Distinctive Distillery

Designers, artists and restaurateurs are remaking a piece of historical Toronto

By MAIGHAN CLARK  Photos By MARK COATSWORTH

THOUGH THE DISTILLERY DISTRICT at 55 Mill has been around since the 1800s and its downtown location is easily accessible from just about anywhere, it somehow remains a hidden corner of the city.

"It's home to a mix of live theatre, dance, art galleries, fine restaurants, a specialty brew house and coffee shop, an award-winning chocolate maker, a farmers' market, outdoor art shows, music and dance festivals and more, so it's a mystery that the place isn't better known," said developer Matt Rosenblatt and John Berman.

The Distillery site has won numerous design awards, and the emphasis on design is reflected in who's doing business here. The partners have chosen the tenants carefully to fit into the one-of-a-kind category, so you won't find Starbucks or Pottery Barn here.

The Distillery site has been a bit of a challenge, as the extensive on-site construction. Many local shops are graced by their gorgeous, billowing arrangements in strong colours.

Roy Banse opened Fluid Living to showcase sleek modern furnishings on Queen West in 2000, but quickly discovered he needed a larger space.

In December 2002 he opened his flagship store in building #8 (416-850-3466) and closed the Queen West location as its lease ran out last year.

"The location is ideal, being so close to the city's core," explains Banse, who was also drawn to the uniqueness of the area. He'd love to see more tourists and locals come down and get beyond the misconception that the Distillery is expensive and inaccessible.

Though he admits moving to the site during its continued transformation was a bit of risk, he's confident the decision will pay off. Banse loves the idea of a glass tower juxtaposed against historic brick buildings.

"I'm not shopping mall material," says the former currency trader who stresses the thoughtful craftsmanship of the pieces he offers.

Floated with contemporary modern pieces, Bergo (building #47A, 416-861-8361) sells unique, award-winning designs in accessories, jewellery and more. The mini MOMA store in the heart of Toronto has work by emerging Canadian artists like jewellery Shoshana Farber as well as European stars like Alvar Aalto and companies like Alessi.

Owner Robyn Berman uses her interior designer's eye to scout new talent, and it's paid off in sales and cachet. On a buying trip to Italy, she ran into superstar designer Karim Rashid, who hipped her to the chic little Indian company producing his oversized silver plates and bowls, now exclusively sold at Bergo.

Both 20-somethings looking for conversation pieces and empty-nesters buying specialty gifts shop here.

At Arxord Furniture (Case Goods building, 416-367-5757), Robert Arxord's sparse, warm, wooden corner gallery, a few key stellar pieces sit up front to for sale and have over. The artisan does the majority of his work behind glass doors, but he'll wave to new tenants and leave his perch for those who seriously want to know more about what he does. This master lends quiet dignity to his made-to-order furnishings.

"The Distillery is more than a centre for shops and galleries. Soulpepper performs plays in rep at the Young Centre for Performing Arts. Dance-makers, George Brown College Theatre School and Dance District social dance studio, and others, have their headquarters here, and monthly Arts Walks, Segway tours and gourmet tours are scheduled.

Dance, music, visual arts and cultural festivals happen throughout the year. Restaurants have live entertainment every week including the award-winning Boiler House (416-203-2121), which features artists like Kevin Clark, Elizabeth Shepherd and David Celia.

With this kind of action, the Distillery won't be a secret destination for long.