

Ste Marie Builds a Whole New Scene

The world-building design studio by Craig Stanghetta doesn't have time for empty aesthetics.

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Design wasn't in the original script for Craig Stanghetta. Before founding Ste Marie, the studio behind some of Canada's most captivating hospitality spaces, he was an actor with a modicum of success—until the existential crises began. “You'd be sitting in your trailer and waiting to go and say your three lines of sci-fi dialogue with a pair of platform boots on and a prosthetic ear,” he said during a talk earlier this year at Toronto's annual Interior Design Show. “And I was like, ‘What the fuck am I doing here?’”

Perhaps acting wasn't Stanghetta's calling. But his dream to create something theatrical yet tangible—experiences that might shape everyday life in a lasting way—was one he couldn't shake. That reckoning sent the wannabe actor down a path of design, where his self-taught aesthetic led to atmospheric spaces (especially those that are defining Vancouver's current restaurant scene like Kissa Tanto, Botanist, and his latest hit, Meo) that are all building blocks in his studio's universe.

Fifteen years on, Ste Marie now has 50 staff members and is rapidly expanding its footprint. Projects ranging from a 40,000-square-foot home in Los Angeles to experiential storefronts in Chicago and Boston and luxury concepts for trains and airports are currently in the works or on the horizon. And it all stems from Stanghetta's fascination with world-building.

Growing up in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario (he named the studio after his hometown), the now 46-year-old jokes that when he was around 10, his mom wouldn't be surprised to come home and discover he'd rearranged the furniture in the living room. He had a natural curiosity for art, spending his teenage years watching David Lynch films, poring over old design books and issues of *Architectural Digest*, and even building furniture. Theatre became Stanghetta's preferred creative outlet, leading him to Toronto's York University to study fine arts in the acting conservatory program before landing roles like Bartender, Joey “The Boss,” and Guy in Toque in Vancouver productions and, eventually, a larger role playing the leader of the rebel resistance on a sci-fi show called *Flash Gordon*. But even with his Hollywood star on the rise, he describes this stretch as a deeply unfulfilling period.

So Stanghetta took a risk. He rented a studio. He started to make things. He tore apart the Vancouver loft where he lived and rebuilt it. “And then slowly but surely, I started to convince some people to take a chance on me and give me my first job,” he says. His first professional foray came in 2010, when he was given the opportunity to design Bao Bei, the revolutionary Chinese brasserie that remains a pillar of Vancouver's hospitality scene.



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The project came by way of a friend, Tannis Ling, who’d visited his redesigned loft for a party. She had grown up eating in local Chinatown restaurants—full of formative memories where family gathered for special occasions—but felt that, atmospherically, the brightly lit spaces didn’t always enhance the experience. Encouraged by the personal connection, Stanghetta leaned into Ling’s own story, which took her to places like France, England, and Taiwan, collecting keepsakes and memories along the way. “She had this rabbit trail of things that were leading to what her ideal space could be,” he recalls. The result was a nostalgic yet modern Chinese brasserie. Gone were the bright lights, and in came pendants and sconces with a dim glow. Texture arrived through drop ceilings with antique corbels, hand-painted murals, and mismatched chairs—the space felt as if it had existed in Vancouver’s fabric for years. Bao Bei was an extension of Ling’s own experiences with items she had collected, including a Chinese porcelain figure she’d dug out of a Salvation Army bin. Stanghetta refers to items like this as talismans, crucial elements that crack open the door to a new concept rooted in memory, raw material for world-building. “That became the anchor to our process and methodology and style,” he says.

A host of Vancouver hospitality projects followed: Meat & Bread, Revolver Coffee, Ask for Luigi, Farina a Legna. Stanghetta’s penchant for storytelling quickly became his

forte, and he would cull insights from conversations with chefs and owners where he found clues and cues (whether physical objects they’d collected or a memory that resonated on an emotional level) to draw out north stars for each project, something instinctual that grounded each space in something genuine.

That philosophy remains the backbone of Ste Marie. Its designs don’t just hold meaning, they harness it. If a space doesn’t tap into something emotional, it’s not on brand, because even a space full of pretty things can feel empty. Instead, Stanghetta’s design process aims to unlock something true about a concept, even if you don’t immediately get the references.

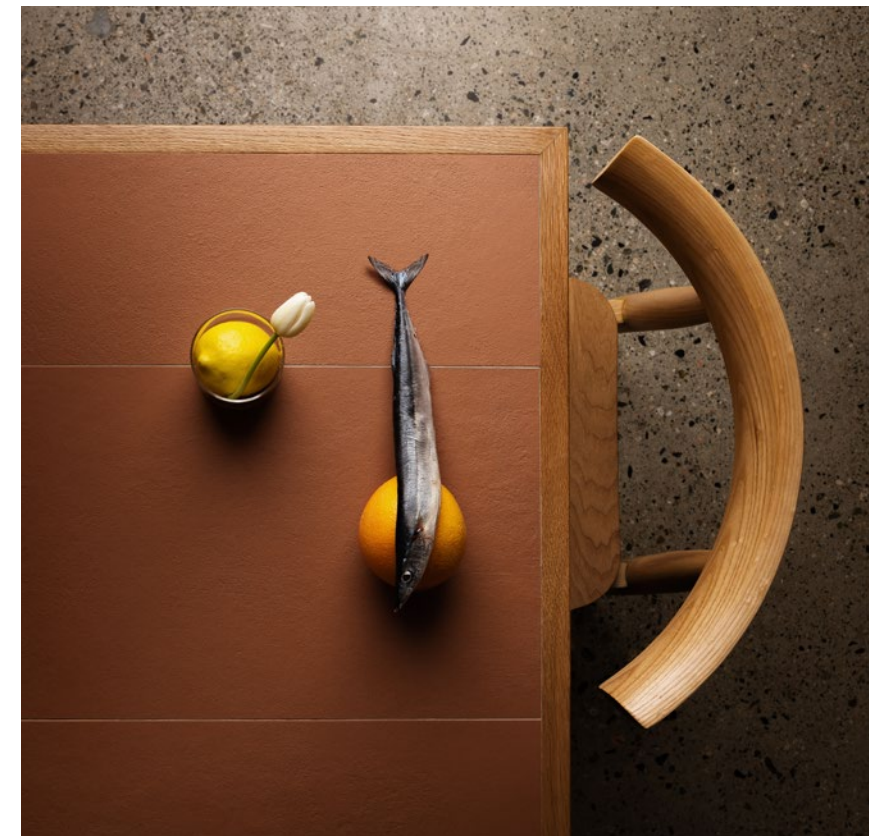
It’s hard to miss throughout Vancouver, where Ste Marie has dreamed up plenty of memory-laden and mood-driven spaces. In Railtown’s Ask for Luigi, Stanghetta dove deep into cinematic and cultural references, peppering in details that reveal themselves slowly from film (the drama *Un borghese piccolo piccolo*) to books (Bruno Munari’s *Speak Italian: The Fine Art of the Gesture*) and even a song (“Prisencolinensinainciusol”). But it was also a personal take, inspired by Italian immigrant homes (Sault Ste. Marie has a rich history of Italian immigrants), with unpretentious materials like wood panelling and intentionally tight layouts that recall cramped *nonna*-style kitchens. Like going over to a friend’s house, it’s nostalgic and authentic. Taking a slightly different approach at Flourist, a bakery and mill in East Vancouver, Ste Marie has channelled the 18th-century Shaker movement to create a warm space that feels like standing in a field of wheat. A muted palette of colours and wood, replete with clean-lined furniture, built-in accents, and a few hand-picked antiques, feels both contemporary and classic, whisking visitors into a sun-washed atmosphere, a respite from Vancouver’s moody weather.

Culinary concepts steal the spotlight in Ste Marie’s portfolio, especially as restaurant designs occupied the bulk of its early years. But its work is much more varied, and its narrative approach has led to projects as diverse as a resort-inspired rental project in Los Angeles and wellness spaces throughout Canada.

In Tofino, Ste Marie tapped into the deep-rooted local surf culture for Hotel Zed, broadening its portfolio to new areas of hospitality. Channelling 1970s nostalgia, the project included a restaurant, a rumpus room-style event space, and a special family suite, all of which Stanghetta injected with nostalgic touches pulled from childhood memories: tiled floors with large-scale daisy motifs along with trippy, wavy textiles across playful decor. Switching coasts, and spurred by Ste Marie’s office in the city, wellness aesthetics found new meaning in the studio’s latest project in Toronto, for the luggage brand Monos, where dreamy multisensory interiors (complete with an olive tree and a central water feature illuminated by a calming lightbox) are more akin to a spa than a storefront. Ste Marie has indeed given wellness a refresh as the firm was pegged to design the inaugural Reformd, said to be the world’s largest-capacity Lagree studio, a fitness concept by Toronto’s Sweat



Craig Stanghetta (left) has reshaped the tone of Vancouver’s dining scene. Through Ste Marie Studio, he’s created some of the city’s most memorable restaurant interiors, including Caffè La Tana (above) and Meo (opening page).



The Ste Marie aesthetic is where set design meets strategy and interiors like Kissa Tanto (left) and Como Taperia (above) feel like immersive film scenes.

and Tonic brand that is located in the city's ambitious multi-purpose Well development.

Ste Marie is now choosy about its clientele. In the beginning, Stanghetta had to convince new clients to trust him, relying on his work ethic and determination to prove his chops. But now, with an accomplished track record under his belt, the reverse is true. Stanghetta isn't just looking for clients with deep pockets. He needs to trust that they have a clear vision and deep curiosity for the "intrepid" design process and believe they're willing to go the distance.

"We're trying to find a sense of commitment and courage," he says of his collaborative approach. "Because inevitably you'll get to this tricky crossroads where you can do something singular and interesting, but it requires to feel like you're outside of your comfort zone, and that's exactly where we all want to be working." Stanghetta likens the experience to forming a band—you wouldn't write and record a song with just anyone—as he seeks clients he respects and who bring complementary yet contrasting abilities to the table.

That's true of his own team, which expanded with a Toronto office a few years ago. He credits much of Ste Marie's recent success to the diverse talent he's assembled. "We have people that are obviously trained in interiors," he says of his multidisciplinary team. "But then we have people that come from a background in property technology and research and law." Signalling something of a shift, Stanghetta brought on Lindsay Butters as chief operating officer and principal three years ago, leveraging her experience with brands like Lululemon and Burberry, which gave her a sharp understanding of the luxury market, to push Ste Marie's boundaries with large-scale projects across the border.

From retail to workspaces, Ste Marie has plenty more in the works in the United States. Having broken ground years ago with a restaurant in Austin, Stanghetta will extend the studio's concept from Toronto's Monos, with new experiential locations for the brand in Boston and Chicago. The latter is where the bulk of the new projects will take shape, ranging from a hotel in the West Loop to an updated workplace—plus their specialty, a coffee and wine bar.

Stanghetta's world-building may sound a bit romantic, but one of his strengths is understanding that commercial spaces need to create value and make money. Part of this commitment to staying power emerges from co-owning several Vancouver restaurants with restaurateur Paul Grunberg. From Savio Volpe to Pepino's Spaghetti House and Caffè La Tana, the added sense of responsibility seeps into Stanghetta's work for other establishments.

In turn, Ste Marie does not design spaces that burn bright when they open simply to fizzle out within a few years. The team considers how the story fits into programming, how it can evolve, and in the long run, how it will live. The studio's level of investment in each project is so strong that Stanghetta envisions a world in which Ste Marie partners with businesses more often, having a stake in the project beyond design.

As creative director, Stanghetta remains focused on the big picture. "I'm personally interested in ensuring that we're doing something that is remarkable, that we all want to be working on, that we're like, 'Oh, this is a thrilling idea, and it's going to be something we want see come to life,'" he says. And with a growing team and an ever-expanding universe, Ste Marie Studio is something of an unstoppable force. Its story is just getting started. ●