



OPEN HOUSE

# HERITAGE

→ As managing partner of The Carlu, Mark Robert knows the value of great architecture. Whether a home or business, special buildings generate special feelings

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



**You and business partner Jeffry Roick took over and renovated the seventh floor of College Park 10 years ago. Since then The Carlu has become a cornerstone of the city's social and cultural life.**

It's great to have your own business of any kind, but it's amazing to have a business that produces such special events. The Carlu is a very happy place. That's obvious when we're hosting all the weddings and galas, but it's true too at our business events. You see people sitting down to a good meal in this lovely piece of architecture. People can feel it's special.

We've had everyone from Prince Charles and Camilla to Donald Trump through here. We just did the BlackBerry 10 launch. That was a big deal, likely amongst the most important product launches in Canada. We had two nights of Bryan Adams Unplugged; his acoustic concerts. He's a wonderful guy but I have to admit that his music really isn't my thing. But I remember looking out at the audience and people were really beside themselves, tears streaming down their faces. And I thought to myself how unbelievable it all was, to host this event in a room we had brought back to life, where Billie Holiday, Frank Sinatra and Duke Ellington had all performed in the day.

**It's all success and applause now but take us back 10 years. It must have been a daunting project.**

It had been closed for 26 years. Nobody could figure out how to restore it and operate it profitably. Nobody thought we'd be able to do it. We were two gay guys who seemingly came out of nowhere. People outside our little bubble didn't know who we were and what we were capable of. It became apparent to us that a lot of people didn't think we'd last that first year.

**And now?**

We've built a great brand, a high-end multi-function special event company. We are the industry leader.



#### **What's next?**

Growth for us will come from third party management, that is managing assets that we don't own. That's the Four Seasons' model; they don't own a lot of their properties. There's been interest expressed in us running other heritage sites in the city (though I can't be more specific because of confidentiality reasons).

**You have carved out a unique niche.**

Jeffry and I are the only two people to privately restore a national heritage site in North America with no government money. There is no other model for what we are doing, at least not in Canada. Our main competition is government-owned venues like the ROM and the Design Exchange where special events have become an important source of their revenue. But that's not their main business, while that's our exclusive focus. Governments are overstretched; they're looking for solutions. We have proven the role of the private sector in the adaptive reuse of heritage spaces. And there will be a greater role in the future to meet the needs of this growing market.







→ **PAST MEETS PRESENT** Mark Robert and Jim Johnson's living room (page 13) features a painting by Celia Neubauer and a Heintzman piano once owned by Robert's great-great-grandfather. The dog, Charlie, is a two-year-old Labradoodle. In the den (opposite page, top) a Remington bronze sits across from a Paul Béliveau painting and a Jesse Boles photograph. The toile wallpaper in the guest bedroom (opposite page, bottom) depicts African scenes. The formal dining room (top) is brightened by a Douglas Coupland work and Paul Smith fabric on the chairs. The painting above the bed in the master bedroom (bottom) is by Peter Hoffer.

### What do you love about it?

It's the perfect house; the math is perfect from the standpoint of symmetry and sight lines. It is so hard to find a grand small house. And it's overbuilt: the slate roof, the onyx fireplace, the doors, everything is the best it could be. It was built by Mathers and Haldenby who built UCC and other buildings at U of T plus many fine homes in Rosedale and Forest Hill. This house was built in 1918 for the first president of Wrigley Canada. It's in the southern Georgian style and allegedly won an award for the best-designed house in the Commonwealth. I'm the fourth owner.

### It's situated in a lovely spot.

I love the South Hill neighbourhood. Not a lot of the old houses were torn down to make way for monster homes like in Forest Hill. Being on the escarpment means we get city views from our bedroom window.

### You live with your partner of 19 years, Jim Johnson, VP, marketing, at Corus. Do you run the house equally?

Jim and I do everything together, so it's just natural to deal with the house together. We also have a country home south of Creemore in Mulmur where I get to indulge my love of power tools. I'm already on my third chainsaw.

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### So time to throw yourselves a party.

Our 10th anniversary party is May 3. We get to celebrate the good job we've done engaging the community and honouring this national historical site. It will be a

great night. We know that it will be fun — we have a great guest list!

### Let's talk about your home in Toronto's South Hill. You have an unusual relationship to it.

Growing up I had a friend in the

neighbourhood, so I would pass by the house all the time. I've wanted to live in it since I was 15. I used to stalk it. I finally bought the house just before the millennium. I'll never sell. They're going to have to take me out of it in a box.



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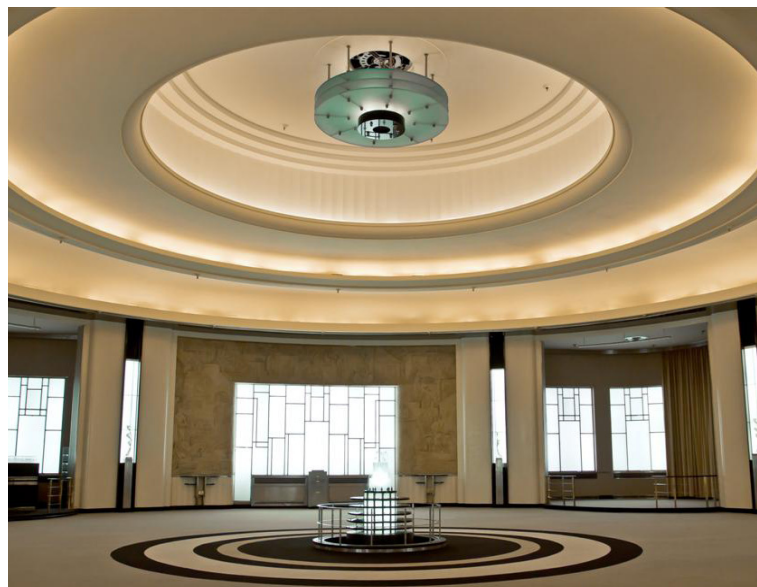
➔ **PRIVATE MEETS PUBLIC** Mark Robert (right) celebrates the 10th anniversary of renovating and managing the Art Moderne-style seventh floor of College Park, renamed The Carlu, after original architect Jacques Carlu. The multi-function space has re-emerged as a crucial piece of Toronto's cultural and social life. Pictured are one of the Clipper Rooms (bottom left) and the iconic Round Room (bottom right).

### Did you do major renos here?

There's always work to be done in an old house like this. We put a pool and covered porch in the back and a gym and a steam room in the basement. We kept most of the important original elements on the main floor.

### It's bursting with art and antiques.

I was born in Toronto. I've inherited a lot of antiques from the family, like the grand piano, it was my great-great-grandfather's. So when we buy anything, it has to be contemporary; we don't want it to get too fussy in here. And I love contemporary art. I was co-chair of Art with Heart and on the board of C magazine for a few years and I ran an online art trading company called the Art Vault. •



Krista MacKinnon Photography