

CHECKING IN



THE FORMERLY DOWNBEAT GLADSTONE HOTEL INVITES THE ART AND DESIGN COMMUNITY TO GIVE IT MORE THAN JUST A FACELIFT.

PROJECT GLADSTONE HOTEL, TORONTO, ONTARIO

ARCHITECT ZEIDLER PARTNERSHIP ARCHITECTS

TEXT LESLIE JEN

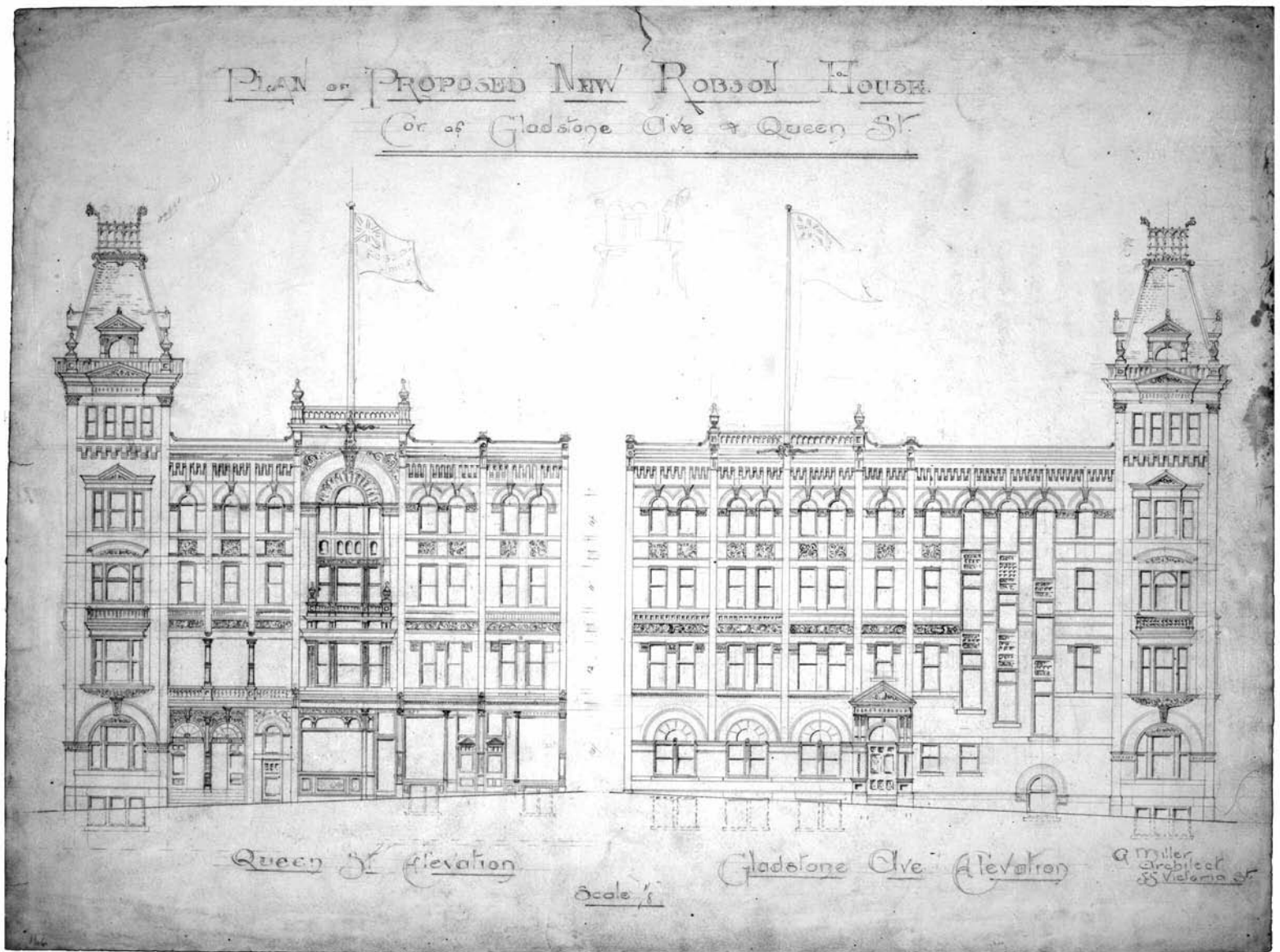
A lot's been happening on West Queen West lately, with shops, galleries and cafés gradually replacing greasy spoons and low-rent dives well past their sell-by dates. Vehicular traffic is being diverted to accommodate the massive undertaking of streetcar track replacement, and on sunny Saturday afternoons pedestrians jostle for sidewalk space along this colourful east-west artery.

Occupying a prominent corner site amidst all this activity is the historic Gladstone Hotel, located squarely in Toronto's Parkdale neighbourhood west of the downtown core. Designed and built by architect George Miller in 1889, it is the city's oldest operating hotel, and back when Parkdale's fortunes were decidedly more upbeat, the landmark Gladstone provided genteel accommodation for disembarking passengers from the former railway station across the road. As the area fell into decline, so did the hotel. Situated where Gladstone Avenue and Queen Street West intersect, the



OPPOSITE EXTENSIVE RESTORATION WORK WELL UNDERWAY ON THE GRAND OLD MATRON OF THE GLADSTONE HOTEL, WHICH NOW STANDS A LITTLE MORE PROUDLY ON ITS CORNER IN A TRANSITIONAL TORONTO NEIGHBOURHOOD. **TOP** EXPOSED BRICK WALLS AND BURNISHED WOOD FLOORS ENHANCE THE GRAND BALLROOM SPACE ON THE HOTEL'S GROUND FLOOR. **ABOVE** RENOVATION WORK ON THE HOTEL'S VASTLY SPACIOUS CORRIDORS. **ABOVE RIGHT** STAIR DETAIL REVEALS VAGUELY BAROQUE SOLID WOOD BALUSTRADES. **RIGHT** GARGOYLE ON THE HOTEL'S EXTERIOR KEEPS WATCH OVER PARKDALE. **FAR RIGHT** NUMBERED BUTTONS ON THE PATINATED PANEL OF THE AUTHENTIC HAND-OPERATED VICTORIAN ELEVATOR LEND A SENSE OF HISTORY AND CHARACTER TO THE GLADSTONE.





shabby/stately hotel occupies a highly visible location to which downtown hipsters have regularly been flocking. Over the past few years, the hotel has been a venue of choice for a great number of arts-related events including alternative concerts, plays, book launches and life drawing classes, not to mention the hugely popular karaoke nights in the hotel's own Melody Bar.

Once considered to be at the fringe of the action both geographically and metaphorically, the Gladstone is now pretty much the beating heart of the thriving Queen West scene, as the voraciously trend-hungry continue to creep ever westward in search of the new. But please don't confuse it with the Drake Hotel down the road. Unlike that slick contrivance funded by technology industry windfall, there is an authentic and convincing quality about the organic process of the Gladstone's gradual restoration. And that is because the people behind the Gladstone truly understand what makes great buildings, great communities, and great cities.

Purchased in 2002 by the esteemed Zeidler family, Bauhaus-trained patriarch Eberhard and daughters Margie and Christina actively seek to bring to the city more or less what they had already accomplished with 401 Richmond, a darkly appealing brick behemoth of a factory building conversion in the city's design/entertainment district. Under Margie's direction, it is now home to dozens of organizations largely involved in the arts, culture and non-profit industries. 401 Richmond thrives not only because of its economic accessibility to tenants but its sense of community. In creating a micro-community within a building by involving the cultural community, they have enriched the existing neighbourhood community, which in turn positively contributes to the urban fabric of the city.

Naturally, the Zeidler Partnership is responsible for the architectural renovation work on the Gladstone Hotel, with Christina Zeidler taking over

ABOVE LATE 19TH-CENTURY ORIGINAL PROPOSAL DRAWINGS OF THE QUEEN STREET AND GLADSTONE AVENUE ELEVATIONS.

the primary development and spokesperson duties. As a graduate of the Ontario College of Art and Design and as a practicing artist and musician, Christina is very much part of the community that the hotel currently caters to. And as a true insider, what is important to her is that the transformation of the hotel remains confined strictly to a physical upgrading, not an ideological revision intending to appeal to the well-heeled. Since purchasing the building, Christina has expressed a sincere desire to keep the Gladstone connected to the local community and to continue attracting a wide diversity of people, including the regulars and old-timers that kept the place afloat in leaner years.

Within the context of a global shift towards overpriced minimalist boutique hotels, the Gladstone is rather unique in its inclusivity. Charmingly, it is still a little rough around the edges and blissfully free of the self-conscious striving for hipness. Though certain to attract a good chunk of a relatively sophisticated design-oriented clientele, the Gladstone is most decidedly not the uniformly chic high-style Ian Schrager/Philippe Starck type of urban lodging, and any hint of chilly exclusivity is refreshingly absent.

Arched windows and rough-cut stone and brick dramatically define the building's exterior, embellished with gargoyles that peer down at passersby. Seen in the original hotel drawings, there are plans to reinstate the missing cupola atop the building's southwest corner tower which was removed in 1930 due to disrepair.

Three main floor public spaces define the ground floor of the hotel. From the welcoming and generous central lobby of wood and exposed brick, the



TOP A FRESH TAKE ON CANADIANA EVIDENT IN ROOM 404 BY JENNY FRANCIS AND CHARLENE AND GRANT GILMOUR. **ABOVE** TWO VIEWS OF ROOM 411 BY HEATHER DUBBEDAM AND TANIA URSOMARZO REVEAL A CONTINUOUS HORIZONTAL BAND OF LIGHTING AND A WOOD FRAMING STRUCTURE THAT DEFINES A ROOM WITHIN A ROOM.

dilapidated charm of the aforementioned Melody Bar can be accessed. Regulars have been making pilgrimages for years to this vocal exhibitionists' hub, famous for its raucous and fun karaoke nights hosted by the inimitable Peter Styles. There are no immediate plans to renovate this legendary venue for fear of eroding its sense of democratic accessibility. On the other side of the lobby, a vast plane of gleaming golden hardwood defines the main ballroom space which occupies the entire west side of the main floor. Recently restored, it is licenced to accommodate up to 198 people, and is frequently used for concerts, performances, launch parties, and even film shoots.

Interior spaces and other features of the hotel are further wistful reminders of days past. Fifty-one hotel rooms are located on the second, third and fourth floors of the hotel, and are reached either by a central staircase

wrapped by heavy and ornate solid wood balustrades, or by Toronto's only remaining original hand-operated Victorian elevator. The metal accordion gate still slides open and closed, lending a deliciously creepy frisson reminiscent of early Polanski films.

On the upper guest-room floors, immensely wide nine-foot corridors seem even more expansive given the generous 14-foot ceilings. The junctures of these L-shaped corridors form mini-lobbies to accommodate informal communal gatherings in this semi-public space. Flooded with light and the sound of hardwood underfoot, the Gladstone corridors dramatically contrast with the sense of compression felt in the dark and hushed narrow carpeted hallways found in standard contemporary hotels.

A number of guest rooms have undergone transformational refurbish-



TOP THE ELEGANTLY MINIMAL ROOM 416 EXPLOITS KATHRYN WALTER'S FINESSE IN FELT DESIGN, SEEN IN AN APPEALINGLY SOFT AND ACOUSTICALLY ABSORBENT GREY FELT "BUBBLE" WALL. **ABOVE** ROOM 312'S CLEAN-LINED FURNISHINGS BY ANDREW JONES ARE SOFTENED WITH GEOMETRICALLY PRINTED TEXTILES BY JOY WALKER.

ment: approximately one-quarter of the 51 rooms have been designed by local artists. In further establishing a strong link to the art and design community, the hotel issued an open call for design submissions for the guest rooms, giving participants a sense of ownership and pride in the Gladstone. The involvement of the Queen West community and the artistic community at large is not an unwise move on the part of the project's visionaries to secure the loyalty of and favour with current and potential clientele. Artists and designers were selected from a formal, juried submissions process and room designs were chosen based on their originality and intent, with the comfort of guests in mind. After a general refurbishment including updated plumbing and wiring, new wood floors and fully renovated bathrooms, artists were given more or less free rein to design the small rooms, most of

which ring in at well under 200 square feet.

The result was a smashing success which culminated in a milestone event in mid-June of this year to which the public was invited over the course of a weekend to view the guest rooms. The Friday evening debut was abuzz with activity and a palpable sense of anticipation and discovery of what was concealed behind each guest room door. Like the best house party ever thrown, crowds clustered in the vaguely domestic spaces throughout the hotel against the backdrop of DJ-spun sonic ambience on every floor.

The artist-designed rooms are imaginative and often theatrical; while some recall dubious art-school installations, others are more rigorous and feasible as pleasant and peaceful spaces in which guests would actually want to spend the night. Artists were encouraged to work in teams for the room



ABOVE LEFT BARR GILMORE AND MICHEL ARCAND'S PLAYFUL APPROACH TO ROOM 318 OFFERS POTENTIAL NARRATIVES OF PAST GUESTS' ACTIVITIES. **ABOVE RIGHT** ROOM 303 IS AWASH IN A RED SYMPHONY OF CONTRASTING TEXTURES AND PATTERNS BY TEXTILE DESIGNERS KRISTIN LEDGETT AND KATE AUSTIN.

designs, a sample of which are described below.

Textile designers Kristin Ledgett and Kate Austin paired up as Ruckus to inject Room 303 with a jolt of red in every texture and pattern imaginable. Hoping to evoke glamour, passion and heat, Ruckus has paired high-gloss lacquers with richly patterned silks in the form of handmade textile objects of knitted, sewn and printed sculptures.

Architecturally trained furniture designer Andrew Jones worked with textile designer Joy Walker on Room 312, and the cleanly minimalist desk, bed and bed tray in the ambiently lit room are punctuated with the subtle silk-screened graphics of the bed linens, upholstered headboard and window coverings. The sensations of hard and soft are a dynamic complement in this most serene of spaces.

Former Bruce Mau design associate Barr Gilmore partnered with interior designer Michel Arcand to create the Blue Line Room in Suite 318. While the vibrating Chroma-Key blue walls titillate, the white outlined shapes of bodies and discarded bits of clothing throughout the room disconcertingly resemble the chalked outlines of fallen victims at a crime scene. Contemporary iconic furniture and lighting complete the filmic and narrative quality of the space.

The Big Stuff upholstery duo of Charlene and Grant Gilmour joined with architectural graduate and designer Jenny Francis to express a restrained kitsch approach to Canadiana in Room 404. The notion of caricature is explored in a white ceiling fixture of antleresque proportions hovering over the bed, whose headboard rests against a full-size photographic wall mural of the sun-dappled great Canadian wilderness. A wall sheathed in horizontally oriented warm cedar panelling recalls our country's abundant forests and perhaps even the clichéd archetype of the log cabin.

Architect and photographer Heather Dubbeldam and intern architect Tania Ursomarzo designed Room 411, which was conceptually the most rigorous and "architectural" of the rooms. An internally constructed wood framing device supports the bed, night tables and desk, conveying a sense of a room within a room. Additionally, a band of continuous fluorescent lighting wraps around the walls of the room, overlapping even the two picture windows. In their words, the installation represents "a cross-section through the primary planes of the building—walls, ceiling and floor—in two 'wrapping' architectural expressions that are an organizational device for the requirements of a hotel room."

Industrial felt designer Kathryn Walter tackled Room 416 to great effect. Her virtuosity in the properties of felt is expressed in an entire wall composed of an ordered grid of highly tactile grey felt semi-spherical bubble tiles, enhanced by the presence of a felt-covered chair and felt lamps casting diffuse light throughout the room. This soft and inviting absorptive environment creates a cozy womb-like capsule, not unlike an elegantly padded cell.

Of the remaining rooms yet to be completed, the southwest corner turret contains a deluxe 2-storey Tower Suite that will be designed by Jane Zeidler and daughter Christina. And based on the success of this summer's artist-designed guest rooms, a second round of rooms are set to debut in December, with the second call for submissions currently underway. The Zeidler vision is thus put into motion: artists and designers working collaboratively to contribute their creative efforts to this architectural piece of history.

It is a well-established notion that sustainability and heritage are inextricably linked. The preservation and restoration of heritage buildings necessarily means decreased construction resource consumption, and culturally speaking, we rely on the past to sustain the future. Clearly, the Gladstone Hotel is an historic building, an iconic architectural artifact, and a "village" in which great ideas and activities reside, are nurtured, and then flourish. Its importance is further intensified through its ability to inspire and mobilize community involvement, and in that sense, is all about sustaining the neighbourhood and a thriving local artistic culture. **CA**

CLIENT GLADSTONE HOUSE LTD.
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DEVELOPMENT CHRISTINA ZEIDLER
CONSTRUCTION MANAGERS MAHER CONSTRUCTION
RESTORATION DOUGLAS ROBERTS
STRUCTURAL JIRI TRICHY DESIGNS
MECHANICAL ECE GROUP
ELECTRICAL ECE GROUP
ELEVATOR CONSULTANT KATZ DRAGO AND COMPANY INC.
CODE CONSULTANT LEBER RUBES
INTERIORS CHRISTINA ZEIDLER
ARTIST-DESIGNED ROOM INTERIORS MICHEL ARCAND + BARR GILMORE, KATE AUSTIN + KRISTIN LEDGETT, CECILIA BERKOVIC, BRUNO BILIO, SUSAN COLLETT + PENELOPE STEWART + NICHOLAS STIRLING, HEATHER DUBBELDAM + TANIA URSOMARZO, JENNY FRANCIS + CHARLENE GILMOUR + GRANT GILMOUR, ANDREW HARWOOD, ANDREW JONES + JOY WALKER, MEISSA LEVIN, ALLYSON MITCHELL, KATHRYN WALTER
ARTIST-DESIGNED ROOM INTERIORS PROJECT DIRECTOR CHRISTINA ZEIDLER
ARTIST-DESIGNED ROOM INTERIORS PROJECT MANAGER SUANNE MCGREGOR
AREA 28,000 FT² GROSS ENCLOSED AREA
BUDGET N/A
PHOTOGRAPHY CAT O'NEIL/SILVER CAT PRODUCTIONS UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED