

Toronto's Urban Cool

*Canada's largest city
goes from bland to bold*

BY *Katrina Onstad*
PHOTOGRAPHS BY
Susan Seubert

*The Drake Hotel is a
nexus of culture in
Queen West. In its café,
books create a cozy
backdrop for afternoon
cocktails.*

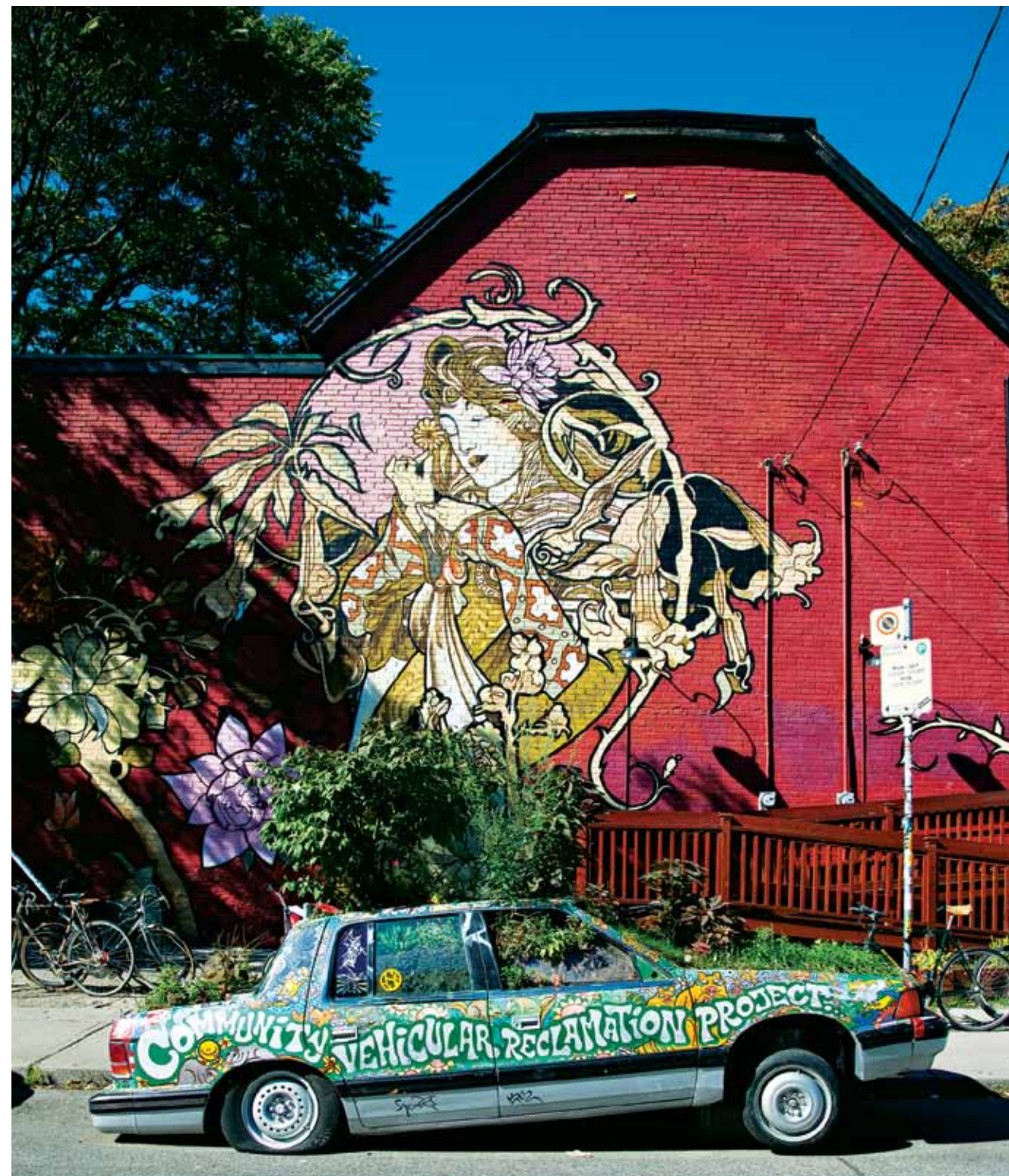
I hear the crowd before I see it, gleeful squeals punctuating the early autumn evening. Such is the sound track of Toronto during TIFF, the Toronto International Film Festival, where celebrity sightings and red-carpet mobs come to seem normal for ten days every September. ¶ Though I'm on my way home for dinner, I'm compelled to bike toward the roar outside Roy Thomson Hall, the sloping glass theater on the edge of the financial district in Toronto's downtown. There, hundreds of arms wave like a field of flowers, cellphones aloft. From the very back of the tumult, I crane my neck and catch glimpses of camera crews and a blur of well-dressed bodies. Nearby, an older woman sits on a bench with a little white dog. ¶ "What's going on?" I ask. ¶ "Brad Pitt," she says. ¶ "You're not going to try to get closer?" ¶ "Nah," she says. "There'll be someone else tomorrow night. I'm just walking my dog."

Her unfazed attitude seems as typically Toronto as the giddy crowd: The city is getting used to being at the center of things. Toronto and TIFF have practically grown up side by side. A modest art house affair 20 years ago, TIFF is now the world's largest—and some say, most influential—public film festival. In the same period, Canada's biggest city, on the northwestern shores of Lake Ontario, has gone from being known as "Toronto the Good"—a euphemism for dull—to being a wildly cosmopolitan city. Nearly half of Toronto's citizens were born outside Canada. As Lisa Ray, an actress of Indian-Polish descent raised in Toronto, tells me: "We're the most successful social experiment in the world."

Even urban planning guru Richard Florida agrees. In 2007, Florida, who grew up near Newark, New Jersey, left Carnegie

Mellon in Pittsburgh to become a professor at the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto. His best-selling 2002 book, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, heralds successful cities as those that attract and keep a creative citizenry who trade in innovation and ideas rather than old smokestack industry. Toronto is a perfect manifestation of his "Three T's" index of good city building: technology, tolerance, and talent.

I'm curious to see how the Three T's of Toronto play out on the streets, so I invite five local "creative class" guides to show me the neighborhoods they love. Toronto is known as a city of neighborhoods, and one of these pockets is new, one is very old (well, old for a town that wasn't incorporated until 1834), and all are vibrant reflections of a self-assured city that's finally come into its own.



A colorful community with an independent streak, Kensington Market (above) is a national historic site. Toronto's downtown region connects some 20 neighborhoods. The Center Island ferry (opposite) offers a panoramic view, topped by CN Tower.

Kensington Market

Global party mix in a heritage neighborhood

Clement Virgo, all six feet of him, cuts a striking figure in his jean jacket, hands in pockets and collar up, bargaining in a Kensington Market fish shop. The owner asks after Virgo's son, and Virgo walks

out with a smile and a discount on his black cod fillet. "It's a small town," says Virgo, one of Canada's most revered writers and directors of film and TV. Kensington is also one of the oldest neighborhoods in Toronto, a protected heritage site spanning several scruffy blocks west of Spadina, a major north-south artery that crosses the city and burrows into the heart of Chinatown. As you walk around on



Street markets bustle in Chinatown (left) and lattes steam at the Mascot, a coffee shop in Queen West (above). Don Valley Brick Works (below) has become part of a city park.



a weekend, it helps to keep your elbows out to steer through the crowds. People line up for empanadas; racks of vintage clothing huddle next to independent cafés where the pierced and tattooed get their caffeine hits.

Virgo came to Toronto from Jamaica at the age of 11 with his mother, brother, and two sisters. He grew up mostly in Regent Park, a public housing project on the east side of the city, but whenever he could, he'd ride to Kensington on the streetcar (Toronto has a subway system, but downtown is best navigated by "red rocket" streetcars). "I loved walking past musicians playing Spanish music, reggae. I'd hear people speaking Portuguese, Jamaican patois. It's a piling on." He's lived in and around the area for almost 20 years.

Virgo leads me to Caribbean Corner, a grocery store on Baldwin Street. Virgo's mom used to take him here as a kid; it's still his go-to for Jamaican spices and jerk sauce. But what he wants to show me today is outside: "Look," he says, pointing to a Star of David carved into the sidewalk by the doorway, a reminder of the time nearly a century ago when the neighborhood was predominantly Jewish.

"I have a mixed-race six-year-old who knows how to order sushi and burritos," he says. "The Market is the city I want to live in."

Residents are ferociously protective of Kensington, once the core of Toronto's punk rock scene. There's no Starbucks (Virgo says the best locally roasted coffee is Ideal's, and the best place to drink coffee and people-watch is Casa Acoreana), and there's only one small chain grocery store. We pass the Waterfalls Indian Tapas Bar: "This is where Nike tried to get in," says Virgo. In 2002, a club opened up that seemed like a typical indie music bar but proved to be a promotional vehicle for Nike. When locals got wind of the invasion, some repeatedly left garbage on the club's doorstep to protest Nike's foreign labor practices. The Swoosh packed up and left.

Down the street is El Trompo, Virgo's favorite *taquito* joint, where he eats a heaping plate of *huevos con chorizo*. This is hangover food, which might be necessary if one follows Virgo's advice and hits the Embassy Bar on the last Saturday of every month. "It's a bit like a speakeasy," he says. DJs spin and local reggae musicians share the microphone. In the summers, the doors open and the sound of reggae spills over into Bellevue Square Park down the street.

Kensington Market borders Toronto's Chinatown, and Virgo wants to visit the movie theater where he used to watch Hong Kong action flicks as a kid, awakening a lust for film that would lead him to make features like *Poor Boy's Game* and to direct episodes of *The Wire*.

Much of the Chinese population, like many ethnic communities in Toronto, has migrated to the suburbs, but on this brisk fall day, Chinatown is still teeming with people. A waiter dumps vats of steaming water into the gutter by the side of the street, letting loose an aroma of fish. When we get to the former site of the Golden Harvest theater, near the corner of Dundas and Spadina, it's a bubble-tea shop.

"Is there still a theater in the back?" Virgo asks the apron-wearing woman behind the counter. "Can we see it?" He's got Hong Kong director John Woo on the brain. Behind the counter, through a plywood door, is a staircase that looks suspiciously cinematic. Oddly, the woman shuts the door so we can't peek in.

"Nothing here! Bubble tea!"

It's a strange moment, and Virgo laughs. "Everything changes," he says.

Evergreen Brick Works

New life for a former industrial wasteland

Change, however, can sometimes go unnoticed by locals. The downside of the "city of neighborhoods" is that in Toronto, people often don't leave their own. In the spirit of investigating one of Toronto's newest areas, I find myself early one Saturday morning on a free shuttle bus to the Evergreen Brick Works.

The Don Valley was once the mouth of a glacial river. Now this green strip of land divides the eastern and western halves of the city. Years ago, I lived nearby, and I'd take long runs through the ravines into the valley as the traffic rumbled on the surrounding freeways. It never failed to astound me that only minutes from downtown, I could spot a rabbit, or a lone fisherman trying to get the Don River to give up a carp.

The recent opening of the Evergreen Brick Works, the revitalized site of the abandoned Don Valley Brick Works, has turned the valley into a hot destination. For years, the massive smokestacks and kilns sheltered squatters and served as a practice canvas for graffiti artists. But a charity called Evergreen reclaimed the ignored lands, turning them into an area of "nonprofit urban sustainability." Not really knowing what this means, I discover as soon as I get off the bus at the basin of the Don Valley that the eco-jargon translates into a fun Saturday morning. Joggers have ended their runs at the farmers market, making up for burned calories with french fries and artisanal cheeses.

Behind the market, in the Children's Garden, kids crawl in a wood fort and dig for worms. Mountain bikers who have survived the trails lean against buildings, soaking up a blast of sun. It's so pleasant that I'm not even annoyed by the guy with the didgeridoo.

"The Brick Works isn't some hippie-dippie experiment," says Brad Long, the gravelly voiced chef who runs the Brick Works restaurant Café Belong. "OK, it's an experiment, but it's not crazy." Pause. "Well, crazy in a good way."

Long is one of Toronto's celebrity chefs—his past as a journeyman rock musician makes him highly regenic

and delightfully profane. Absorbing hellos from everyone he passes, Long walks me up a hill to point out the paths that wind through the grass from the neighborhoods above, a 26-mile walking circle. In the summer, wildflowers bloom on once toxic soil. "Come at night," says Long. "The whole city is alight."

Before this, Long ran the restaurant at the Air Canada Centre sports arena, bringing organic fare to Toronto Raptors and Maple Leafs and feeding haute cuisine to high rollers in the box seats. But after years struggling with the environmental footprint left by how we eat, he quit the ACC to open Café Belong, which strives to use local, organic, responsibly sourced ingredients.

The repurposed decor features exposed wood over an open kitchen, with tall windows looking across at the graffiti-splattered walls of a factory (the graffiti at Brick Works are legally protected). Long points out reclaimed design elements in the infrastructure and talks up his sustainable initiatives, such as rain-barrel water sourcing. In locavore spirit, Long buys his produce from the same farmers who set up their stalls on Saturday mornings. "People ask me: *What is Canadian food?* It's the beauty of our natural resources, used in this incredibly multicultural way."

The menu is always changing, but this season, critics are hailing the pork belly glazed in maple syrup and apple cider vinegar. To

It never failed to astound me that minutes from downtown, I could spot a rabbit, or a lone fisherman trying to get the Don River to give up a carp.



get through the Canadian winters with flavor, Long is also experimenting with pickling.

Pickling has always seemed apocalyptic to me; it's how we'll eat at the end of the world, which doesn't seem so delicious. But I order the pickle plate, and what appears is a sampling, including pears, carrots, and chokecherries, each uniquely flavored. My ladylike nibbling quickly becomes inelegant wolfing. The eggplant in a madras sauce has a complicated, revelatory spiciness. "I'll admit I've taken a jar of that home after work and eaten the whole thing before bed," says the server. It's even better washed down with a dry white wine from Stratus in the nearby Niagara region.

For the diners, the emphasis is on taste, not sustainability. "I tell my staff to shut up," says Long. "You can scare people by explaining provenance. It's too much information. We give them good food with value and ambience, and the trick is to get the hell out of the way."

Queen West

Artfully reimagined for the next generation

There's only so much green a city dweller can take before she must get back to street level. No neighborhood better embodies Toronto's urban cool than Queen West, and that's an entirely biased opinion, as it's been my home for nine years. Queen Street runs east-west from one end of the city to the other, but Queen West is generally considered the chunk west of Bathurst, ending near the Gladstone Hotel, around Dufferin Street (somewhere on that westward walk,

Room 318 in the Gladstone Hotel outlines visions in blue and white (left). Jatinder and Sarbjeet Singh share a moment at Chandan Fashion, their Gerrard Bazaar boutique (opposite).





Perhaps more than any other neighborhood, Queen West channels Toronto's creative spirit. The Drake Hotel (above) keeps the bohemian vibe alive in the gallery district. Near Queen West, a band makes joyful noise at the Communist's Daughter (below).



perhaps near the bucolic Trinity Bellwoods Park, street signs tell us we're supposed to call it West Queen West, but it seems that nobody really bothers).

The Gladstone Hotel, built in 1889, stands as a proud landmark dividing Queen West from neighboring Parkdale. It's a regal Richardsonian Romanesque building with arched windows and red brick, but only a decade ago the best way to describe it was decrepit—a leaky eyesore known for its hand-operated elevator and karaoke night filled with hipsters and long-term hotel guests. The Zeidler family took control of the hotel in 2002, and daughter Christina Zeidler oversaw the Gladstone's delicate overhaul, making careful efforts not to displace staff and residents while simultaneously saving the dying building, inch by inch.

"It's transformed, but that's not the purpose of it," says Zeidler, sitting in the Melody Bar by a curling mahogany bar from the 1940s. "The purpose was to respond to a neighborhood. I like the idea of revitalization, trying to bring the building back to life, back to the community, make it a hub. I don't feel as if it belongs to me. I feel it belongs to the community."

Two blocks east on Queen, the Drake Hotel has been similarly restored, to a slightly more upscale end. Both hotels present exhibits and events. The art scene in Toronto has usually been a movable feast, but for several years, Queen West has held fast as a gallery row. The Gladstone now offers an arts walking tour of the area. "The wish and hope is that the art scene will remain here as a vital, living part of the city," says Zeidler.

An artist herself, Zeidler sensed the lack of venues for Toronto's creative population, so she hired hungry local artists to give each of the 37 rooms at the Gladstone its own feel: pretty in pink in the Teen Queen, or streamlined sparse in the El-e-men-tal room.

The success of the Drake and the Gladstone has coincided with—or caused?—a boom in the surrounding neighborhood. Zeidler and I take a walk along Queen Street east from the Gladstone, Zeidler peering in the windows of her favorite galleries, starting with Katharine Mulherin Contemporary Art Projects, a showcase for up-and-coming artists. Stephen Bulger waves at Zeidler from the window of his gallery, which specializes in photography. The Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art (MOCCA) is tucked away behind a parking lot. Outside the gallery for the Ontario Crafts Council, Zeidler looks through the glass: "Oh, I love that," she says, pointing at a small ceramic forest of white sticks.

A woman unlocking her bicycle nearby overhears and says, "It's called 'Dancing Chromosomes.' I made it." She turns out to be a ceramist named Chari Cohen. Still wearing her bike helmet, she and Zeidler, who have never met, discuss what might be a better word for crafts. "I'm thinking 'material arts,'" says Zeidler, whose dream of a living arts community feels very real.

Gerrard Bazaar

The colors of India along an ever evolving street

Far from the cool of Queen West, a few miles to the northeast, is the Gerrard Bazaar, sometimes called Little India. This six-block stretch along Gerrard Street, in an otherwise quiet, working-class neighborhood, sparkles at night with saris swinging from the awnings and gold bangles twinkling in the windows of the jewelry stores. Incense tickles the throat. "This street was our umbilical cord to India in the eighties," says Lisa Ray.

“There should be something more romantic and passionate to describe Toronto than ‘livable.’ Can’t we call Toronto sexy yet?”

Ray grew up with her Polish mother and Indian father in a sleepy suburb of the city but became a supermodel in Mumbai when she was still in her teens. In 2005, she starred in the Academy Award-nominated film *Water* (in which she played an ostracized widow), and she has spent most of her adult life in Mumbai, New York, London, Paris, Milan, and Los Angeles. "The Toronto of my youth was wound tight—very conservative, very insecure. There was no hunger for greatness," she says.

Her return was dramatic: In 2009, Ray developed a rare form of cancer called multiple myeloma and found herself settling into Toronto more permanently. She's in good health now, but she has stuck around. "I'm not thinking I want to be anywhere else anymore." And anyway, she says, "it's a very Canadian thing to make your name somewhere else and then come back home."

As we walk down Gerrard late one morning, the sari stores are yet to open, and the mannequins are wrapped in black sheaths, eerily resembling Benedictine monks in the sunlight. Ray points to a group of people in a jewelry store, the older women in saris, the younger in jeans. "That's definitely a bride getting bling for her wedding," she says.

Ray stops in front of a clothing store where a faded old sign reads "House of 220." "People would buy toasters and ghetto blasters with Indian wiring to send to family back home as gifts," she says, remembering crowds lining up out the door during the holidays. While her dad was buying small appliances, young Lisa would pore over glossy Bollywood magazines and scour the stores for Indian products like coconut oil and herbal remedies.

Now, of course, the South Asian diaspora—much of it settled in the suburbs—can get its information about the homeland from the Internet and order a toaster online. But Gerrard Street remains a fine example of what Richard Florida calls an "ethnic enclave," an immigrant community built around cultural identity, where the streets mirror the inhabitants' country of origin.

"For Indians who come here, the neighborhood is a kind of nostalgia for nostalgia," says Ray.

Though still bustling, the strip has a slightly shabby mien beneath the superficial glitz, with more abandoned storefronts than there used to be. The neighborhood's "Little India" nickname isn't even entirely accurate anymore; these days, merchants are Pakistani as well as Indian. An Islamic bookstore and an Indian sweetshop sit on the same block.

But the restaurants are still hopping, and that's why people travel to Gerrard from across the city. We pass Motimahal, with its fast-food seats, and stop at the Lahore Tikka House, with psychedelic-colored *tuk-tuks* outside and walls draped in mirrored fabrics inside. It's like a Russian nesting doll: rooms within rooms and a seemingly endless basement.

Our waiter, whose hair is dyed the color of an orange Popsicle, serves our biryani on Styrofoam plates with plastic cutlery. "Always get the chicken tikka," says Ray, sipping Limca, an Indian soda.

Ray talks about her friends in Toronto, many of whom she made since returning. I tell her Richard Florida calls Toronto "messy urbanism" in action: imperfect coexistences all around, man and nature, bikes and cars, religions and cultures atop one another—but always livable. Ray rolls her eyes at the word.

"There should be something more romantic and fanciful and passionate to describe Toronto than 'livable,'" she says. "Can't we call Toronto sexy yet?"



Leslieville

At the corner of sassy and folksy

But “livable” is the buzzword for a neighborhood called Leslieville, just south of Little India along Queen Street’s east end. Torontonians bristle at New York comparisons, so I’ll say it fast and duck: If hip, established Queen West is the West Village, then cheap, cheerful, and DIY Queen East is Brooklyn—its more livable cousin.

But not long ago, Leslieville had a reputation for poverty and crime. Nathalie-Roze Fischer is a French-Canadian-Haitian-Italian Torontonian (self-description: “Canadian mutt”) who set up a clothing and accessories shop, Nathalie-Roze and Co., in 2006, renting an apartment nearby. “My mom said: ‘You’ll be mugged!’”

Fischer was ahead of the curve. Leslieville has become the best destination for shoppers who eschew chains. In part, Leslieville grew to serve the film industry. At the south end of the neighborhood, closer to Lake Ontario, massive studios host film and TV shows in production, lured by the city’s tax credits. Leslievillers are used to streets blocked off with cones and trailers—streets that could pass for New York or Chicago.

Nathalie-Roze and Co. champions Canadian designers and offers crafts courses at night. Fischer shows me canvas bags and buttons that flag-wave for the neighborhood: “Leslieville is for Lovers” and “Lesbiville.”

We settle down to brunch at linoleum-topped tables at kitschy Lady Marmalade (Torontonians are committed brunchers). Over French toast, Fischer describes her clientele as “renegade, self-employed, and wired.”

The day before we met, the coffee shop Mercury Espresso hosted a “pop-up” food event, announcing on Twitter that two chefs were coming to sell Cuban sandwiches and sticky toffee pudding for ten bucks. “I basically ran over there,” Fischer says with a laugh.

As we walk along Queen East, past furniture and clothing stores, we hit two different “Back in ten minutes” signs. The streets are wide and tree-lined. “It’s a nine-block town. All the things you want from a big city, but you have this genuine charm. There’s no attitude; no one checks out your shoes before they serve you. Not that that’s happening on Queen West, but...” She trails off, hinting at a playful east-west rivalry.

The neighborhood of early 20th-century duplexes has attracted young families priced out of more established areas. The streets are crowded with baby strollers, and retailers want them to roll in. At Doll Factory by Damzels, a store showcasing the rock-and-roll in-house fashion line Damzels in This Dress, Ramones onesies share shelf space with feather-covered boots. Baby on the Hip carries designer slings and pacifiers so pretty they look like sculptures.

Fischer advises checking out Leslieville’s many vintage design stores. We stop longest in Love the Design, a curated curiosity shop. I covet a pair of shiny reindeer antlers before being distracted by beautiful handmade stationery.

When the stores close, the bars and restaurants open. Worn-out shoppers can dine at Ascari Enoteca, a wildly popular wine bar and pasta restaurant where images of famed Italian Formula One driver Alberto Ascari peek out from every surface. At the east end of Leslieville is the hobbit-like Ceili Cottage, a Celtic bar with live music in a shack with oyster shells cemented into the walkway. This past winter, the owner kept people coming to the popular outdoor patio by erecting a yurt there instead, with seating for up to 30.

Nightlife continues at a local watering hole, the Avro, where you’re likely to encounter a whimsical theme event, such as letter-writing night or an all-Canadian-albums party (you must love Corey Hart to endure this). I decide to have a beer at the bar, where I spot



World culture and natural history are on display at the Royal Ontario Museum (above) in a daringly angular space designed by architect Daniel Libeskind. Vintage furniture is stacked at Guff, an eye-catching store in Leslieville (opposite).

a jar of glittering loonies and toonies (one- and two-dollar Canadian coins) on the counter. I ask why it is there. “It’s our community jar, for local projects like gardens and art,” says the bartender.

Sitting on my barstool in quiet Leslieville, I’m aware that I am in micro-Toronto, a neighborhood village sprung into existence by the creative industry, at least in part. Meanwhile, in a different village in this same city, A-list celebrities are celebrating an international film festival. Toronto is a tale of many cities—in one.

Toronto-based writer **KATRINA ONSTAD**’s second novel, *Everybody Has Everything*, will be published in June. Traveler contributing photographer **SUSAN SEUBERT** lives in Portland, Oregon, and Maui.