

TORONTO'S HAPPY HAMLET

A tour of theatre guru David Mirvish's village by Hailey Eisen

I MET UP WITH David Mirvish in front of his father's landmark bargain centre and Toronto tourist attraction, Honest Ed's. I had always been curious about Mirvish Village, the small Markham Street strip in the Bathurst Street and Bloor Street area, lined on both sides with art galleries, independent book and movie stores, restaurants and antique shops. The village is a haven for artists and collectors and attracts visitors from across the city and around the world. But, the small street is filled with hidden gems that the average passerby could easily overlook. So, when the opportunity arose to have David Mirvish

give me a tour of the neighbourhood — named in honour of his dad, Ed Mirvish — I knew I'd be getting an insider's perspective.

For Mirvish, the Markham strip is filled with memories of legendary artists and art dealers who have passed through the area since its inception in the early 1960s. The village, he says, was born almost by accident. His father bought the houses along one side of Markham in order to build a parking lot for Honest Ed's. When he found out the street was zoned as residential, he was only able to build a small lot behind the houses — he was left with all these Victorian homes that couldn't be knocked down.

"My mom, Anne, who had been working as a sculptor in New York, needed a studio and my dad wanted to keep her in Toronto," Mirvish explains. So Anne moved in, and other artists, like the famed gallery owner Jack Pollock, rented spaces in these houses for about five dollars a week. Ed Mirvish decided that one side of the street looked off balance, and so he bought up the 12 houses on the west side of Markham also. It was Anne's idea to paint them all in pastel colours — yellow, pink and blue. Soon, the neighbourhood was a buzz with energy and small businesses began to open up shop.

Art for art's sake

Today, Mirvish Village is thriving as one of Toronto's smallest BIAs and is filled with unique businesses and second-storey artist studios. No one lives on the strip, but the community vibe is evident. As Mirvish leads me through the village, he points out some of Toronto's coolest, unique retailers all clustered along one small strip. "Coming to this village is truly an adventure," he says, looking proudly down the street that has maintained its authenticity over the years as the city developed around it. Just recently approved by the

city as a BIA, the area has always remained true to Ed's initial stipulations. No chains have ever opened up in the village and all the storefronts continue to boast independent, artsy businesses. As we wander into shops, it is apparent that David Mirvish has developed an excellent rapport with business owners in the community. The first stop in our tour, by my request, is Mirvish's own arts bookstore. For years the huge space, now occupied by **David Mirvish Books on Art (596 Markham St.)**, served as the David Mirvish Gallery. The bookstore originally

opened in the 1970s across the street to service the thriving arts community. When Mirvish closed his gallery, he relocated the bookstore. The two-storey, open concept shop displays an incredible 50-foot-long-by-10-foot-high Frank Stella painting. Today the store features hard-to-find books on art, artists, cultural studies, architecture and more. It also features regular book signings and special events. Mirvish says some of the most memorable artist appearances over the past few decades have included Andy Warhol and Peter Ustinov. On Nov. 18, The Honourable



David Mirvish enjoys the laid-back Mirvish Village vibe

Lincoln Alexander, Canada's first black member of Parliament and former lieutenant-governor of Ontario, will be in the store signing copies of the first biography written on his life. This event is open to the public.

As we wander out of the bookshop, Mirvish points out **Vintage Video (No. 604)**, a business that has been on the street for about 20 years. Inside is a film buff's dream come true: walls and tables lined with videos (VHS and DVD), dating back to the 1930s through the 1970s. On the wall are photos of some celebrities who have passed through the store including Samuel L. Jackson, Robin Williams and Anthony Hopkins. Another local haven for collectors is **The Beguiling (No. 601)**, which showcases the largest selection of alternative, underground and avant-garde graphic storytelling in the country. This comic book store was born in 1987 in opposition to most other comic shops that specialize in villains and superheroes. The store owner says Beguiling really fits into the artistic spirit of Mirvish Village. While strolling through the village, I stop into **Draganov Fine Jewellery Studio (No. 606)** to take a look. The store features beautiful custom jewellery in silver, platinum and gold. The artist, George Draganov, works in the back of the store to create exquisite pieces. He also offers in-house classes in the art of jewellery making.

Vintage village

There are a few vintage clothing hot spots tucked away in the village that come highly recommended. The first is **A Vintage Bride (No. 587)**, specializing in wedding dresses and other formal wear. It's not to be missed. Hidden down a flight of stairs, next to Rocco's Plum Tomato is **Spa_ce Vintage Clothing Gallery (No. 608A)**, featuring a killer collection of retro duds.

For antique collectors, David Mirvish recommends taking a trip to **Twice Found (No. 608)**, formerly **Plantation Antiques**. The store's former owner Thomas Keeling was in business in Mirvish Village for 41 years and will continue to have a few cases on display in the shop. The new owners are excited to make their home here as it's one of their favourite streets in the city. Specializing in 20th-century modern works, Canadian ceramic arts, Asian antiques and ethnographic pieces, the new store is filled with treasures.

When the lights go out

Mirvish Village comes to life at night with live music venues, university pubs and unique eateries. Since its beginning the village has had a wild side, which

usually shows its face after dark. Mirvish recalls the days when opening night parties from the Mirvish theatres would be held in Saints and Sinners on Markham Street. He has a memory of dancer and choreographer Jose Greco dancing on the table at one of these parties.

Today the street is popular among musicians and artists as well as students from the University of Toronto.

Mirvish offers much praise for **Southern Accent (No. 595)**, a Cajun restaurant housed in two beautiful Victorian homes.

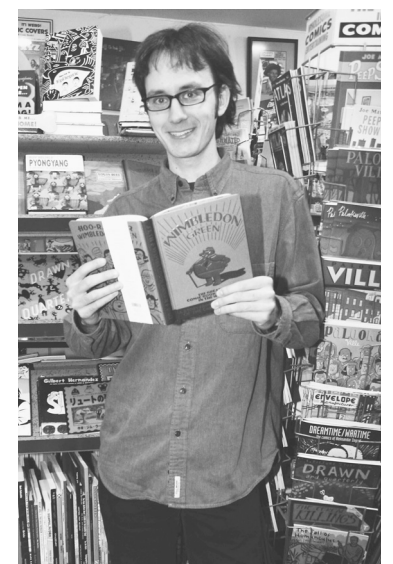
Unable to resist, I took a few friends there for dinner a week after meeting Mirvish. It is a cold fall night, but we feel cozy in one of the eight enchanting dining rooms. An eclectically decorated restaurant, the food is authentic Cajun creole, the service is exquisite and the experience unlike anything else in Toronto. After dinner, it is recommended that we visit the resident physic and spiritualist, Marlana, who has been working here for 20 years.

"This street has an amazing energy," she says as I sit down to have my Tarot cards read — a 15-minute experience well worth the price.

After dinner, check out **Victory Café (No. 581)**, a cozy student hangout with live jazz and poetry upstairs. Or head over to **The Central Jazz and Supper Club (No. 603)**, for live music.

It takes a village

As the arts scene in Toronto continues to develop and grow, Mirvish Village remains a hub for artists and art lovers. The vibe here is contagious, and, after spending a day, you might even find an inner creativity you never knew you had. The area around **Honest Ed's** is also worth exploring, with one-of-a-kind boutiques, art supply stores and theatres.



Peter Birkemoe runs The Beguiling