OPEN HOUSE

STUFF IS A NOUN AND A VERB

→ OCAD prof and former curator of the Design Exchange Michael Prokopow lives in a light-soaked loft in Kensington Market that showcases his love of art and modern design

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

How would you describe your aesthetic?
I always go back to the words of William Morris: "Have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful." You could call it functional rationalism, or rational functionalism. It's a school of thought with roots in the late 19th century and the emergence of industrial design as a profession. My aesthetic is heavily influenced by Scandinavian design of the '30s, '40s and '50s and what was called the Good Design Movement of the 1950s and early 1960s.

Name something in the room that's a prime example.
Bruno Mathsson's eminently practical Maria folding table from 1936. When folded down it measures about 9 inches in depth. When open, it stretches 10 feet 6 inches and can have 10 or 12 chairs around it. In addition to being useful for dinner parties, it also serves as a great desk. I can spread out and out and out.

You've got some exquisite things in here, but the place doesn't feel precious or intimidating. It's very comfortable.
Comfort is utility. Too many of our design choices are aspirational, meaning they often tend to represent what we think will look sophisticated or expensive and "classy," to use that overused word. Many people's ideas of taste are constructed from wanting to move up the social ladder. The decoration of the palace often problematically exists in the suburbs. Consumer goods pretending to be something different than what they really are is one of the complexities of capitalism. The post-World War II champions of modernist design sought to change this through their work. That utopian-inclined mission always had to do battle with history, emulation and the cult of the sentimental.

→ CLASS ACT Good stuff includes Hans Wegner wingback chairs from 1952, a Bruno Mathsson folding table from 1936 and An Te Liu's YA lightbox from 2003 (opposite page). Michael Prokopow designed the towering bookcase in the main room and the lightbox in the second-floor study (left). The graffiti bench (above) is by Jason Miller.

This used to be a George Brown College building. It was converted in 2000. You moved in almost seven years ago. What first attracted you?
I must have seen more than 30 places with my realtor, David Rose. Often, he'd just have to open the door and I'd go, "Nope." When I first saw this place, it was painted yellow — and I mean yellow yellow. It smelled of cat urine. The kitchen counter was covered with realtor cards suggesting that lots of people looked but could not see (or smell) past their first impressions. It was late August and I can still remember how inviting and bright the space appeared upon walking through the door. The tall ceiling and volumetric space was instantly appealing and I knew that I could live here happily.

I've seen a couple of other units here; some look dreadful. What was the biggest problem to solve?
I love visual depth. For example, think how when you look at a landscape you seen the hills receding to the horizon, layer in front of tonally different layer. A home is a domestic landscape and I think layers are needed for visual impact. I designed that bookcase to anchor the room. While it acts like wallpaper, a big painting or a sculpture, it is functional, it holds about a third of my books — my working library — and I admit freely that it is not particularly well organized. I often have to search many shelves to find the book for which I am looking. In terms of the set-up of the room, I made the conscious choice to balance the bookcase with the three George Nelson cabinets on the opposite wall.

As an expert in material culture, do you feel added pressure to curate your space, for your home to live up to a certain standard?
I would not say that I am trying to live up to a certain standard. I'm not curating my home for the outside world: I know what I like, what pleases me and the room and content and the arrangement of things suits me.

There's a unique energy to Kensington Market and Chinatown.
It represents what I call "Toronto the Scruffy." There's this streak of chic in

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the city: the glossy and the shiny and well-kept at one end of the economic spectrum and those endless pockets of charming inconsistencies. Indeed, so much of Toronto is a visual jumble. As for Kensington Market, historically it was a Jewish neighbourhood replete with all kinds of merchants, four synagogues and row houses with mezuzahs. Its character began to change in the 1950s and '60s, (as did so many city neighbourhoods) and today the market is experiencing the often mixed-blessing of gentrification.

Give me some market faves.

Sanagan's Meat Locker just took over the old European butcher space. It is a terrific place: great products and great people. There's Cora's Kitchen with all sorts of fantastic baked goods. And there is Café Pamenar. It is my main hangout. It's a Persian-owned coffee house with a pretty garden in the back, internet, ever-changing art and a great vibe.

A surprising collection?

I've a collection of woven Canadian ties from the 1960s. They're an example of a Canadian homespun tradition that's all but forgotten. I wear them all the time. They're my decoration.

What do you get from your students?

There's always a generational difference between students and teachers. I find the references of contemporary youth culture to be exciting and at times bewildering. To understand the culture of the young today requires the ability to conduct an ongoing archaeology of the present. Particularly striking to me is the relationship that the young have with technology. It is effortless and boundless and unlike anything we've seen before. We have proof that it's changing their brain chemistry. But now I'm beginning to sound like an old-fogey professor. What's most significant is this seismic change in terms of gender and identity and the fluidity of social relationships and the absence of judgment or censure. My sense of youth today is that they see no limits in their capacities. And I think that the culture of youth in Toronto is especially strong and significant. This city is an amazing social, cultural and aesthetic laboratory.

Where did you get your love of material culture?

I've always loved things. I guess it goes back to my childhood in Victoria, BC. My mother was often ill and I spent time in foster care. I found a safe haven in the town library where I discovered all these picture books of grand English houses — the 740s in the Dewey Decimal System, "Art and Objects" — it was this fantasy world into which I could step. I spent hours looking at images of elegant rooms filled with ornate objects and imagined what life could be like. And then I got a job in an antique store run by two sisters, Rosemary Wells and Wendy Russell. For me it was a type of Aladdin's Cave filled with phenomenal things. Rosemary and Wendy, always so caring, patient and generous, taught me so much about life and the material world. One lesson, however, always was at the forefront of my thinking about objects. They used to tell me that each object speaks about the society that produced it and about the people who used it. They also told me — importantly I should add — that we are only stewards of the objects and they must be passed along. It was a good lesson and a counterweight to the temptation to covet.

Is this why one of your courses is called "Stuff"?

Indeed. The course considers how objects operate in people's lives and how humans invest objects with meaning and oftentimes meaning having nothing to do with the objects themselves. •