

Growing Together: Irvine Robinson Interiors



By Brock Weir

The Auroran continues our Sesquicentennial series on Aurora's oldest businesses with a business still in family hands after more than 65 years.

Neil Irvine's grandfather, Jack, was "all about the work" and it is work he continues as the third generation at the helm of Aurora's Irvine Robinson Interiors.

Jack founded the design firm serving the Greater Toronto Area since 1948. For the last 21 of those years, it has been firmly established at St. Andrew's Village at Yonge Street and Orchard Heights.

In those early days, Irvine Robinson was more than just a design and decorating firm; they also built the furniture which ultimately graced their clients' homes. Things are geared primarily towards design elements today, but Jack's 24-year-old grandson is proud to now steer the ship and the legacy that comes with it.

"I take special pride in it," says Neil, noting Jack was heavily involved in the store and the business right up until his death in 2010, just shy of 92. "It has come down through my grandfather, my father, and now I am trying to learn the ropes. My grandfather loved this. He was all about the work, up early in the morning and just kept going. You could see the passion."

The elder Irvine spent considerable time making sure his children and grandchildren learned the ropes, whether out on the floor or unloading the trucks, but as the youngest of four children, there was something about the family business that just resonated with Neil.

"I studied business, but I didn't actually study design myself," he says. "I like the idea of a family company and going forward with the generations. When I started here, I worked here throughout the summers and started to get a feel for it, primarily on the truck and at the warehouse learning the footings. Then, I graduated from university and I decided I would try it out, see how it went, and I enjoyed it ever since."

With approximately 10 employees at the Aurora store, the Irvine Robinson team handles many suppliers from around Canada and the United States. They take pride in being able to do "anything inside the home", secure in the knowledge there is much more to it than just selecting the right stick of furniture.

The last decade, however, has brought about some shifts not particularly in how they do business, but in serving the changing face of their clientele. Tastes changing over the years is nothing new in the industry, but with more and more information and options becoming available over the internet, as well as decorating and design shows on TV, Mr. Irvine finds there is increasingly more 'informed' and 'educated' clientele.

'Ofentimes, people are already fairly educated, so they will come in and know what items they are looking for,' he says. 'Others, however, will come in and say, 'I want a high quality sofa; what do you recommend?' From a design perspective, a lot of it is based on preference. We have established ourselves through word of mouth and have built the clientele.

'Each designer here has their own clientele and they come back over time and just build those relationships. [The internet and TV shows] have changed the industry, but not our business model. We do get callers who will phone after seeing something online, but our bread and butter is still the design-end of things.'

For the last two decades, the store has thrived in St. Andrew's Village, where many stores have failed in recent years. Nevertheless, based on their Aurora success, they have recently opened up a second store in Bracebridge, keeping up with population growth trends further north, as well as cottagers and weekend warriors. Asked what keeps them going in Aurora, Mr. Irvine says he believes they have become something of a 'destination'.

'The area certainly has changed, there used to be more retail here, but there are quite a few of us in this plaza that have been here for quite some time,' he says. 'When people come in here, they typically have a purpose to coming here, as opposed to just wandering around. We do get some walk-in traffic, but if people come in they are interested in getting ideas, whether something in the showroom triggers an idea or they want to talk to somebody knowledgeable.

'We work because we enjoy it and everyone is passionate here. It is nice to come into work each day and be excited. Because we're a small family company, every detail is a bit more exciting because you can recognize the growth.'