

The Gladstone's birthday lament

After a year in business, the renovated hotel faces the massive urban change that is hot on its heels

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For a practising artist, Christina Zeidler has a normal Irony Quotient. Hyperawareness of different points of view and interpretations are, after all, the amniotic fluid of contemporary art creation. But for a commercial developer, a high IQ is a burden. This weekend, as Ms. Zeidler celebrates the first re-birthday of the Gladstone Hotel, the 1889 railway hotel she and her family have renovated and transformed, she's excruciatingly conscious of the impact sophisticated renovation projects are having on the Queen Street West neighbourhood.

On the one hand, many consider her hotel -- with its individually decorated artist-fantasy rooms, and locally minded music and meetings -- to be a model of urban regeneration. "The Gladstone is the most creative conversion of a landmark into a hotel that I have seen in North America," says New York-based Roberta Brandes Gratz, author of *Cities Back from the Edge: New Life for Downtown*. "A genuine community gathering place has been added to the neighbourhood."

But for the young artists who exhibit weirdly erotic photographs of masked women on the Gladstone's walls -- and for some of the old-timers who still go to drink in the Gladstone's bar -- Queen Street West is fast becoming so glamorous, so popular, so commercially alluring, they're feeling pushed aside. The heave-ho will accelerate by the end of February, should the Ontario Municipal Board approve three proposed condo developments being touted to thousands of potential buyers as their chance to dip in the area's funkiness.

And this is a neighbourhood that's still getting used to the changes of the past few years. "When people describe the Gladstone as 'flophouse to art house,' the phrase is terribly offensive to me," says Ms. Zeidler, 38, while sitting in the hotel's Ballroom Café. Nine men were living in the building when her family bought it for \$2.3-million in 2000. By 2004 the hotel was under reconstruction and the men had to move. A few needed help finding new digs; one needed basic identity papers. She helped them out and says they still drop by. "I'm a connections junkie. This is a place where people who are dressed to the nines can come and mix with people not so well dressed."

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As her staff hustle around, hauling crates of drinks for the gala birthday party, hanging artifacts from the hotel's sometimes grand, sometimes seedy past, and preparing for the weekend-long open house, Ms. Zeidler rises and leads the way, first by elevator (the Gladstone's is a manually operated cage, like something out of the Rue Morgue), and then via steep stairs, to the hotel's top floor.

The Tower Suite, which rents for \$475 a night, has a 360-degree view of the city. "See those high-rises past Bloor?" Ms. Zeidler says, indicating some solitary white fingers flipped at the city's low skyline. "That's what 19 storeys looks like in the middle of a low-rise area."

And urban change is coming from all directions. Ms. Zeidler points east of the Gladstone to Queen Street's diners, galleries and stores, and, at the corner of Beaconsfield, the also-renovated, hugely popular Drake Hotel. (Some Queen Streeters say the Drake's owner, Jeff Stober, is the area's black-hat villain, a champion of trendiness and gentrification. "There's the perception," Mr. Stober agrees affably, "that commercial real estate values have gone up because we've bought up buildings on this block to turn it into a cultural destination." He points out that his hotel also runs an ambitious arts program, and works with the Gladstone on local festivals).

On the south side of Queen are other wild cards -- the proposed towers currently before the OMB, and Woolfitt's Art Supplies. Owner Ben Woolfitt has told The Globe and Mail that he is in discussions with the city and with the Ontario College of Art and Design to dedicate his building as a place where artists can live and work rent-free on the second floor, subsidized by income-producing tenants on the first floor. How the area will retain affordable space for artists is the big question, says Lynda Macdonald, the area's planner for the city. "We've spent a lot of time on this at the OMB hearings. We're really worried about displacing the artists."

And nothing is for sure where real estate values are rising so fast.

"I used to have to explain to people what Beaconsfield Village was," says real estate agent Steven Edge, who has worked in the area for 12 years. "Now, I say 'Near the Drake and the Gladstone,' and I'm selling to doctors, lawyers and CBC people." According to Kevin Somers, a west-end branch manager for Royal LePage, the average price of a detached house around here was \$485,000 in 2004 (a 22-per-cent increase over 2002). By 2006, it had risen to \$639,000 (a 32-per-cent increase over 2004).

Commercial property prices are rising too. Rose Vuong and her husband, photo-journalist Thai Khac Chuong, bought a two-storey Queen Street storefront for \$100,000 in 1986. A few years ago they turned down an offer of \$500,000 from the Drake's Mr. Stober. Now they're the last holdout on their block. "He wants this place big time!" says Ms. Vuong, seated in her redecorated restaurant, where she displays her husband's photos of the fall of Saigon. "I'm not going to sell. I hope to save this place for my kids' future."

The area's biggest changes loom to the west and the south. By 2008, the city will have straightened Dufferin Street (it currently takes a jog under a railway bridge). As for the so-called Queen West Triangle -- bounded by Queen Street, the tracks, and Sudbury Street, with the lake in the distance -- the future is uncertain. If the OMB approves condo projects in the areas from four developers, including a 17- and 18-storey complex that would replace a low-rent artists' building just below Queen Street, this view will go. So will the Queen West streetscape. And just try finding a place to park.

What bothers some artists is that condo developers are using the artists as the bait to lure newcomers. Westside Lofts promises to "introduce new residents to the neighbourhood [by] giving each purchaser their choice of an original piece of artwork from a Queen West Gallery." The Bohemian Embassy brochure reads "Join the ambassadors of hip on Queen Street West at Gladstone."

"I'm deeply disturbed by what is being proposed," says artist Vera Frenkel, "and by the absence of the city's vision of what a remarkable part of the city this could be." She, Ms. Zeidler and the neighbourhood coalition Active 18 all insist that they are not against development -- just tall towers and high prices. In their place, they want guarantees of affordable housing, height limits and developer contributions for arts-related community improvement projects.

Whoever prevails, it's all new to the old-timers.

On a Wednesday afternoon, in the Gladstone's Melody Bar -- scene of legendary weekend karaoke concerts -- bartender Ann Powell is serving a trio of men. By the grizzled look of them, they've been propping up this bar since beer was 40 cents a stubby. Two are arguing loudly about long-ago mining jobs in northern Quebec. One sits alone.

"When I first started here 15 years ago," Ms. Powell says, "this place was run down bad." It's changed for the better, she adds. "The people now are pretty nice. Artsy."

The lone man snorts into his brew. "It's the new gaytown."

"Awww.," Ms. Powell says admonishingly.

Grinning sheepishly, he finishes his beer.

Ms. Powell smiles. "I was *educated* at the Gladstone. Nothing surprises me."