

# Eye candy at The sugar factory

1920S HYDRO STATION IS SPUN INTO SPARKLING LIVE/WORK SPACE

By Andrea Utter

Photography • David Bebee

**AFTER A DEMANDING** six-month renovation of a dilapidated industrial building in Kitchener, Gay Isber finally has a place to call home ... and office.

The 1920s former hydro substation now houses her art and jewelry design lab on the ground level and an urban, open-concept loft upstairs. The proximity of the two aspects of her life is anything but a burden: "I'm a total workaholic, so in the middle of the night I can get up and just walk downstairs to my studio. It's amazing!"

Isber opened the doors of her new studio in December and brought her staff of five high school girls with her. "They all have different talents," she says proudly. "Some are better sewers, others are better with colour, but they're all great girls."

Her new Sugar Factory is in the heart of a blossoming art district at Duke and Breithaupt streets, where other artists are also busy creating in warehouse studios and the old firehall across the street.

For Isber, the building is as much a work of art as the sparkling jewelry she creates. "I was the designer so I got to put my stamp on everything," she says. "Because I didn't use a contractor, I got to do exactly what I wanted."

Though she does have drive and can work magic with paint and jewels, Isber didn't do all the work herself.



Spruced up and landscaped, the former hydro substation on Duke Street in Kitchener is now a smart base for The Sugar Factory. The Yellow Rose of Texas sculpture climbing the corner of the building is a link to owner Gay Isber's southern roots.

"I went down to the soup kitchen on my moving day and asked some guys if they wanted to make some money," she recounts. "I fed them breakfast and lunch every day and most of them stuck with me through the whole renovation. They'll forever be connected to my building and I'll always be connected to the community."

Isber, a native Texan, says the renovation did not stray far from her original vision. "It's true to my first plan, but I let things evolve, too. Everything in this place has a story." ▶



Designer Gay Isber, shown at right in the jewelry-making area of The Sugar Factory, lit up the glass-top dinner table in her loft home (above) with three chandeliers.



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Light and colour are Gay Isber's hallmarks, and crystal chandeliers hang everywhere in her Sugar Factory.

At left: now richly covered in red velour, the round bucket chair and ottoman were someone's discard, and the formerly pink vinyl chaise lounge was a bargain-bin find. The plank-look floors are actually made from shelving. Below: "Gay's café" in her main-floor jewelry factory.

► She plotted the livestock watering trough which now serves as a soaking tub, the Yellow Rose of Texas sculpture creeping up the exterior corner of the building and the Texas state seal impression set in the concrete outside. "Everything is a nod to Texas," Isber says. "Many of my treasures are things I brought back from there because it's all the stuff that I really love."

Another passion that colours her decor is her love for the unloved. "I'm a trash girl," she says, laughing. "I get really excited about trash day. I think it's a shame that people throw things to the curb. So I take it and reinvent it."

The stainless steel dresser which became a vanity in the bathroom was a curbside find that took heavy-duty grinding and cleaning to bring out its rustic patina. The sofa, armchair and all of the 1960s dining room

swivel chairs — all garbage-day grabs.

"What I've been doing lately which is so much fun is finding a piece in the Ikea as-is section and remaking it," Isber says. A damaged Ikea kitchen island was transformed by dressing it with diamond plate steel. "They call it Ikea hacking," she chuckles. "There's a whole website about it."

Nothing in Isber's quirky building is what it seems. The wide plank flooring in the loft that looks like it's original to the building is closer to 80 days old than 80 years. "It's shelving from Rona," Isber admits. "I wanted a floor that looked like an old barn floor, but it was going to cost me \$12,000. I said, 'yeah right.'"

At \$8 a square foot, the entire second floor (save the bathroom which is tiled with old gravestone markers purchased from the ►



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A stainless steel bowl set on a refinished metal cabinet and a livestock watering trough became the basin and tub for the bathroom. The flooring is made of tiles cut from gravestone markers found at ReStore.

► local ReStore) was installed for half that price. “There are two layers of plywood, a million screws and staples and about 15 gallons of glue holding everything down — it doesn’t squeak and it kills all the noise between the two levels,” Isber says.

Though she plans to install a span of windows on the south side of the building (not to mention a third storey made entirely of glass), the only natural light on the residential level comes through six small circular panes of glass. “What are now windows were plugged up with big, huge old insulators which fed electricity to the transformer that was in the middle of the building,” she explains. “Once we got those out of there, we traced the holes and had thermal panes made to fit.”

However, they let in only a few rays of sunshine so, for a woman whose life is all about light and sparkle, there are lamps and chandeliers all over the space. “It’s an electrical building and I use tons of electricity — how apropos,” she says, laughing.

The biggest statement in the loft is the montage of overscale Swarovski crystal chandeliers hanging over the dinner table. “I needed them because if I was lying in



This crystal chandelier is whimsically dressed in Sugar Beads jewelry of many colours.

bed, I didn’t want to have to look at my dirty kitchen. And of course, how could I not have the sparkle? That’s what my business is all about.”

Downstairs, in the work area, four more chandeliers adorned with her own pretty embellishments fill the space with even more sugary grandeur.

The renovation, of course, was not all



In a creative use of a material more commonly found in industrial settings, the bathroom on the main floor also has corrugated steel covering the walls. Gay Isber saw it as a textured backdrop to reflect light filtering through the coloured beads she hung from the chandelier.

sugar and spice. “Because I was the first person in the region to convert an industrial building into this type of space, the city didn’t really know how to do it,” she says. “I had a big huge cry at city hall one day because the guy told me it would be four to six months to get my permit. It ruined my day!”

But with a little charm (Isber has tons of it) and friendly pleading, the permit arrived in 11 days. “The city was very nice to me. They called the ministry and I don’t know what they said, but I got my permit incredibly fast.”

Isber has come a long way since the week she spent pressure-washing and cleaning the building. As the interview concluded, a sign reading The Sugar Factory & Gay Isber’s Design Lab was installed and she had pride written all over her face: “Wow — this is a very exciting moment.”

The Sugar Factory & Gay Isber’s Design Lab is located at 286 Duke St. W. in Kitchener: 519-571-1885.

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# Funky style meets small-town convenience

## EXPECTING THE UNEXPECTED LURES SHOPPERS TO CONESTOGO

By Andrea Utter

**IN A VILLAGE** with just a handful of shops, a trendy home lifestyles store is creating a buzz from Kitchener to Toronto. Conestogo Mercantile has become a destination for stylish hipsters to revel in a mix of modern, retro and artistic finds.

Owners Dan and Veronika Stawski were confident when they acquired the store six years ago that shoppers would travel the 10 kilometres beyond Waterloo to see their interesting products.

"We knew if we could prove ourselves unique enough, the greater area could sustain the shop," Dan says.

After a decade of marriage, Dan, a machinist, and Veronika, a bookkeeper, took the plunge into retail.

"We had often discussed owning a store even before we were married," Dan says. "But 10 years later, we knew we needed a change and wanted more independence."

One week of location research, a phone call and a visit later, they were in business and opened Conestogo Mercantile in late 2000.

"It was very quick," Veronika says. "It was a risk, but there never really is a right time to take it. We just had to make the decision to do it."

### A BREATH OF FRESH AIR

A trip to the shop takes you from the bustle of box stores to the creaks of pine

planks under foot and exposed century-old brick walls — the ultimate in comfort shopping. "There's not that mall-frenzy feeling," Veronika says. "Our customers say, 'I can whip out here on my lunch and I'm not fighting with parking or crowds of people.' It's a more relaxed and casual feeling."

Their secret to success combines atmosphere and unusual products. "The music is fun and the merchandise is difficult to find elsewhere," Dan says.

Dan and Veronika strive for that small-town sensibility. You'll find Dan chatting and cracking jokes, getting to know the customers.

A small chalkboard at the front of the store keeps shoppers informed of what quirky business the owners are up to. This time, it tells us about Dan's visit to a Dallas gift show in search of finds to fill the shop for spring and summer.

### THE TAKEOVER

What started as a small gift shop has now filled most of the main floor of the building. "In the first year we took over the back room, and then after about a year and a half we had the other half of the building, too," Veronika says. "It's insane!"

Dan, the shopper with an eye for style, keeps finding more stuff to fill up the space. But now that they've occupied most of the building, where will they go next?



Dan and Veronika Stawski opened Conestogo Mercantile without any experience in the demanding world of retail.

Photography • Peter Lee

"We opened Jinjer, a gift store in Collingwood, in 2004," Veronika says. "It's kind of like the first two rooms of the shop here in Conestogo. Colourful, fun and funky."

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Conestogo Mercantile is located at 1857 Sawmill Road, Conestogo. Call 519-664-3293.