

At home with Vancouver architect Robert Lemon

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Architect Robert Lemon, in the kitchen of his Vancouver home.

Photograph by: Ward Perrin, Vancouver Sun

When architect Robert Lemon and interior designer Robert Ledingham found their 1936 art moderne-style house, it was threatened by something potentially more destructive than the Big One. Straddling two 33-foot lots on West 10th Avenue, it faced being torn down and replaced with two new houses built side by side on separate lots.

That was in 1988, just two years after the city established its heritage registry to honour Vancouver's centennial. Although the house — called the Barber House for its first owner, structural engineer Horace Barber — was on the heritage list, it was not legally protected from demolition.

Lemon and Ledingham wanted to preserve the house, but optimize the property's real estate value with a second building — an addition would have destroyed the house's architectural integrity. Lemon also wanted to pioneer the idea of secondary houses in the rear of an established site.

It wouldn't be easy. The neighbourhood, West Point Grey, was zoned single-family residential with no allowance for an infill or laneway building, so they needed special variances for a second full-sized

house in the back yard. “It was the first one that had ever been done in the city,” says Lemon. “It took over a year to go through the planning process. We had people sending petitions saying this was going to lower their property values, and we had to go to city council for a special meeting. In the end, they withdrew their objections and came and apologized later.”

Lemon is an expert on adapting heritage buildings to modern conditions. As Vancouver’s senior heritage planner from 1991 to 1996, he helped implement new provincial heritage legislation for the City of Vancouver and developed the city’s transfer of density policy, Recent Landmarks program and Heritage Interiors initiatives. He has consulted on the restoration and rehabilitation of landmark projects that include the BC Hydro building on Burrard, Christ Church Cathedral, the downtown YMCA, Coastal Church next to the Shangri-La, the Hotel Georgia and the Wing Sang building in Chinatown. He also designs new homes, both traditional and modern.

Lemon’s house is now protected — the city required heritage designation as a condition of building the second house — and it received a City of Vancouver heritage award in 1991. Built the same year as Vancouver’s city hall and with a similar style, its exterior is basically a streamlined concrete box with a regular arrangement of punched windows. The interior had been converted into two apartments, now restored as a single-family home. The original plans by architect Ross Lort show the living room and bedrooms on the top floor, with the kitchen and dining room downstairs. Now the dining room is upstairs off the living room with the kitchen running across the back of the house. The bedrooms and Lemon’s home office are on the ground floor.

Renovation always brings surprises, and this one was no exception. It revealed an underlying steel frame with train rails serving as two-storey-high columns four feet apart. In the living room’s exterior concrete wall, concealed beneath layers of panelling were three curved niches formed by wooden barrel staves stacked between the steel rails. The room also has an interesting stepped ceiling. The interior was otherwise unremarkable — no special finishes, just clean stripwood floors and plain walls — so Lemon and Ledingham completely redesigned it, choosing materials that are modern, but characteristic of the period.

The panelling is avodire, an African mahogany cut to produce a distinctive striped pattern. The fireplace with horizontal banding was originally painted concrete with a mantel of vitrolite, a coloured glass popular when the house was built. Unable to remove the paint, they faced the fireplace with vitrolite and replaced the top with granite. Horizontal lines in the new mirror wall and the millwork are derived from the bands on the fireplace, as are the glass shelves in the study off the living room. The andirons are original to the house, as are several refurbished light fixtures.

The avodire panelling and horizontal detailing carry through to the dining room, where circular speakers set into cabinet doors are positioned at ear level for people seated around the table. The custom table has a vellum top. The finish of the base and the built-in sideboard is auto lacquer.

Both auto lacquer and avodire were used for the cabinetry in the kitchen, reached through a door thinner along one edge to accommodate a curved Venetian plaster wall. Even for a relatively small kitchen, it works well, says Lemon, who loves to cook. There are two sinks, one in the serving and dishwashing area near the dining room, the other in the island, where he does most of the prep. A domed skylight over the island floods the formerly dark room with light. The appliances — a cooktop, wall ovens and built-in Traulsen refrigerator — are next to the island. In retrospect, Lemon says he would probably have a range with the oven below and more counter space instead of a wall oven, but it's still an efficient kitchen.

Like all good kitchens, it is also a place to hang out. At one end, a comfortable banquette and chairs around the kitchen table seat five, so guests can be part of the action. Cabinets conceal speakers and cookbooks, though Lemon is running out of space for the latter. Because of the island's location, he can join the conversation of people chatting in the living room while he cooks.

It's a great house for entertaining, he says. "We entertain a reasonable amount, and it flows very well for parties. People can go up on the roof, especially in summertime. We can have 100 people."

The roof is reached through narrow French doors that fit the four-foot opening between the structural rails. Bright red, metal stairs overlook a treed courtyard between the two houses. Originally simply a roof, the deck is a series of rooms defined by planters, built-in benches and changes in floor level. A curtain and a hornbeam hedge chosen for the colour of its leaves provide privacy, but nothing obstructs the panoramic view of Vancouver and the North Shore mountains.

More than 20 years on, the house is as elegant and functional as when it was first renovated. And even though Lemon and Ledingham also have a condo in the recently completed Jameson House — Lemon oversaw the conservation of the adjacent heritage buildings — they are in no hurry to leave. "At the time, 2005, it seem likely to be a good move downtown," says Lemon. "We will give it a try, but not give up on West 10th just yet."

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