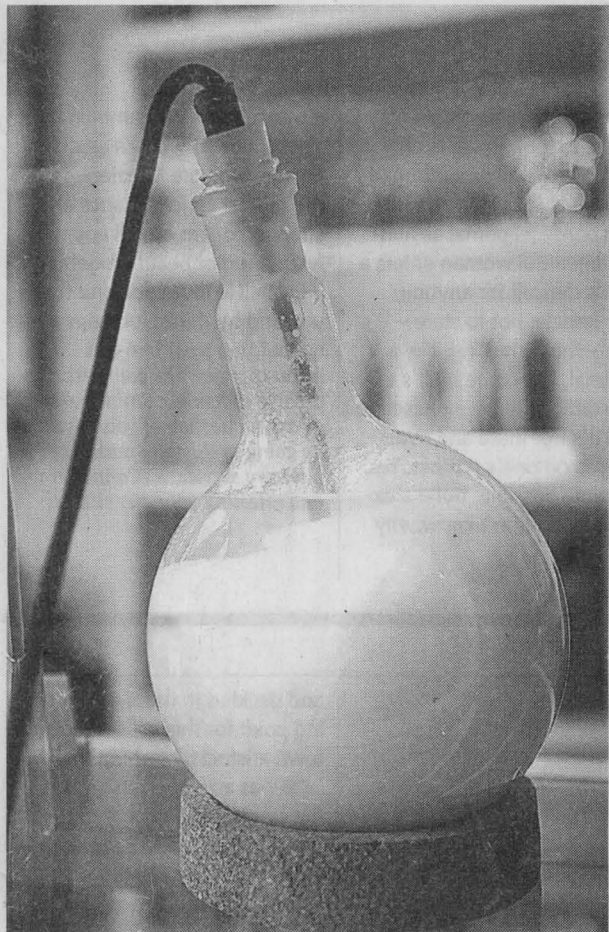


HOT NEIGHBOURHOODS » 'A WHOLE LIVING EXPERIENCE' ON THE WEST COAST



Aura Luz Melis's Slow Glow Lamp for Droog, left, is just one of the avant-garde fixtures on offer at OnlyHuman Modern Lighting and Furniture in Victoria's Design District. On nearby Herald Street, Josephine's Home Embellishments, left, specializes in eclectic French-inspired wares. DUANE PRENTICE FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Victoria's Design District 'has arrived'

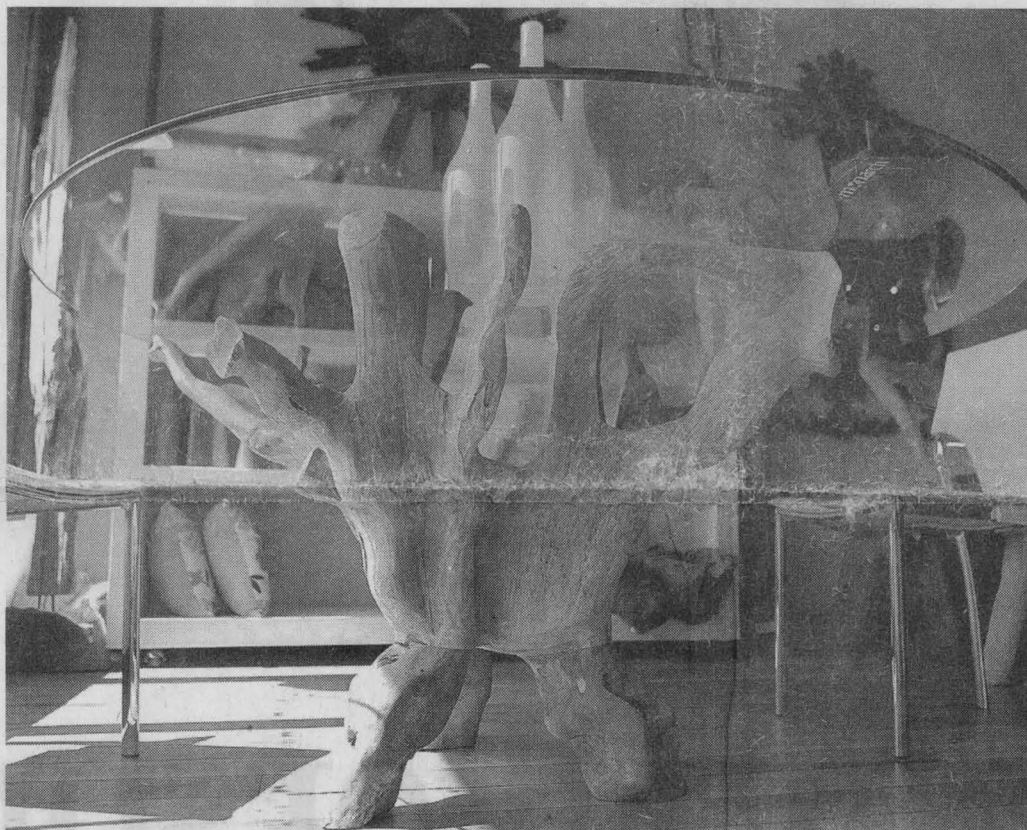
A once-struggling area of the B.C. capital reinvents itself as the city's new style hub. **Fiona Morrow** pays a visit

As with many image-savvy cities, business is all about the branding in downtown Victoria these days. Think, for starters, of Fabulous Fort (the moniker for Fort Street), LoJo (Lower Johnson Street), Government Street (The Ultimate Urban Experience) and Broad Street (Keeping You Fit and Looking Good).

The latest addition to the city's roster of designated hot-spots is the Design District, which incorporates 25 stores specializing in furniture, interior design, artworks and landscaping. Bordered by the Inner Harbour, Market Square, Herald Street and Chinatown, the area boasts some of Victoria's oldest, most historic buildings, many of them former industrial warehouses.

It's a good fit: The beautiful brickwork and high ceilings form the perfect backdrop for the plethora of design- and life-style-oriented retailers. A proposed antidote to the big-box stores that lure people out of the heart of cities, the Design District hopes to reroute those looking for something a little different back to a thriving, style-centred neighbourhood.

Though it seems an obvious way to raise the area's profile, creating the brand was a slow process. "The area was underdeveloped for a long time," explains Pamela Robert, chair of the Design District. Along with Ken Kelly of the Downtown Victoria Business Association, Robert began looking at the possibilities for the precinct about four years ago. "We start-



A sculpted teak table base supports a round glass top at Monarch Furnishings on Herald Street. DUANE PRENTICE FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

ed with a lighting strategy in the trees, pedestrian crossings and parking meters on Herald Street," says Robert. "We wanted a more contemporary feel." As the city began to address some of the area's difficulties with homelessness and petty crime, Robert spotted a shift in attitude and capitalized on it. "We realized we needed to do something on a marketing lev-

el because the whole area really was up and coming."

Word got around and, last year, many businesses in the neighbourhood expressed interest in a major revamp. Approval to officially brand the area the Design District was quickly forthcoming from the City of Victoria.

In addition to paying a membership fee of \$1,000 per year,

of a glossy brochure detailing the various stores and numbering them on a street map. Shoppers can focus on a specific design need or simply browse their way through everything their home and garden might need.

Larger, more established stores such as Capital Iron (1900 Store St., www.capitaliron.net) and the soon-to-open branch of venerable furnishings retailer Thomson and Page (524 Yates St., www.thomsonandpage.com) are complemented by smaller outlets with a particular design emphasis. For example, Josephine's Home Embellishments (537 Herald St., www.josephineshome.com) is a treasure trove of French-inspired vintage accessories, while Monarch Furnishings (546 Herald St., www.monarchfurnishings.com) offers a wide range of contemporary wood furniture.

For a different kind of pampering, the Design District also offers two hair salons, two restaurants – including the very trendy Union Pacific Café – and Swans Boutique Art Hotel (506 Pandora St., www.swanshotel.com).

According to Robert, the district has already proved itself the most successful packaged precinct in Victoria, having become a marketing tool for local property developers quick to spot the area's potential. "It's been hard work," she says. "But the Design District is no longer up-and-coming. It has arrived."

Victoria Design District must-sees

MIROIRS
1824 Government St.
250-361-3382
See yourself reflected in every inch of wall and floor space in this specialty mirror store, which offers everything from large art deco sunburst mirrors to bespoke minimalist room enhancers.

ONLYHUMAN MODERN LIGHTING AND FURNITURE
533 Pandora Ave.
250-383-6659
www.onlyhuman.ca

A tiny, narrow store adjacent to Market Square, OnlyHuman's eclectic design-forward space is dominated by such avant-garde products as the Pig Table from Dutch design firm Moooi.

DIG THIS
560 Johnson St.
250-385-3212
www.digthis.com
Whether experienced or aspiring, horticulturists of every level will find their needs satisfied in this huge store catering to all things green.

UNION PACIFIC AFTER DARK
537 Herald St.
250-380-0005
www.unionpaciferafterdark.com
Funky café by day, Union Pacific comes into its own at night, specializing in delicious artisanal cured meats and cheeses.
» F.M.