



Distillery keeps corporate names at bay

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For most visitors, the Distillery District is a pleasant way to spend a few hours, maybe go for a meal, wander through an art gallery or watch a play at the Young Centre.

It's all those things, for sure, but there's something else going on down here that in its own quiet way is different, even revolutionary.

Though it takes a few minutes to sink in, it's hard to miss: There are no franchises here, no chains, no brands as they're now called.

That means no Starbucks, no McDonalds, no Chapters, no Tim Hortons; well, you get the idea.

This is no accident. For the owners of the Distillery, Cityscape and Dundee Realty Corp., it's part of a carefully considered strategy aimed at resisting the tide of homogenization that is turning cities around the world into clones of one another. They won't stop globalization, but they can keep one little pocket of one little city safe from the forces of sameness.

So far, their approach has paid off handsomely. Though there are millions upon millions of people, many of them Torontonians, who are happy to run with the horde, others prefer not to. These rugged individualists are precisely the ones the Distillery wants to attract. If you want Burger King, don't bother with the Distillery. If you're looking for Future Shop, go to the mall. If it's a heavily advertised national brand you desire, go elsewhere.

The Distillery is a bastion of authenticity, a celebration of the non-corporate. That doesn't mean its tenants don't include businesses; there are dozens.

Lisa Mills-George of The George Partnership, a graphic design firm, runs one of them. "We came because we love the energy," she says. "We feel we're a part of something. And our clients love to come here."

Mills-George and her staff of 12 rent space in the five-storey limestone building that is the oldest on the site. It has been a landmark since 1860, a monument to the Victorian love of architecture, no matter how humble its use.

Transformed into office space, the multipurpose building works beautifully. Throughout the George Partnership's light-filled space there are reminders of the past, stone walls, old bins and scales. This may not be the kind of real estate that appeals to insurance company executives, but that's not a bad thing. Indeed, that's the point.

As it is, barely three years after the Distillery opened as a cultural enclave, it is fully rented. Tenants

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include everything from cafes and restaurants to art galleries, shops, daycare and, soon, a spa and performing arts school.

"If we had two Distilleries, we could rent them out in a month and a half," says Cityscape's John Berman. "We thought it would take us eight years to reach critical mass; it took only three."

The advent of the Young Centre, the theatre/teaching facility built by Soulpepper and George Brown College, has made a big difference. It attracts 400 to 700 people nightly. All this without a single Blockbuster, Coffee Time or Shoppers Drug Mart.

"Excluding the national and international chains is critical to the approach we've taken," Berman explains.

"By doing that, we've ensured the Distillery will remain unique and special. We've been approached many times, and though sometimes it hurts to say no to the rents they're willing to pay, it pays off in the long run. For example, I think that if the café we had were a national chain, the Distillery would be a far less interesting place. If people want to go to McDonalds, there are dozens around. They don't need to come to a national historic site."

In the meantime, Berman and his partners are busy planning new construction in the southeast corner of the site. They hope to announce a retail/residential/hotel complex before the end of the year.

But don't expect a Holiday Inn.

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