

Distillery District

Distinctive Distillery

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

By MBAGHAN CLARK Photos By MARK COATSWORTH

ALTHOUGH 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.

Developers Matt Rosenblatt and John Berman liken the Distillery to New York's SoHo district, an architecturally unique industrial neighbourhood taken over in the 60s by artists.

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.

Open just eight months, Thompson Landry Gallery (building #5, 416-364-4955) only shows artists from Quebec. Manager Joanne Thompson is as passionate about her gallery's location as she is about her art.

"We've been so well received at the Distillery," she says. "We looked all over Toronto but wanted something warm, inviting and unique. The Distillery has all that and more."

The site's beautiful stone walls that set off art so well remind her of Quebec, and she loves the 2,700-square-foot space. One of the benefits for Thompson Landry is the proximity to other established galleries.

"We often recommend one another," she says. "People appreciate that helpful attitude."

Thompson also praises the landlords for organizing events that entice people to the site. Customers include new collectors who want to see fairly young accessible artists as well as those seeking established names.

One of the very first tenants was Elizabeth Munro Design (building #9, 416-214-4760), a floral design store that counts the Distillery's restaura-

rants, theatres, galleries and other retailers as clients as well as neighbours. Munro purposely chose the neighbourhood so that she could be part of an arts community.

"There's a real mix here, and it's bringing this area to life," says the florist.

With both corporate and residential clients, Munro has a strong base that's kept her going dur-

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ing the extensive on-site construction. Many local shops are graced by her 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 (416-850-4266) and closed the Queen West location when 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.

Filled with contemporary, modern pieces, Bergo (building #47A, 416-861-1821) 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 jeweller 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 overscale 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 Akroyd Furniture (Case Goods building, 416-367-5757), Robert Akroyd's sparse, warm, woodsy corner gallery, a few key stellar pieces sit up front to fondle and fawn over. The artisan does the majority of his work behind glass doors, but he'll wave to newcomers 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-owner 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 Cella.

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

