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# I Dream of Drake

Jeff Stober has a \$4-million dream—to turn this Queen West dump into the hippest hotel/hangout in town. **By Siobhan Roberts**



**"Fuck!" says Jeff Stober.** "How cool would it be to create a place that could bring together fabulous minds to suck whiskey and get buzzed, get a vibe and talk and eat and sleep?"

This is Jeff Stober's vision for his soon-to-be-boutiqued Drake Hotel at Queen West and Beaconsfield, rescheduled for opening in the fall of this year now that the spring opening date is passing by with the place a "heads-up" construction/disaster zone.

You can just see the glee of fantasy behind Stober's blue-tint Moschino specs. Indeed, if all goes as planned, his Drake will be the Toronto version of New York's Chelsea. Now, how to get Leonard Cohen between the sheets...?

Stober's recitations on the "Drake Creative Platform" are usually more eloquent than expletive, and expressed in dizzying design speak:

"The hotel's core theme is its state of un-design. ...It's the theory of the collapse of post-modernism from a hotel perspective. ...The constituency at the Drake are artists from all walks of life; a democratic high-life meets low-life, like on the Titanic, or as in *Bobos In Paradise*, where the bourgeois meets the bohemian—the artist and the art collector will co-exist. ...The hotel itself will be an artistic installation, no different from a gallery that must be curated (Stober is on the hunt for a curator). ...It's anti-Four Seasons, anti-300-thread-count linen. ...The Drake won't be manufactured cool—it will be inbred, people will feel it, feel like they are part of a tribe. ...The brand becomes the vibe."

He also rattles off the functional components: a salon-inspired lounge, Japanese/Peruvian dining room, a kickass coffee and juice bar, an underground and totally wired live-performance venue, the just-named Yoga Dorm looking onto the rooftop Sky Yard, and nineteen Crash Pads at \$100-\$175 per night. One room is reserved for an artist-in-residence. Art will adorn every nook and cranny available. And Stober expects that on occasion—say, during the Toronto International Art Fair in November—all the hotel rooms would be

given over to an in-house show, maybe even a live show with nineteen artists doing nineteen nudes.

Stober's passion seems convincing; his blend of benefactor to the arts and hipster hotelier is what this Queen West neighbourhood needs. It is a bit paradoxical—it's a hotel for the locals (he plans to do no international advertising). That is, it's a hotel for local artists and local galleries like Loop, Fly, Greener Pastures, Look Up, Luft, and Bracket, to name a few within a block.

"The plans for the Drake are pretty ambitious," says Duncan Farnan, owner of Bracket Gallery. "How successfully it flies will depend on the operation. If they provide good service and good hospitality, it will attract people to the area and hopefully that will move out some of the used appliance stores." It's an interesting Queen Street strip now, Farnan points out, but the previously loved refrigerators lining the sidewalk and window-fronts full of stove elements really lower the tone.

What a successful Drake might do, in essence, is extend the commercially "happening zone" of Queen West even further west. At Dufferin and Queen, Margie Zeidler—the mastermind behind the studio conversion at 401 Richmond West—has become a family owner of the Gladstone Hotel. She has renovation plans as well, but organic and gradual ones that will allow the current residents to stay put (one has been there for thirty-six years, several for a more than a decade). "This has been happening on Queen Street for years," says Zeidler. "We did a development at Queen and John fifteen years ago and I remember saying to people, 'This area is going to change.' ...By the last official count I was given, the number of galleries between Bathurst and Roncesvalles was twenty-two," she says, "and I have noticed three more since then."

Left: The new Drake Hotel, located near Beaconsfield Ave. at 1150 Queen St. W, opens its doors next fall

Right: Jeff Stober on the hotel's rooftop, soon to be known as the Sky Yard

Over: The Drake's interior in mid-construction

Photos by Sally McKay, May 2003

