



BUSINESS + SERVICES

Q+A: BLACKBARN SHOP

BLACKBARN Shop is a home emporium of distinctive, sophisticated design finds from all over the world. The stunning 3,000 square foot space has the charm of a cabinet of curiosities, with the elegance of a high design experience. We sat down with Mark and Kristen Zeff, owners of BLACKBARN Shop, and asked them about their business and how they like DUMBO.



Tell Us About BLACKBARN Shop, the space, and why you chose Brooklyn

Mark: While we were living in Brooklyn, we started to notice that there was a shortage of home stores outside of Williamsburg. Kristin and I travel quite a lot and when we travel we see, discover, and find things things that we cannot find here, and as a lifestyle we love to collect. We decided, because of this lack of home stores in this part of Brooklyn, to look for a space and open a store.

Kristen: We did look into other locations in Brooklyn that were not in DUMBO and then Mark came and saw this place and everything just kind of fit together. We thought it was just an architecturally interesting space, back there we have a room with a 50 foot tall ceiling and a giant skylight—you just don't find spaces like this. As soon as he saw it we were just really excited, and thought we could forget all the other places we looked at because this just felt right for us too.

Mark: We wanted a store that was very special in that it wasn't your normal home store, where you would go and buy plates and glasses and things like that. We will eventually get there but we wanted to start with aspirational stuff: we have found objects, we have customized furniture, and customized objects, like a candle collection.

Kristen: We've had a lot of repeat customers. We've had a lot of people come from across the street, and they bring their dogs and their children. So it has been fun getting to know people. We opened in late July and then you have August and a lot of people are on holiday and people are traveling, but now I've noticed a big uptick in people coming in.

Mark: Today I was at a meeting at West Elm, and I noticed how much busier it is over in that part of the neighborhood compared to where we are here. I think that with these new buildings coming up across the street there is going to be more retail and I think that this corner will build up and our focus is to make this be neighborhood-ish in terms of appeal and slowly but surely the people in the area will learn about us and we will become known.

Kristen: Another thing we are trying to do is find designers as well because they are buying for clients all the time.

Mark: The other thing that we also have is this office that you are sitting in. I've been in the design business for what seems like a 100 years [Kristen: Close!] And the idea is that somebody comes to our store, they sit on our sofa, and they love it and they decide they want it—but their apartment needs a bigger one or smaller one, so we do customizations for them. We also built a kitchen [in our store] so that way they can decide if they want a kitchen, or if they are building an apartment and they need a kitchen, it can become an incubator from an interior design aspect, not just retail/buying stuff. So the store has two heads, one that says "I'm a retailer, buy my stuff" and the other says "I'm a generator/incubator for custom work."



How Has Being in DUMBO helped your business?

Kristen: So Mark originally moved to West Chelsea 18 years ago and there was nothing going on in West Chelsea at the time and this neighborhood has the vibe and energy and a lot of young people here. We love the creative energy of DUMBO and it is a beautiful location

Mark: I can answer the question in two ways. How has it helped my business? It helps my business in that I'm not having to pay huge retail rents that I would have to pay in Manhattan. In fact, I don't even think I'd be able to find a space this big in an area that I would want to be in, that would be affordable. The only huge spaces available are in the new building in Midtown that are going up today and tomorrow or a big warehouse space in SoHo and quite frankly the rents in those areas are unaffordable. The bottom line is that we want to transfer value to the buyer. If we have to pay higher rents, what would normally cost \$3,000 here would cost \$12,000 there. Then it becomes unattainable and not liable. That's how being out here helps me. This gives us time to grow the business without a huge outlay of cash and gives us time to do the things we want like develop product, develop ideas, and relationships. I don't think there would be an organization like the one you are representing coming to talk to talk to us if we were in midtown. So it's just all about community and it's all about being a part of DUMBO. So that's how I think it helps us. It's a good story and it's real and authentic and I think that Brooklyn and especially DUMBO has a very interesting vibe about it. To me it feels very cosmopolitan and very metropolitan. It doesn't feel like I'm in the suburbs with little houses or townhouses one after another. It just has a sense of, I don't know, it's just cool and that helps the brand.

Kristen: We have had so many people from the neighborhood that own their own businesses stop by and introduce themselves and everyone has been friendly in a different way than you get in Manhattan. There is definitely a close knit type of community feeling in the neighborhood, and everyone kind of knows everyone too. Which is interesting, you know I talk to the guy who owns the store down there and he'll be like do you know so and so who has the store over here and it's just a really interesting community.

Mark: In fact, today, one of the guys who work here [in DUMBO] said that he wanted to show us this little store, and it's this Japanese little store in the basement, down below the street level. He has been for a while and he has grown his business and people know it and that is the way we want to grow our business. Yes we are not on a busy corner, yes we are across the street from a fancy building and we have challenges but that's part of the give and take.



What are your favorite spots in DUMBO?

Mark: I like Brooklyn Roasting. I think that's a very interesting place. I like that section where you are underneath the bridges. And the archway.

Kristen: I like Foragers. I think everyone loves Foragers. There is always a massive line there.

Mark: I like [Empire Stores], the building that West Elm has developed. They have done a beautiful job. Not to be nondescript. I like the way it is laid out. It feels 17th century. It's not so grid-y, there's some roads that don't make sense. It feel like London to me or Lower Manhattan. I love the cobblestone streets I hope they never get rid of them.

Kristen: I like [Trunk], the little clothing store on Front St. They have a bunch of Australian clothing designers. I'm the one who walks around everywhere and I go in all the shops.
Mark: It's been fantastic. We no longer live in Brooklyn—we moved back to Manhattan, but the commute has been great and I was just thinking how lucky we are that my kids' school is on the F train line, we live close to the F train. It's just been great. And I thought it would be a problem to get my Manhattan clients to come here but people just love to come here, and the commute is not that bad and if you take a car at the right time it's 15 mins from most of downtown manhattan and we haven't had one bad vibe. It's been great.

Portrait of Mark and Kristen Credits: Gianni Franchellucci

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