

DESIGN



INDUSTRY

A fully outfitted Design District

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In mid-March, LeTricia Wilbanks and Selena Mackay were ready to debut their furniture showroom that had been in the works for more than a year, but Harris County's stay-home order scuttled their plans.

The two interior designers, who teamed up to open Wilbanks Mackay in the 7800 Washington design center next to Ladco and The Shops at Ladco, kept going to work anyway, tending to residential and commercial design jobs and preparing their store for the crowd they knew would someday come.

The coronavirus pandemic has had Houston's economy on a roller-coaster ride, and Wilbanks and Mackay are just two merchants who are on it. When stores could reopen May 4, the two unlocked their front door to a showroom with brands of contemporary furniture, lighting and accessories that otherwise couldn't be found here.

The Shops at Ladco — connected to the original Ladco showroom with a bridge — opened in May 2019. Other design-showroom space next to Ladco and its Shops is now officially full, with Wilbanks Mackay and a new storefront for the Pomogranit + ADR tile and stone firm, which opened last week. Both stores



Photos by Jon Shapley / Staff photographer

Selena Mackay, left, and LeTricia Wilbanks opened their Wilbanks Mackay showroom. Top: The store's accessories wall.

are open to the public as well as trade business.

The Ladco furniture showroom owned by siblings Ronnie Ladin, Phillip Ladin and Lynn Yellen has been at the Washington location — originally an A&P supermarket distribution center — for 35 of its 52 years. Developer Larry Levine of Levcor adapted the new Shops at Ladco and the remaining design showrooms in a joint venture of Ladco, Levcor and 4M Interests.

Wilbanks Mackay and Pomogranit are now among the growing number of design-oriented businesses populating the Houston Design District on Old Katy Road that spreads from Loop 610 on its west end to

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Washington on its east side. Earlier, Frankel Building Group moved its offices next to the Shops at Ladco after already having its interior design services there.

The Houston Design Center for years has been tucked away in a shady pocket off of Old Katy Road, and other businesses have popped up around it. A red-brick building at the Loop soon will be the new home of Meredith O'Donnell Fine Furniture and her new Hickory Chair showroom. O'Donnell is closing out her store on Post Oak in Uptown Park to relocate to the Design District.

Joyce Horn Antiques and a spacious Walker Zanger showroom are on Old Katy Road as well. The Westport Business Park has a variety of tenants, including several in the design industry: Postmodern Traditions and Pride of Persia, rug stores that formerly were in the Design Center, Newberry Architecture, Kirksey Architecture, Missy Stewart Designs, J.J. Design Group, Custom Plumbing & Hardware and Skyline Art.

Contemporary aesthetic

Wilbanks and Mackay met in April 2018 at an industry marketing event when Mackay admired Wilbanks' hairdo and asked her how she did it. They connected over that topic, swapping texts and even a quick how-to video from the high-energy Wilbanks.

Several months later, Mackay was ready to hatch a plan that had been percolating and wondered if Wilbanks would join her.

"She asked me to meet her at Toulouse, and I thought it was just a let's-get-to-know-each-other cocktail hour. She literally sat down and said 'Hi, how are you? This is what I want to do, and I want to do it with you,'" Wilbanks recalled of their first real meeting.

Mackay had been doing work for Levine, who encouraged her to open her own showroom and to consider some unleased space at the Shops at Ladco. Independently, Wilbanks had been nursing a similar idea, working with a business coach on her own plan.

They're doing design work together, too, having recently finished a large commercial project and launching two large residential projects together. For their showroom, they'd been shopping European markets, looking for French fabric sources and Italian furnishings not represented in Houston.

Some of Martyn Lawrence Bullard's contemporary lighting collection for Hudson Valley Lighting hangs from the tall ceilings, including a cluster of huge gold rings that glow with light over a seating vignette and oversized pendants of opaque glass surrounded by a ring of vintage brass over a dining-table vignette.

Not all of their 2,400-square-foot showroom's furnishings are imports. Some are designed by Wilbanks and Mackay themselves, and others are American made but upholstered in French fabric.

Londonart wallcoverings make an appearance, too, in a huge mural of a big-city skyline in the main showroom and another they call "The Queen" that covers a wall in a conference/workroom.

New collections

The Ladins and Yellen are busy with their own changes. The Shops at Ladco brings four new elements to their lineup: a luxury outdoor-furniture collection, rug collection and 3,200-square-foot dedicated spaces for transitional collections from American-made Baker Furniture and Century Furniture.

Both said demand for transitional and more contemporary styles has been on an upswing, first as Hurricane Harvey victims replaced furniture and now as people stuck at home want to upgrade furniture they're tired of.

"We reopened May 4, and I guess there was a lot of pent-up demand because May (sales were) off the charts. June has slowed down a little bit but has still been very good," Ronnie Ladin said.

"We think a lot of vacation dollars have been reallocated into home furnishings," Phillip Ladin added. "Maybe people staying at home have said, 'It's time to change that ugly brown sofa.'"

Another big space is devoted to high-end outdoor-furniture brands – including EGO Paris, Varaschin Outdoor Therapy from Italy, Point 100 from Spain and Royal Botania out of Belgium – a



Photos by Jon Shapley / Staff photographer

The Shops at Ladco has a 3,200-square-foot space for some of Baker Furniture's transitional collection.



Wilbanks Mackay sells Martyn Lawrence Bullard's lighting collection for Hudson Valley Lighting.



Pomogranit + ADR has tile and dozens of stone slabs in its new shop.



Jay and Yen Sethia, left, and Sho Sarker are managing partners at Pomogranit + ADR, which has opened a storefront at 7800 Washington.



Ladco owners and siblings Phillip Ladin, from left, Lynn Yellen and Ronnie Ladin have had their furniture showroom in what was once an A&P distribution center for 35 years.

growing sector of the furniture market.

In the rug room, where there are 850 samples on wall displays and another 300 full-size rugs, Ronnie Ladin brushed his hand across a soft rug made of 100 percent Sunbrella yarn but hardly resembles what anyone would think of as an outdoor rug.

"In October, we'll have broadloom carpet that's 100 percent Sunbrella. Just think about the uses for that, both residential and commercial, public spaces and super-high-traffic areas in office buildings," Ladin said.

Stone showroom

Hempstead Road is known as an area with a number of stone-slab yards, where designers and contractors take clients to choose materials for kitchens and bathrooms. Pomogranit Stone was one of them and its three managing partners, Jay and Yen Sethia with Sho Sarker, acquired the Architectural Design Resources tile firm.

Now called Pomogranit + ADR, the firm wanted to add an in-town showroom that would dazzle both the general public and their trade clients. It's between Ladco and the Wilbanks Mackay showrooms.

Inside the front door, a stairwell encased in slabs of exquisite Calacatta Macchia Vecchia, gleaming white marble filled with

dramatic gray and gold veining, makes a major style statement. To show how stone can be used beyond counters, they created a small kitchen in which counters and cabinets alike are covered in the same luxurious stone.

In the back is a warehouselike space with dozens of 4-foot-by-8-foot slabs of marble, granite and quartzite. Niches with roomy worktables are filled with racks of artisanal porcelain tile, some of which is exclusively sold here.

Infrastructure issues

Stores aren't the only things new to the Houston Design District. Denzil Hollingsworth, who formerly worked for the Design Center, now works full time for the Design District, promoting the area and working on infrastructure issues such as drainage, lighting and even working to get covered bus stops.

The district itself formed a few years ago, but Hollingsworth and others have gotten more serious, addressing areas that flood and adding lighting to intersections where it could be dangerous to enter the road after dark.

A canceled spring event – Design in Bloom – has been rescheduled for mid-September as part of a larger event to promote the Design District. That event will bring in top names in the industry, interior design and architecture, including interior designer Ray Booth, architect Bobby McAlpine, landscape architect Keith Williams, floral designer Laura Dowling and Flower magazine editor-in-chief Margot Shaw. (Access Design, an event co-sponsored by the Houston Chronicle and the Design Center, will also be part of that fall event.)

Hollingsworth and his team have set up a Facebook page and are working on a new website for the district. He added that there could be redevelopment in the future, using the Somerset Green gated community as an example.

"Look at Somerset Green – it made a huge impact. They bought property that was nothing and turned it into a beautiful place to live and very accessible to downtown," Hollingsworth said. "Our promotion is live-work-play. That's what we want to see in the district: a great place to live, a great place to work, and a great place to play. We're headed in that direction."

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