



THE NEW

Yowie founder SHANNON MALDONADO
may be the hippest person in Philly.

QUEEN OF *SOUTH STREET*

So why is she setting the anchor of her design empire
on one of the city's most unfashionable blocks?

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“I’m probably going to get rid of that bar cart by the end of the day.”

Shannon Maldonado waves at the minimalist dark green cart in the corner of Yowie, the buzzy 250-square-foot shop and design studio she runs on 4th Street in Queen Village. I’m a little surprised, because it’s a cool piece, something any modern-design buff would want to own. Or, at the very least, it’s an inoffensively utilitarian way for Maldonado to display some of the non-alcoholic cocktails she’s selling.

But she isn’t feeling it for the space anymore—and anyway, she tells me, both the stock and store layout are always changing. She’s not married to any object in the place.

Maldonado opened her eclectic shop five years ago, after starting online with ShopYowie.com in 2016. The space recalls an art gallery, with clean white walls, a white ceiling and even a white floor. It all serves to make each neon yellow bottle of kombucha vinegar, cobalt blue enamel coffee mug, and magenta-and-orange-striped cotton bath towel pop. These objects are a seemingly incongruent collection of things that when the shop first opened delighted or baffled the neighborhood, depending on who was looking.

Yowie’s stock consists of anything that inspires the trained fashion designer turned interior designer turned de facto tastemaker and, let’s face it—influencer. She hates that last word, but it’s the most basic definition of what she’s doing: guiding the tastes of more than 50,000 Instagram followers. Not just so they’ll snap up custom color-soaked sweatpants and

limited-edition ceramics collaborations, but so they’ll be a part of the Yowie lifestyle. So they can exist in an arena with fellow design obsessives, and tap through a curated Instagram story of stuff that inspired Maldonado when she was a high-school kid taping French magazine tear sheets to the walls of her South Philly bedroom, when she studied fashion design at FIT in New York, when she worked as an assistant designer at Tommy Hilfiger and American Eagle, when she made the move back to Philadelphia to pursue her dream of starting her own brand.

“Yowie” is the Australian name for Bigfoot, and Maldonado says that though she chose the name because of the positive-sounding inflection (you can’t really say the word and sound like a downer), she realized later that it’s also symbolic of the brand. “We are Bigfoot,” she tells me. “For decades, people have been trying to track him down. He leaves a footprint; it’s a mystery. He can’t be caught. He’s always moving, and that’s us! We’re always moving.”

After five years, Yowie is moving. The

brand is busting out of this jewel box of a space to become what Maldonado’s team refers to as “Yowie 2.0,” on the corner of South Street and American Street. Maldonado, who’s 38, came of age on this stretch of South—hanging out with friends, shopping at Agent Aloha and Sub Zero, buying back-to-school sneakers at Samsun Footwear, getting a bad haircut at the now-shuttered Chop Shop, eating cheese fries at Ishkabibble’s. Now, decades later, she’s returning to expand Yowie’s footprint with a 9,500-square-foot space that will soon be home to a boutique hotel, a cafe and a bigger shop. In the process, she just might transform this historically lagging stretch of South Street into a design destination.

When she meets me at the new building, Maldonado is wearing a simple monochromatic ensemble—all black, including Nike Rifts. It’s a clean antithesis to the elaborate looks she used to self-style as a kid.

The building is located near Bridget Foy’s, a Bank of America ATM, and smoking shop Munchies Reloaded—in between Magic Gardens and the tourist-saturated waterfront.

Now, the future home of Yowie is a dingy hollowed-out shell that used to house

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the Plumer & Associates real estate company and the law offices of its sub-tenants. Back in 1965, Maldonado’s grandmother closed on the family house in this building.

It requires a sharp, prescient vision to see any potential here. But Maldonado sees it. She leads me on a tour that feels a little like walking through an M.C. Escher sketch—staircases go up and halfway down and then up again. I’m looking at popcorn ceilings and threadbare wall-to-wall carpet, but she’s seeing something else. With a lavender-painted fingernail, she’s pointing to the wall where huge wooden curio shelves will hang, and the ADA-compliant hotel room on the first floor that will double as a photo studio when it’s not booked. She’s thinking about

color swatches and paint samples and where the light fixtures will hang.

She believes in this vision—she sold her house to put money into buying the building, joining business partners Everett and Valerie Abitbol and Bill Vessel. The stake she’s planting on South Street feels like a full-circle moment, just a handful of blocks from where she grew up in Pennsport. But by other measures, she’s traveled far to get here.

Maldonado’s parents—Marcel, known as “Marcy,” and Juan—were young when she was born. She spent a lot of time with her grandmother when she was a kid and has fond memories of what they did together, like walking to Dickinson Square Park to eat the community free lunch. Her

grandmother died when Maldonado was six, and her death marked a shift in life—it was time to grow up. However fraught it was to navigate her parents’ eventual divorce and grieve for her grandmother, Maldonado says, one constant was unwavering support from Marcy and Juan for all her creative endeavors.

Marcy is a sewing whiz, making outfits for holidays like Christmas and Easter. “I’ve never worn a store-bought Halloween costume, and neither have my siblings,” her daughter says. The family still dons themed group costumes every year, with Marcy as creative director. When I meet her at the Milk + Sugar bakeshop she just opened with Maldonado’s sister Brittany, Marcy recites years of those themes, from Alice in Wonderland to the Avengers.

She taught Maldonado to sew when she was 10, which feels like the starting point for everything that came after—the color-blocked felt pouches Maldonado sold to classmates when she was in fourth grade, and a fashion show—featuring her friends modeling looks like low-cut shantung pants and a sleeveless turquoise linen shirt sparkling with hand-sewn Swarovski crystals—that Marcy helped her stage when she was in high school. That led to



Left: Shannon Maldonado wears the YOWIE Everyday hoodie in Mr. Blue Sky; above: The future home of Yowie.



Maldonado's decision to pursue fashion design in college, long before she'd eventually return to Philadelphia, to her old neighborhood, to take a brand she'd created and bring it to life, first through pop-up shops and then with the 4th Street storefront.

"I've shopped that block my whole life," she says. "I've been going to Fabric Row with my mom since I was a kid."

Childhood trips to Fabric Row weren't the only clue Maldonado was a budding creative from the jump. But that wasn't a way people described themselves back then, she says: "Everyone did not think that was the coolest thing. I just felt very isolated."

She was an early adopter of eBay, scooping up used art books, an original German *Jesus Christ Superstar* movie poster, and vintage *i-D*, *L'Uomo Vogue* and *The Face* magazines, slicing out the high-fashion pages to wallpaper her bedroom. Her list of inspirations looked like a roster of New York Fashion Week shows: Raf Simons, Isaac Mizrahi, Todd Oldham, Hussein Chalayan. One of her biggest influences

was Alexander McQueen. Watching old YouTube videos of the late British designer recently, Maldonado says, she could remember how she felt when she saw the shows for the first time: "Clothes can be this big. He put on performances."

Besides the visual inspiration, the magazine pages cocooning her room were a symbol of her ambition, a larger-than-life mood board she would actualize into reality. "It was escapism," she says. "I would think, 'Oh my God, what if I lived or worked in Europe?'"

Instead of Europe, she landed in New York. After high school, Maldonado enrolled in college at FIT. On their tour of the school,

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↑ An eclectic mix of books and home goods inside Yowie's current Queen Village shop

Marcy reports, she noticed that a version of every student project hanging on the walls was already in her daughter's high-school portfolio—a sure sign, they both thought, that she was destined to be there.

About a week after she moved into student housing, though, the 9/11 attacks shook the world and tore into her college experience. After her first year, Maldonado moved back to Philly and rode the train to New York several days a week for classes. Her mom and aunts took turns driving her to 30th Street Station before sunrise.

"Her drive, her determination—I knew that at the end of this, it was going to all be worth it," says Marcy. "So just that was enough for me to get up in the morning. It was easy."

At FIT, Maldonado chose the children's-wear path, falling in with a small group of women who were as motivated as she was. They would listen to Gavin DeGraw while they stayed up all night to finish sewing their assignments.

"Everything for her is like a passion project," former classmate Nadia Lachance says. "I don't think she's trying to climb some status. It's not purely financial. She does it out of passion." (Lachance, who works as a brand creative producer, mentions that in a meeting not long ago, her company's employees were tasked with sharing their recent sources of inspiration. One of her team members named Yowie.)

In college, Maldonado interned at Tommy Hilfiger and won a contest that resulted in her first job with the brand by designing an imitation collection that the iconic designer himself picked for the prize. She eventually moved on to Ralph Lauren, where, she says, she learned what a heritage mega-brand looked like from the inside.

She joined American Eagle in 2007 just as it was kicking off a new children's-wear label called 77Kids, working in a kind of start-up within the global retailer corporation. It was the best job she'd ever had; after growing up in South Philly and seldom venturing much farther away than Center City, she soon found herself traveling to France.

"I was losing my freaking mind," she says of realizing that after just months in the job, she'd be going to Paris. "I will never take for granted that I was flown to foreign countries to shop for inspiration."

At American Eagle, Maldonado saw 77Kids from infancy to, eventually, death, when the brand that she calls "almost too cool before its time" was shuttered. Absorbed into AE, she designed denim and outerwear that she still spots in the wild: "I walk down the street, and every day I see somebody wearing my shit."

Anna Hughes, the design director at American Eagle who hired Maldonado, says she came into the job energized and didn't slow down: "Her brain never stopped being creative." She remembers her always focusing on the details, like the time she designed the miniature pocket stitch on the kids' denim to mimic AE's

adult jeans. "She was never really pencils-down," Hughes recalls. "She was always evolving things, making them better."

In 2016, Maldonado left her job at American Eagle; she says she wasn't being challenged creatively. By then, the seed for Yowie had been planted. When Maldonado talked to friends back in Philly, they couldn't name local stores where they shopped. She saw a hole in the market here—a hole that didn't exist in New York, where some storefront rents were \$10,000 a month.

But beyond the rent, she also wouldn't be doing what she wanted to in New York. "I just felt possibility here that I didn't feel there," she says. "I'm glad I lived in New York, because I think it really honed my confidence and creativity and worldview. But I wanted to bring that back to Philly. We can have cool shit here."

Cool shit came, at first, in the form of Yowie pop-ups. Maldonado got the idea from working in denim, where jeans are tested with mini drops in stores to get a read on which washes sell. "I think that stuck with me a little bit—testing things in small ways," she says, "and then making them bigger."

The beauty of the pop-ups was that she could see and hear firsthand what was working—what customers responded to and what they didn't care for. "I'm picking certain things based on weird shit I love," Maldonado explains. "Hopefully, people love it, too, but probably not." The pop-ups helped her to course-correct, to tweak her ideas. And, maybe more importantly, they helped Yowie find its people.

At the time, Instagram was relatively new, and Yowie didn't have the tens of thousands of followers it has now. Maldonado got scrappy, contacting a hundred people she found on the platform, popping into their DMs with notes like, "I see you follow this gallery, here's a party I'm throwing next week." She laughs—a light, uplifting peal—at her own audacity. Or maybe she's laughing because it worked: People showed up, and they just kept showing up.

The pop-ups eventually evolved into the brick-and-mortar on 4th Street, blocks from the shops where she'd bought colorful zippers for her hand-sewn pouches and Swarovski crystals by the pound for her fashion show. The brand she'd been visualizing for years was finally here. Customers came. Some didn't understand the name.

But like all great brands, it would become bigger than the founder, says her friend and Queen Village neighbor Robert Perry, founder of Tattooed Mom. "I think that's part of why it's got this weird 'I'm not quite sure what it is' name," he tells me. "Because you can kind of insert yourself into what it is. You can be Yowie. It doesn't mean you have to buy stuff in there to be Yowie, but it means you're in on the fun pop-culture reference. You're in on supporting small businesses, small-business founders, small creators and makers."

For her part, Maldonado has always been at peace with other people's confusion over the name. "I'd rather stand out than be boring or be something you can easily figure out," she says. "I think that's the funny thing about Yowie. It's like people really want to figure us out. It really bugs them that they can't sometimes, and I love that."

One of the facets that differentiate Yowie is Maldonado's focus on collaborating with artists. They're people whose work she admires, and they haven't always been the most obvious choices. Ceramist Domenic Frunzi remembers being surprised when she first reached out to him. He was just starting to focus on art full-time and hadn't really put himself out there yet. Their first collaboration was on a plate she asked him to make for a Yowie dinner. (Yes, she's organized dinners, too.) Since then, they've worked together on dozens of projects, and she sells his pieces in the shop.

He says he likes that Yowie is more than a retail store—that Maldonado has woven it into the community by hosting events and pop-ups, including the dinner for which he originally made those plates: "She's constantly thinking about, 'How do I make Yowie a holistic experience and not just a place where you go buy something to put on your shelves?'"

When it comes to ceramics, Maldonado's vision was molded by a Watershed residency in Maine; she enrolled in a 14-day workshop there to learn how to shape clay firsthand. "She put herself in a potter's shoes," Frunzi says, which allowed her to better understand the process and thus better learn what she wants from ceramic artists—to know what's possible and what's not.

Maldonado recalls the two-week workshop less sanguinely: "That was a really fucking humbling experience. I cried the first three days. I was

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so overwhelmed by what I didn't know." But then she let go and "made stuff and destroyed it" and learned that nothing is precious. Her getting rid of that bar cart on a whim is starting to make more sense.

While she was delving into ceramics-making and running Yowie, Maldonado started to stretch her creative muscles in other ways. In 2017, she met business partner Everett Abitbol when he bought a ceramic Air Jordan 11 she was selling as part of a pop-up. Abitbol's mom lived nearby, and after their initial encounter, he popped into the shop a few times, always finding something he was compelled to buy, like wrapping paper emblazoned with extended middle fingers.

Maldonado became friends with Abitbol, a onetime taxi-fleet owner, and his wife, Valerie, and when the couple eventually set out to open a hotel, they asked her to design the interior. The property, a former First African Baptist Church on Christian Street, was on the historic register but needed a gut renovation. "We had this moment where we both looked at each other," Abitbol says, "and she said, 'I've never done something like this before.' And I said, 'Yeah, me neither.'"

There was no pause, though, Abitbol recalls: "She was just being up-front with me. She also told me that there's nobody who would work harder or care more about this project."

In 2019, they opened the Deacon as an invisible-service hotel—a cross between a traditional hotel and an Airbnb, with some amenities but no front desk. It also served as a community space in which to hold events like cannabis dinners and classes on how to make challah or leather key fobs. Maldonado's design—Danish furniture, a teal accent wall, the ceramic Air Jordan that started it all—was splashed on websites of magazines including *Dwell* and *Architectural Digest*.

After the Deacon, Maldonado was hired to design Ethel's Club, a social club for people of color in New York City. Yowie was humming along. She was continuing to sell things she loved and work with makers who inspired her. The pandemic crashed into 2020, but so did a wave of support for Black Lives Matter following the murder of George Floyd. Suddenly, Yowie was on every list of local Black-owned shops to support.

"There was just this crazy momentum building behind us," Maldonado says. She

launched a campaign on IFundWomen.com to build out the future of Yowie and create a new, bigger space—and raised more than \$77,000. "People I hadn't talked to in, like, two decades donated hundreds of dollars to this campaign," she remembers. "I cried every day that month."

The Deacon Group, including Maldonado, set its sights on South Street. It's a stretch of street that saw its heyday decades ago. Though it was a shopping corridor for years, today some storefronts sit vacant, and the open ones are a bit of a motley mix. (Its atrophy is complicated, but mostly, blame a proposed highway that never came to fruition but prompted stores to close anyway and an out-of-town developer who kept many of the 40-some buildings he owned unoccupied for years.) People ask Maldonado why she's not putting the project somewhere more central or cooler, like Rittenhouse or Fishtown, but nothing else felt right. "For me, it's an iconic street," she says as we're walking through the doors of what she's calling Yowie Townhouse. "I'm so excited and proud to be like, 'No, I believe in South Street; I'm putting a multimillion-dollar project on South Street, and I know it's gonna be awesome.'"

We wind our way upstairs, to the front room that overlooks both South and American streets, with a pretty view of the tree-tops. She's looking around this room, seeing not what's there, but what could be.

Just half a block away from here, close to three decades earlier, her family stood against the wall at 2nd and South to have their hand-crafted ensembles judged in the annual South Street Easter Parade. Now, Maldonado is reflecting on how wild it is to be contributing to something that has the potential to jump-start a monumental shift.

"I know we're going to be an anchor on South Street," she says. "In a street that's in such disarray, with so many opposing forces, I know that we're going to be a positive force."

Tattooed Mom founder Robert Perry agrees, noting that South Street has been a lot of things to a lot of Philadelphians over the years. For many people, it's been a place to discover your creative self, he tells me: "I think this is a space where Shannon came of age creatively, in some ways. You can see the vibrancy of the way people dress and the different types of shops. That South Street clicked with her in some profound way."

That process, he says, is something he's seen over and over from his bar on South between 5th and 6th streets: "It's repeating itself as we're talking right now. There's some 16-year-old kid who is walking down South Street, connecting with the culture that's here. It's a vibrant kind of connection, an emotional connection that people have to this neighborhood."

Planting the Yowie flag here is a game changer in a lot of ways, not only for Yowie and Maldonado, but for South Street and Philly. "She's putting something together that just doesn't exist here," Perry says. Something with the potential to return this street to its former glory.

It might not exist here yet, but Philly is changing. People want to see new stuff, Maldonado says; they're ready for it. When she started Yowie, it was an outlier for modern design in Philly. She was thrilled to see LMNO, Stephen Starr's new Fishtown restaurant, debut with a modern design: "It's not reclaimed wood. It's not Brooklyn 2007 vibes."

She's also ready for it. The past five years of running Yowie have taught her to continue to diversify its products. There will always be new shops; people will always be pushing forward. Yowie will never stop evolving. And even before Yowie, everything she's done has built up to this new project. "I'm so prepared," she says. "The Venn diagram is all coming together. This is our house. It's the nexus."

We walk back to the original shop, up South and down 4th, and Maldonado shows me some of the current products she's selling: a resin sculpture of a hand holding grapes she designed in collaboration with NYC artist and shop owner Telsha Anderson, a verbena-and-yuzu-scented Redoux room spray created for Yowie's anniversary, jars of Chili Cheeks chili sauce and colorful boxes of Omsom East Asian meal starters. And then there are the buzzy non-alcoholic drinks, like Ghia and Figlia, featured because she read that the non-alcoholic drinks market is poised to grow 35 percent by 2023—and, also, I suspect, because they come in beautiful packaging.

A few hours after I leave the shop, Maldonado puts up an Instagram post offering the bar cart to her followers. Before long, hundreds of commenters are vying to take it home. 📍