



PHOTOS: JO-ANN LORO/YAM MAGAZINE

## DESIGNING THE DISTRICT

VICTORIA'S DESIGNER HOTSPOT OFFERS THE CHANCE TO LIVE IN CREATIVITY.

By Danielle Pope

The corner of Johnson and Government is alive with visitors today. Two women rush past me, a clutch of shopping bags between them. A group of twentysomething men strut through the crosswalk with iPhones and skateboards in hand. Despite the sun, brick buildings with arched windows cast shadows onto the pavement, and a busker sets his hat on the sidewalk before picking up his guitar. Shop doors open in a line down the street, welcoming in passers-by with signs boasting local wares.

There's a shift in the city's vibe here, distinct from other areas of downtown. This district feels raw, creative and well worn; you can feel the remnant grit of a neighbourhood that's bounced back from difficult times — that's lived through a haunted history and repainted its buildings in hopeful shades of modern style. This is Victoria's Design District, a vibrant place whose trendy veneer does not, importantly, hide decade upon decade of stories.

### GETTING COHESIVE

I decide to tour the district with designer Iván Meade, creative director and principal at Meade Design Group and one of the region's most prolific designers. Meade's studio focuses on everything from interiors and graphics to fabrics, artwork and, recently, chocolate. The Mexican-born designer has been pushing the cohesion of this designer hot spot since his studio opened in 2002 —

and he was the creative force behind branding much of the neighbourhood. Though the district officially launched in 2007, it took years of collaboration to get it there, and it's still growing.

"These shops could be anywhere, but the owners choose to have them here, and we're lucky for that," says Meade. "We have the opportunity to experience world-class design and craft in our own city, without having to go to New York."

It's a busy weekday afternoon when Meade and I start our tour at the shop just below his studio on Government Street: Lore General Store, which showcases local wares and maker workshops, from ring making to weaving. Meade moves about the shop with the excitement of a hunter, pointing out fine textures and fabrics. He talks to the owner about his favourite locally crafted honey — made in small batches from Mellifera bees — and asks when the new batch will arrive. My fingers play with the cotton tassels of a Turkish tea towel, and the smell of cedar soap and rosemary fills the air.

As we tour the Design District, it's clear that a sense of community runs deep. Shop owners stop what they're doing to shake Meade's hand and greet me. I discover the creation of this district was the city's attempt at mending an area so affected by petty crime, homelessness, rundown buildings and a low profile that businesses risked extinction.

The revitalization invited businesses to become part of an official precinct — one that showcased a style-centred way of life. That's why the district is hard to define geographically: it's a milieu of shops and buildings that joined over time, from Government and Johnson to Wharf and Herald, Market Square, Dragon Alley and parts of Chinatown. What they all have in common is a focus on creative living — whether through interior design, furniture and art, or local eats and stylish self-care.

### CREATIVE MASHUP

From Monarch Furnishings to Swans Hotel, Brewery & Pub, the district is a mashup of artisan talent that grows its kitsch from capturing some of the city's most historic warehouse buildings.

"I love the energy here," Meade tells me. "We didn't just want to rescue the buildings and shops — we wanted to restore a sense of community. We care about each other."

We explore Bois & Cuir, a hip new furniture gallery on Government, then head down Johnson through more of Meade's favourite haunts: the teeny-tiny Salt & Pepper Fox, Meade's kryptonite for quick lunches; Rook & Rose, where he buys his floral displays; Citizen Clothing, which supplies most of his wardrobe. At the base of Wharf and Pandora, where the Janion recently turned abandoned buildings into a thriving hub of stylish micro-suites, we duck into Paboom Home Imports: Meade's "save my hide" store.



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IVÁN MEADE

Opposite: 1 Chester Fields; 2 Monarch Furnishings; 3 Paboom Home Imports; 4 Rook & Rose; 5 The Drake Eatery patio in Market Square; 6 TRIG Vintage; 7 Dragon Alley heritage apartments

Today's discovery is a black ceramic whale.

"I like how chubby he is," Meade says, smiling.

Later, we pass Sager's Home Living on Government and Herald streets — another of Meade's favourite hot spots for home furnishings.

Above Sager's, and throughout the district, heritage apartments are home to artists, designers and makers. Dragon Alley blends history with live-work modernity — Moore Paterson Architects won awards in 2001 for the conversion of these derelict buildings into updated live-work townhouses. This is how an area transforms, Meade tells me.

We stop at a Herald Street classic, TRIG Vintage, with its mid-century modern décor. It looks like a retro flashback to my parents' home, but it's a warehouse of possibility for Meade.

"I get a burst of adrenaline every time I come here," says Meade, confessing his storage unit is full of found treasures waiting for use.

And amid the historic streets, treasure-filled alleys and local-to-luxe boutiques and eateries, the vibe is one of creative possibility.

"This place is remarkable," says Meade. The sun catches the warmth of the old brick buildings, adding a glow to the old sash windows. Somewhere in this district, right now, someone is finding an outlet for their creativity. ■



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