanese feel to it. I was just in heaven. He used to give me off-cuts of wood to play with as building blocks. I was so into that stuff. Could you imagine if I had held on to those blocks?

And the green ceramics?

Green is my favourite colour. I fell in love with the first piece when I saw it in a shop in Amsterdam. It's by a gay ceramic artist called Piet Groeneveldt. The rest followed and were collected all over the place.

How did the Wellington Place Neighbourhood Association come about?

When I first moved in, my neighbours included urban planner Ken Greenberg and Scott James, former head of the Toronto Historical Board. We immediately saw the potential of Victoria Memorial Square which was right outside our door. The park was in bad shape — just dirt trails and picnic tables. That was as far as the city thought about park design back then. But the park was the site of the first European cemetery in Toronto dating from 1793, it was the burying ground for Fort York.

The remaining burial markers were badly deteriorated. So my neighbours and I got together, commissioned studies, lobbied the city and raised money to develop designs for the park. Now the remaining grave markers have been restored and displayed properly and the War of 1812 monument has been properly lit. There are paved pathways and benches. It's amazing how popular the park is now. At the same time the neighbourhood was discovered by developers, so our focus began to include not only public space but also working to ensure that development contributes to the neighbourhood. We became the ad hoc voices of the community working with businesses and other residents as they moved in.

And now the neighbourhood association has bigger battles.

We are not against development. We love that so many people and businesses have moved into the neighbourhood. But we must ensure that further development respects the unique qualities of what is here, and that you have sufficient infrastructure to support the population. These are established neighbourhoods, now. You can't just dump giant towers into them. Developers should realize that from a marketing perspective they shouldn't kill what's so wonderful about Wellington Place.

A comment from Eliel Saarinen, architect father of Eero, comes to mind. "Always design a thing by considering it in its next larger context — a chair in a room, a room in a house, a house in an environment, an environment in a city plan."

You've developed brand strategies for numerous private and public-sector clients, from Sun Life and BC Gas to York Transit and the University Health Network. Why does a hospital need a brand?

It's not about advertising to get more patients; a hospital rarely needs more patients. But a hospital does need donors, government funding, staff recruitment, allies (or what's called "friend-raising"). A brand establishes profile and communicates what's special about any organization, what it promises. And what it must deliver.

You're writing a book.

It's about the dynamics of the relationship between clients and consultants in design, marketing and innovation. Successful outcomes are the result of great clients working with good consultants, not the other way around. Great clients have openness and respect, a willingness to learn and to question assumptions, to recognize that they may not be asking the right questions of the consultant. Many clients don't see that nor understand their role. If the project fails, they blame the consultant. Great clients know who is ultimately responsible. •