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The passing of the torch



(On the left, Ed

Mirvish, who recently passed away. On the right, Will Alsop, architect of the addition to OCAD. Glenn Lowson/National Post; Peter J. Thompson/National Post)

By Mark Medley

William Thorsell calls them three punches that struck Toronto hard over the course of one weekend. The Royal Ontario Museum CEO was referring to Conrad Black, who was convicted last Friday morning; "**Honest**" [Ed Mirvish](#), who was buried that same afternoon; and [Bluma Appel](#), who passed away on Sunday evening.

"And those are three big punches," he said. "There's no question about that."

If Toronto was hit hard recently, so it has been over the past year and a half: June Callwood in April and Doris Anderson in March, and last year the passing of such public and cultural figures as Steve Stavro, Ken Thomson and Jane Jacobs. [Sam the Record Man has closed](#) and Moses Znaimer's CityTV is leaving Queen Street West.

"There is a changing guard," Mr. Thorsell said. "These people played enormous roles over a long period of time. But there's a generational change now."

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They've left a changed city behind. They were a group of "wonderfully powerful personalities," from Jane Jacobs forcing us to re-evaluate how we build cities, to the neon-light glow of Ed Mirvish, and from the tenacious philanthropy of Bluma Appel to the social activism of June Callwood, these were larger-than-life individuals who came to define Toronto.

In conversations with *the National Post* over the past week, some of Toronto's most prominent thinkers, leaders, and entrepreneurs discussed the mark these giants left on the city and wondered who was waiting in the wings to fill the void.

"It's critical to have independent characters who just try things," said developer Harry Stinson. Toronto needs people "who try things, who say things, who do things strictly because that's what they think is the right thing to do. And it doesn't bother them when people think good or bad of them ... Ed used to say that he just didn't talk about the things that failed. But he would try them."

Toronto has been fortunate to have in its ranks citizens with a startling sense of civic imagination, combining moxie, an appreciation of the fantastic and a can-do attitude.

Who, as Ed Mirvish did in 1948, would open a business anchored by zany, self-mocking ads and 23,000 light-bulbs? Who but Sam Sniderman could transform a Yonge Street music store into a heritage site anchored by a giant set of glowing records? Where's the next Moses Znaimer, creator of an upstart, in-your-face, TV empire? Disagree with his politics and chuckle at his missteps, but who but Mel Lastman, part carnival barker, part huckster, could promote the city with such flair, especially compared with the staid David Miller? And who but Conrad Black would have the audacity to start a national newspaper from the ground up? And now? Mirvish is gone, and there's already speculation about the future of his store; Sam's closed last month; CityTV will soon leave its Queen West headquarters as the dismantling of CHUM continues; Mel Lastman is back selling appliances; and Black faces the rest of his life in a prison cell.

People like Ms. Callwood, Ms. Jacobs and Mr. Mirvish forged an identity for Toronto through their work, ideas and philosophy of "social entrepreneurship," established a blueprint of city-building for the younger generation to follow, and allowed culture to flourish through philanthropy. They "left a strong vision of what's possible," said Rahul Bhardwaj, the new president & CEO of the Toronto Community Foundation.

Matthew Teitelbaum, director and CEO of the AGO, said they dreamt big. "I think that that's what leaders do: They push us out beyond where we're immediately comfortable."

They were also all self-reliant and action-oriented, said David Pecaut, chairman of the Toronto City Summit Alliance.

"Nobody in that group ... said, 'Oh well, we've got a problem, government should do it. It's their responsibility.' They all rolled up their sleeves and they got on with it."

People like Mr. Mirvish or Ms. Jacobs, who become ingrained in the consciousness of the city, are "absolutely fundamental" to the shaping of a city, according to David Crombie, former mayor of Toronto. "You have to have crossovers between business, academics, and politics and social service. And you'll find that most of those people moved in all of those worlds," he said.

Rudyard Griffiths, executive director of the Dominion Institute and co-founder of the Grano Speaker Series, called them "city builders" who left their imprint on the landscape of Toronto.

"That previous generation of the Blumas, the Mirvishes, Callwoods, Jacobs and others, had a kind of amazing sense -- or deep sense -- of civic responsibility, of both private philanthropy but also [a] personal activism that in many ways contributed to making this city a better place to live."

Such a legacy may be difficult to follow. "I guess the question is, is there a second generation that's willing to step up to the proverbial plate with the same kind of intensity, the same passion and the same commitment?"

Mr. Stinson said it takes a "fearlessness," something he feels is missing in the city.

"I am concerned that there's a lack of truly independent people in the city," he said. "People are along for the ride to be civic leaders, but they're really not leading. They're sort of putting their finger in the wind and sensing the current trends and saying fashionable things, but they're not stepping outside the box that much. They're not ruffling feathers."

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It might be that the next generation has no choice.

"It's like when your parents die," explained Mr. Thorsell. "You turn around and sort of say, 'Who's there?' And the big finger looks at you and says, 'You're there.' "

So, who is there? Many of the same names were mentioned when discussing the "next generation": Rudyard Griffiths; David Pecaut; Tony Gagliano, cofounder of Luminato; Frances Lankin, president of the United Way of Greater Toronto; Albert Schultz of Soulpepper Theatre Company; Bhardwaj of the Toronto Community Foundation.

There are also people making noise at a more grassroots level. Alana Wilcox, co-editor of the uTOpia series of books, suggested a new generation of leadership might come from such people and organizations as Matthew Blackett and Spacing magazine, David Meslin and the Toronto Public Space Committee, and Sheila Heti and Trampoline Hall.

The out-there public persona of the city is already being changed by people like Mr. Thorsell, who spearheaded the Crystal that is only a few blocks east of Honest Ed's emporium. Will Alsop has become a force in Toronto: the world-class architect behind the OCAD tabletop (itself a new icon of the city akin to Sam's neon signs) has opened an office in the city. He is looking to make his mark on Queen West and has fallen in love with Kensington Market. Brad Lamb, love him or hate him, appears on billboards across the city, is a reality TV star and, for a condo-obsessed city, is the king. Mr. Stinson is positioning himself as our version of Donald Trump, and author [Richard Florida's arrival](#) to a city he has said is a leader of the "creative class" is eagerly anticipated.

There is also a new generation stepping out from behind the shadows of their parents: former lieutenant-governor Hal Jackman's daughter, Victoria Jackman, head of the Jackman Foundation and wife of super-architect Bruce Kuwabara; adman philanthropist Matthew Bassett, son of media baron John Bassett; Cawthra Burns, co-chair of the ROM's Young Patrons' Circle. David Mirvish now has sole attention of the spotlight after his father's passing. David Thomson is set to create a new Toronto power couple after his engagement to actress Kelly Rowan. And much of the social scene revolves around the Spoke Club, co-founded by businessman/pitchman Galen Weston Jr. and his sister, Alannah.

But it will pose a challenge to the next generation to produce leaders on the same scale and importance as those recently passed, said Larry Bourne, a professor at the University of Toronto's [Centre for Urban and Community Studies](#).

"Every generation produces its own leaders. The passing of one generation to another is sad, but of course expected. It's just in this case we've had so many big names in such a short period of time," Prof. Bourne said. The challenge will be to "provide the leadership that these people provided: innovative, imaginative, energetic, directed at least in part to social goals. The end message to the next generation is: Can you match or exceed their contributions?"

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Published Saturday, July 21, 2007 12:02 PM by [Ronald Nurwisah](#)
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