

# design

## BY COMMUNITY

A COLLECTION OF BOUTIQUE FURNITURE AND HOME DECOR SHOWROOMS BANDS TOGETHER TO MAKE RIVER NORTH AN INTERIOR DESIGN DESTINATION.

BY AMBER GIBSON  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY TODD WINTERS



Like Willis Tower in the Loop, the Merchandise Mart serves as proud showpiece of River North, garnering all kinds of attention. Its job is easy, though: The Mart is the largest office building in the world, topping 4 million square feet, the stuff of postcards. It even has its own Brown Line El train stop. Everything else nearby seems to pale in its impressive shadow.

But over the last decade, independent showrooms have been popping up on neighboring streets of Wells, Kinzie and Hubbard, selling \$10,000 beds, custom tiles, mosaics and armoires that might end up as the piece de resistance in a luxury home. The problem was, foot traffic seemed to end at the Mart. So the others decided they had to do something to share some of that spotlight.

In 2013, about 20 of these showrooms banded together to form the River North Design District, aiming to better market the neighborhood and open its doors wider to the public. Its apt slogan: “Think Outside the Mart.”

“The newly designated design district is a wonderful way to draw new visitors to River North’s well established gallery district, centered at Superior and Franklin,” notes Peter Vale, owner of Vale Craft Gallery. “Visitors enjoy River North’s eclectic mix of art galleries and design showrooms, and are surprised to discover how the old manufacturing buildings in the neighborhood have been repurposed,” he says.

Just like fashion, home decor speaks volumes about a person’s personality and lifestyle. Definitions of “elegant,” “modern,” “quirky” or “beautiful” vary widely, and the RNDD embraces them all. The showrooms, clustered within easy walking distance from downtown, offer inspiration for renovating every room and down to every detail. While the massive Merchandise Mart attracts industry pros curating clients’ homes, the surrounding showrooms present amateurs a more approachable entrée into the world of interior design.

“We’re more accessible now to travelers that aren’t with designers,” says Oscar Tatosian, owner of Oscar Isberian Rugs, a longtime business established in 1920 and opened in River North in the 1990s. While a wool rug stitched in Iran from Isberian might run as high as \$50,000, pieces in the store and others nearby range in all price points. Walking the neighborhood is like visiting intimate museums where everything’s for sale and admission is free.

The best part is that the admission comes with valuable insight. The RNDD recently hosted a public lecture at The Golden Triangle, a treasure trove of Asian and European antiquities. A panel of designers discussed how to best arrange antique and modern pieces to create a unique look. Attendees not only got the expert advice, but were surrounded by vivid examples of this integration in The Golden Triangle’s eclectic showroom. Owner Doug Van Tress says he’s thrilled to

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help educate more people about design and introduce them to the River North design community.

“The RNDD is about people, ideas and imagination, not stuff,” Van Tress explains. “It’s a purely creative enterprise, open to anyone with a brain and a head or heart for design. While any showroom can sell ‘stuff’ the RNDD shows people how to use it.” No intimidation necessary.

With floor to ceiling lined in glittering glass, high-end stone and hand-cut tile mosaics, The Tile Gallery may initially elicit a sense of star-struck awe, but owner Barbara Warren puts visitors at ease, chatting about patterns and materials, helping them navigate among the hundreds of tile and stone vignettes, no matter their experience. Warren realizes that, thanks to HGTV shows like “Divine Design” and “Design Star,” more laypeople are interested in interior design and know they can do it without huge investment. “We’ve seen a lot more retail buyers come in the last couple years with ideas and inspirations they saw on a home design show or website,” she says. “It’s exciting to show first-time visitors how much fun they can have choosing styles and patterns they didn’t even know were an option.”

Like Warren, Tatosian is happy to share his extensive knowledge of how his rugs are dyed, woven, stretched and dried in far-flung locales across the world, from India and Nepal to Turkey and Pakistan. Considered one of River North’s old guard, Tatosian says he enjoys connecting with and learning from fellow designers in the RNDD.

(FROM LEFT TO RIGHT) DOUG VAN TRESS, OWNER OF THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE; BARBARA WARREN, OWNER OF THE TILE GALLERY; OSCAR TATOSIAN, OWNER OF OSCAR ISBERIAN RUGS

To succeed, any commercial district also needs the support of its own—and the RNDD finds it in businesses like trendy Asian fusion restaurant Sunda. Owner and nightlife impresario Billy Dec didn’t have to travel to the Swat Valley of Pakistan for his bold doorway. He found it just down the street at The Golden Triangle, along with his giant teak ceiling panel carved with an intricate lotus motif that hails from an ancient Burmese temple.

The Golden Triangle’s pieces come from all corners of the world. On any given day, the exotic and varied antiques might include a Chinese medicine cabinet, wall paneling stenciled with poetry from the Qing dynasty, wingless Baroque angels from 18th century Germany, or a chandelier repurposed from Parisian street lamps. But Van Tress says there is a common theme: wabi-sabi, a Japanese aesthetic that embraces imperfection. At Sunda, he notes, “The rich patina and history of these items contrasts with the sleek modern shell of the dining room.”

The crossovers between design showrooms and surrounding businesses is just one of the strengths of the RNDD. With help from the pros, visitors can leave with pieces to mimic the looks they see or to create a style entirely their own.

*Pick up the RNDD’s postcard directory and walking map at the Chicago Visitors Centers in the Historic Pumping Station and the Chicago Cultural Center or from hotel concierges.*



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