

MANSION

HOMES | MARKETS | PEOPLE | REDOS | SALES

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Friday, December 13, 2024 | M1

New Kids, New Life, New House

A single dad renovated this Florida home to make space for both himself and his sons

By NANCY KEATES

FOUR YEARS AGO, when Keith Jacobson was 57 years old, he became a single father of identical-twin boys. It meant an extreme change of lifestyle for the former investment banker turned real-estate developer and art collector.

Instead of traveling to Europe for weeks at a time or working for stints in New York, he is now at home in Miami every weekday to take his sons to and from school and to activities such as music lessons and Taekwondo. No more dinners out with friends on a whim. Now he eats with the children almost every night and reads them bedtime stories. On weekends, he swims with them for hours in the



Keith Jacobson in the living area of his newly renovated home in Coconut Grove, Fla.



ALEXIA FODERE FOR WSJ (2)

pool or takes them to a nearby park where they hunt for snails and lizards. When he goes out to brunch, the children go with him.

A big shift was where he lived. The 3,000-square-foot house he had renovated in the trendy area of Mid-Beach didn't fit his situation anymore. He wanted an extra bedroom for a live-in nanny, a home

Please turn to page M8

MANSION

New Kids,
New Home

Continued from page M1
office, a playroom and more space for the children to run around. He wanted a bigger pool and areas where he could hide when he needed to be alone.

For all those reasons, in 2021 after the twins were born, Jacobson bought a seven-bedroom, 8,500-square-foot house for \$3.7 million in Coconut Grove, a quieter, greener neighborhood than Mid-Beach.

The boxy white Colonial-style house was built by a developer in 2005 as a spec house. Jacobson says the home's ample moldings and traditional fireplace gave it what he calls "Old-Lady Style." He liked the layout, which let him separate the playroom and children's bedrooms from his bedroom and entertainment areas.

But while the house fulfilled his need for more space and separation, it was lacking in another part of his life that he treasured: his passion for one-of-a-kind modern architecture and art. He had renovated most of his past homes in a design-forward fashion and he wanted to make where he lived now reflect his own sense of uniqueness.

"My life is path breaking. I'm a single, gay, older dad. I didn't have any role models," he says. "I would have built my own new modern house, but I didn't have time." Building a new house would take at least three years, he says. He wanted to move in much more quickly than that.

For help in turning the nondescript Colonial into something more interesting, he turned to renowned Miami architect Rene Gon-



Jacobson and his sons by the pool, where they spend hours playing. The Spiral Gold Circuit, right, is a light installation.



zalez, a longtime friend whose work he admired. Gonzalez, known for his inventive, modern, light-filled creations, hesitated at first.

Gonzalez usually designs spaces he initiates instead of renovations, and he wasn't impressed with what he describes as the nonde-

script existing house. In the end, he took on the project for two reasons: He wanted Jacobson to live somewhere he would find joy, and he knew that Jacobson would be open to a more extensive, art-focused transformation and wouldn't put in design restrictions. "He's a courageous person in all elements of his life," says Gonzalez.

The resulting one-year, \$2 million renovation is what Gonzalez describes as a series of interventions, camouflaged as art installations, rather than a restructuring. "There are moments that create dramatic differences," says Gonzalez.

In the double-height main living room and stairway hall, Gonzalez worked with artist and designer Johanna Grawunder to create the Spiral Gold Circuit: mul-



titiered custom light installations made of bronze and acrylic that produce mobile-like, floating Mondrianish abstract geometric shapes reflected off a mirror on the ceiling. He put in Rosso Levanto red marble walls, some honed and some rough acid-etched, over the fireplace and by the stairway to make a new

curved stairwell alcove.

Another area of focus was the kitchen and family room, one large open space at the far end of the first floor, with glass windows and doors that show the lush, tropical greenery of the backyard. Gonzalez changed all the surfaces in the kitchen, adding wood and granite. In the family room, he designed a full-wall custom cabinet system that has light and mirrors, making the shelves appear to be floating and to reflect the myriad objects—from Shona sculptures to ceramic and glass vases to a bowl of ostrich eggs—on each shelf. Glossy, sheer white, "plastic fantastic" curtains stretch from the ceiling to the floor.

Upstairs, the changes were more cosmetic, involving paint, furniture, curtains and rugs. Long hallways stretch in two directions: The arched openings are painted in colors that progress from darker to lighter, with yellows and greens on one side and blues on the other direction to enhance a feeling of anticipation, Gonzalez says. In the main bedroom, dark-blue velvet curtains are intended to create a sense of intimacy by acting as an envelope.

Even though Gonzalez never puts moldings into the homes he designs, he decided not to touch the existing moldings in the house. "We just looked at it as a backdrop," he says. "I had to pick my battles."

Jacobson, formerly an investment banker, grew up in Cape Town, South Africa, until his senior year in high school, when his family moved to Westport, Conn. For most of his life, he had

MANSION



Jacobson's office, left, got only some repainting as part of the renovation.

no interest in being a father, Jacobson says. But as he got older, his friends started having children. "I felt like I wanted something more meaningful," he says. He wasn't in a committed relationship, which meant he would be parenting on his own.

He found an egg donor and a surrogate, who got pregnant in February 2020. The boys lived with him at his Mid-Beach house for a few months after they were born until Jacobson realized it would be too small in the long term. They moved to a three-bedroom apartment, with a room for a live-in nanny, for a year while the renovation of the Coconut Grove house was

under way.

Now, he works as a real-estate developer from home so that he can have breakfast with his 4-year-old sons (it is Cheerios or oatmeal when he's cooking; eggs when the housekeeper cooks). He drives the children to and from nursery school every weekday, about 10 minutes each way. In the afternoon, he spends time with them as they eat their snacks, then either he or the nanny will take them to their activities. He eats dinner with the boys. (The housekeeper cooks for them; Jacobson eats ready-made meals.) While the nanny is giving them a bath, he finds his reading glasses. Each boy picks a



book that he wants for his bedtime story.

Jacobson occasionally travels, but usually just for long weekends. He has stopped going to dinner with friends on weeknights, limiting his social life to

one night a weekend. While he still has his core group of friends, he has ventured out a little, talking to some of the moms from school. The house has a big playroom, a bedroom for the live-in nanny, a swimming

pool where he spends hours with the children on weekends, and even a room for storing presents such as Legos, Magna-Tiles and air rocket sets. He says the twins get so many gifts for their birthday from friends that he spaces them out. He likes to make Toll House cookies with the boys in the new kitchen.

The main bedroom suite is usually off-limits to the rest of the family: It includes a sitting room where Jacobson likes to relax on his own. The boys are also rarely in his office, the formal dining room or the main living room with the sculptural light fixture and red marble, he says.

Jacobson has a long real-estate history. He bought a 5,000-square-foot loft in New York's SoHo for \$2 million in 2000 and hired an architect, spending around \$1 million to make the raw space livable. During a 2003 sabbatical when he traveled around the world, he rented the loft for \$50,000 a month to Nicole Kidman for nine months. He then sold the loft to Harvey Weinstein for \$6.8 million after Kidman moved out. Kidman could not be reached for comment. Representatives for Weinstein said he could not be

reached for comment.

In 2005, Jacobson spent \$4.5 million on two floor-through apartments in a glassy, modern Richard Meier-designed building, part of a complex known as the Meier Towers in Greenwich Village in Manhattan. He spent around \$1.3 million to create a duplex and sold it in 2011 for \$10.5 million. As he was renovating those apartments, Jacobson and his brother developed a new building on West 19th Street called 520 West Chelsea that was designed by Selldorf Architects.

Jacobson still owns a 3,000-square-foot apartment in New York, which he bought for \$7 million in 2011 and renovated for around \$1.5 million. In 2012, Jacobson paid \$500,000 for the circa-1928 Mid-Beach house in Miami. He did a \$1.2 million renovation and liked spending time there so much that he moved in full time in 2018.

Jacobson says he invested so much into his new Coconut Grove house because he loves architecture and art. "I don't play golf. This is my hobby," he says. He plans to live there for a long time, at least until his twins go to college. "I decided to do it the way I wanted," he says.