

## Landscaper specializes in monumental projects

By Tom Sandborn-contributing writer

Erik Lees has come a long way from his North Shore boyhood to become one of the premier cemetery design experts in Western Canada. The tall, fit and handsome Lees, who with his fair hair and blue eyes looks a decade younger than his 51 years, squints into the sunlight and looks thoughtful when he's asked about the origins of his passion for using landscape architecture as an art form to express grief, and to support mourning and memory. What path led to this lifework helping communities move from private loss to civic remembrance?

Maybe it began with the influence of his mother, Lees mused, while on a brief break between office design work and the open-ocean swim he was looking forward to at the end of a recent sun-drenched day.

Yetta Lees is a serious fabric artist and the founder of Vancouver's pioneering Circle Craft Co-op.

"I can't say the word 'texture' without thinking of my mother, who is an incredible designer in her own right... mostly in fabric, but she talks about texture in architecture too. I learned so much from her sense of materials and her commitment to working with craftspeople. She has such a strong eye and a wonderful way of articulating what's going on in a work."

His mother's involvement with the Unitarian Church in the 1960s exposed Lees to visiting speakers like Tommy Douglas, and introduced him to a group of Unitarians who were planning to leave professional jobs in the Lower Mainland to establish a communal farm in the Slocan Valley. When his own family left the North Shore in the early '70s for a year of travel and study in Europe, 16-year-old Erik decided he preferred the adventures to be found in the emerging counterculture and back to the land movements of the B.C. Interior to traipsing around art galleries and castles.

In the Kootenays, Lees soon chose horticulture as the medium to channel the family traditions of artistic expression, and before long he had discovered mentors in local greenhouses.

"When I was 17 I went in to a commercial greenhouse near Nelson," he told the Courier. "I remember it clearly. It was near dusk, a coolish spring day, the old Dutch grower was smoking his pipe, tending the chrysanthemums. It seemed like there was a lot to be done and so I asked him if he needed help. Two and a half years later I was still there, now as a horticulture apprentice working for all of \$2.25 an hour. That was where I got my start in horticulture and landscape construction, which morphed in later years into landscape architecture."

After three or four years running his own small nursery and landscape construction firm, Lees was hired to run the City of Nelson greenhouses.

"We grew all our own plants, trees and shrubs, including spectacular display greenhouses in the city. It was in the hot humidity of those displays that I first became aware of how gratifying it was to see people enjoy the public spaces and experiences we created."

Eventually Lees became parks supervisor for Nelson, a job that included responsibility for the local cemetery. It was, he said, one of the great cemeteries of B.C., on a steep site, with large trees, and tough ground. To bury the dead, workers had to blast rock and stumps and in the early years many graves were dug by hand.

After a couple years on his own in the Kootenays, Lees reconnected with his Unitarian friends and joined them on a communal farm in the Slocan Valley known as The Gully. He credits his communal experience with teaching him how to design and execute projects taking into account a variety of voices and agendas, a vital skill for his current work. On the farm he built his own log cabin and designed a large communal garden.

The themes of sacred space, memory and mourning recur in the work of Lees and his firm. In addition to the Woodlands project, Lees + Associates have recently designed an installation in New Denver to remember Doukhobor children taken from their families and placed involuntarily in residential schools in the tiny Slocan Valley village during the 1950s.

In July, the firm unveiled in Vancouver's Mountain View cemetery a set of stone and steel monuments Lees designed to honour over 900 military veterans whose graves lie unmarked there. Like the Woodlands and New Denver projects, it offers the experience of public space as a zone for reflection and healing.

Lees is quick to note his projects are collective efforts, developed and executed by a team at his company. He underlines the importance of consultation, noting the team met extensively with former Woodlands residents. He remembers the meetings as powerfully emotional and educational.

While he's reluctant to accept all the credit for these profound works of public art, they clearly reflect a singular artistic vision and sensibility. Stand silent before the soldiers' memorial at Mountain View, gaze at the eloquent visual metaphor of the broken family table at his Doukhobor project or look up at the painful image of "A Window Too High" at Woodlands and you know you are in the presence of a sophisticated artist.

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