

## CASE STUDIES

### Permission Granted: A Case Study of the Challenges and Opportunities of Creating Community Experiences at the Gladstone Hotel

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**Abstract** How do we create the conditions for dialogue and exchange within a cultural institution? When we cannot define a project from the outset, can we collectively create parameters for communities to unpack their own narratives in an inclusive and dynamic way? This paper examines the alternative models of exhibition and programming that are being employed by the Gladstone Hotel in Toronto, Canada. Situated as a multi-purpose space, the Gladstone Hotel produces and hosts a myriad of exhibitions, arts, and cultural programming: acting as part-community center, part-bar, and part-art space, the hotel's multifarious approach embraces experimentation and fosters vigorous discussion. The Gladstone Hotel is a contemporary community space that reflects Jane Jacobs's assertion that "new ideas need old buildings." By examining several curatorial initiatives at the Gladstone, this article explores the ways in which alternative approaches to the concepts of "expert," "gallery," and "curator" are realized within the context of a hybrid space.

#### A GALLERY AS THE NUCLEUS OF A HOTEL

Located in the complex and rapidly-gentrifying neighborhood of Parkdale in Toronto, Canada, the Gladstone Hotel was originally built in 1889 as a railway hotel, and is the oldest continuously operating hotel in Toronto. After being purchased by the Zeidler family in the early 2000s, the hotel underwent an extensive renovation that turned the thirty-seven hotel rooms into individually commissioned works of art. This process also converted the entire second floor to studios, and created four distinct gallery spaces that make use of the spaces between the hotel rooms and studios. Under the current direction of its president Christina Zeidler, the Gladstone Hotel is part-hotel,

part-bar, part-restaurant, part-events venue, part-gallery, and part-community center.

As the Gladstone Hotel has neither a permanent collection, an archive, nor a mandate to preserve history and material culture, the institution maintains a multifaceted platform that includes music and literary events and exhibitions of design, craft, and art. The Gladstone Hotel, therefore, endeavors to "perform the museum," as described by Charles Garoian (2001), who states that,

Performing the museum is predicated upon rupturing the assumption that works of art are beyond reproach. While they are conserved, preserved, and secured for posterity, works of art represent the potential to dialogue with history; for us to expose, examine, and critique cultural

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codes. They also provide the possibility to imagine and create new cultural myths, new ways of exhibiting and interpreting works of art that take into consideration content introduced by museum viewers. (236)

**CONTEMPORARY, BUT NOT A WHITE CUBE**

The Gladstone Hotel’s exhibits are mounted in spaces that are visibly differentiated from the traditional “white-cube” gallery and embody Jane Jacobs’s notion that “new ideas must use old buildings” (1961, 187–99). In other words, the Gladstone’s original architectural details, such as its tin ceilings and rounded, ornate Richardsonian Romanesque doorways, are not silenced. This is significant because, as many scholars have noted, the white-cube approach to contemporary exhibition design, with its sterile and immaculate whiteness, offers “a timeless, neutral non-space whose function it is to serve as both a Platonic receptacle of the Ideal (a mediating chora), and a chorismos, a boundary that ensures the separateness of and limited circulation between the Ideal and the Real” (Margaroni 2005, 93). The Gladstone Hotel is neither a sterile, immaculate environment, nor a cathedral to material culture. The space is worn from its long history, which is made clear by its uneven floors and cracked walls and ceilings. Rather than appearing nondescript and implacable, the space retains exposed layers of structural alterations. For instance, modern doors have been inserted into Victorian era doorframes, which subtly disrupts the paradigm that a gallery space is a neutral and timeless one.

While it is arguable that the difference between the white-cube approach and Gladstone Hotel’s galleries—and the implications of this difference—might not be immediately recognizable to visitors, what is likely more

immediately apparent is that the hotel breaks down the structures of surveillance that are manifest in traditional museums. At the Gladstone, there are no ticket desks and, with the exception of its three annual exhibitions, no charge for admission. Moreover, there are neither glass cases, nor covers for plinths, nor roped-off spaces; there are no security cameras, and galleries are usually devoid of attendants and security guards (with the exception of the four annual large-scale exhibitions). “Museum behavior” is still very much performed by visitors, but it is arguably less prescribed and regulated. As observed by the hotel’s staff, visitors often sit on the gallery floor, use cell phones, take photographs, and bring food and drink into the gallery, all of which is proscribed in many art institutions. It is important to note that employing the surveillance-free gallery model is, of course, not without flaws; it has resulted in damaged and stolen artworks at the Gladstone. A further challenge is that without the constructs of surveillance it is difficult to collect feedback and data on audience engagement and to determine if the Gladstone’s informal strategies for presenting art are effective.

Further, the lack of surveillance at the Gladstone reverses the archetypical relationship between public and private spaces that informs the program of the modernist museum. Within this paradigm, as Hyungsook Kim notes, spaces are systematically divided based on deeply situated, binary structures dating to the Enlightenment (Kim 2007, 137). Highly specialized spaces for knowledge production and consumption, such as galleries and classrooms, find their binary pairing in the café and gift shop, in which behavior is performed differently. At the Gladstone Hotel, this binary is fluid, as the delineation of spaces is less rigid and borders between

spaces are not overtly defined. As previously mentioned, food and drink are permitted in the galleries and exhibition spaces regularly double as meeting rooms, workshop facilities, event spaces, and pop-up retail venues. It is also important to note that there is no separation between private and public activities. The installation of artworks, for instance, is not done behind closed doors, nor are installations draped off. In an attempt to foster a culture of transparency, the processes of the physical installation and accompanying decision-making processes are fully visible to gallery visitors. Again, the obscuring of spatial boundaries is not without shortcomings. The Hotel's staff are regularly called upon to manage a diversity of expectations with regard to use of space. For example, there are occasions when large sculptural installations need to be moved to accommodate a wedding ceremony in the gallery, or guests of the hotel have become irritated when access to their hotel room is blocked by a performance artist making use of hallways and doorways. The delicate maneuvering between an artist's expectations of exhibiting in a professional gallery setting and customer's expectations of access can tax staff time and hotel resources.

### A NEGOTIATED SPACE

The seventy exhibitions that the Gladstone hosts every year, which feature works by established and emerging artists, offer a playful means to engage with contemporary art. The site is, in many ways, a space of negotiation between accepted institutional norms and rejections of heteronormativity, as with programs such as Docents Gone Wild (Figure 1). This programming series invites performance artists and drag queens to provide tours of the space that combine facts about the hotel and exhibits with fictitious information or personal interpre-

tations. While the program functions in a similar way that docent-led tours do at other arts institutions, this program also encourages the guides to offer their own humorous readings of the history of the hotel, and to include autobiographical anecdotes. For example, for her 2012 tour, drag queen Miss Fluffy Soufflé provided some information about the architectural elements of the space but also included an overview of her favorite Gladstone Hotel staff members and tips for curing hangovers. At one point in the tour she stopped by a blank wall and proceeded with a tongue-in-cheek monologue, describing it as an example of some of the aesthetic sensibilities being explored by contemporary artists in Toronto.

Moreover, there are even instances wherein legalities are negotiated, as with the case of the three live chickens that took-up residence at the Gladstone during the exhibition *Grow Op* (April 2013). While urban chicken coops are illegal in Toronto, curator Victoria Taylor and designers Karen May and Justin Miron concluded that constructing a small, wired chicken habitat on the Gladstone Hotel's lower green roof provided an important opportunity to discuss issues around urban farming and food security. The Gladstone agreed.

The Gladstone Hotel's most successful exhibition program, *Come Up To My Room* (*CUTMR*), offers a case-study for how institutional norms are negotiated within this hybrid space. Now in its eleventh year, this annual alternative-design event brings together makers from all disciplines to create experiential, site-specific, immersive, and participatory installations (Figure 2). Similar to the Gladstone Hotel exhibition model, but on a grand scale, *CUTMR* avoids dividing works into the discrete disciplinary silos of design, art, and craft. Nor does the exhibition distinguish between expert



**Figure 1.** Docent Miss Fluffy Soufflé provides a tour of the Gladstone Hotel, combining personal anecdotes and historical facts. *Photo by Tamir Kojfman, courtesy of the Gladstone Hotel, 2012.*

and informal knowledge, which is expressed by the *CUTMR* program offering invitations to designers to experiment with contemporary art practices. In other words, artists are not asked to produce artworks and designers are not asked to produce utilitarian objects. Makers from any discipline and in any stage of their careers are encouraged to explore new forms of making, even those that might fall outside of their

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educational backgrounds, training, and typical practices. The invitation to experiment often results in so-called “failures,” such as mechanical and electrical equipment that does not function,

during the exhibition. Further, as several of the makers are producing outside of their knowledge set, another issue that occasionally arises is that projects are not fully completed in time for the opening of the exhibition. While this can prove frustrating for audiences, makers, and curators, this allowance for “failure” is accommodated by having the makers on-site throughout the course of the exhibition. Rather than the

omnipresent voice of the curator distilling meaning for the audience and relying on didactic panels and labels to instruct—or in this case having

to display “out of order” signage—the makers directly interact with the public and offer explanations of their installations. Finally, a significant programmatic element of *CUTMR*



is that most participants are invited to exhibit based on a portfolio and not on a project proposal, and the curators are removed from the process of developing the installations. When the exhibition opens to the public, in many instances the installations are similarly revealed to the curators. This reverses the conventional curator/artist relationship. By loosening curatorial control, curators must trust that the partici-

### A HELPFUL ANALOGY WHEN DISCUSSING THE GLADSTONE HOTEL'S PROGRAMMING APPROACH IS THAT OF A TEACHING HOSPITAL

pants will produce installations that are in keeping with the mandate of the exhibition. Similarly, the participants expect that the curators will facilitate a context for dialogue and dynamic engagement with visitors.

A helpful analogy when discussing the Gladstone Hotel's programming approach is that of a teaching hospital, whereby growth and learning are encouraged as part of the model. An example can be seen with the exhibit *Grow Op*, which launched in April 2013 (Cover illustration). *Grow Op* brings together emerging and established artists, designers, landscape architects, and urban designers to consider discourses around place-making, public art, civic engagement, and the natural environment—both manicured and unkempt. One of the interesting developments with the inaugural *Grow Op* exhibition is that some of the participants produced projects that included plant material, although these artists were not experienced working with living matter. This proved problematic when certain plants which were not well-adapted to growing in the interior environment of the Gladstone Hotel started to wilt during the exhibition. Over the course of the public exhibition, a dialogue developed between the artists and

experienced landscape architects as to how to resolve these issues. This conversation became a performance of sorts, played out publicly as a tutorial and an evolving artwork as plants were replaced. As this discussion occurred during gallery hours, the public was invited into the discussion, and several visitors offered their own advice and insights. As exemplified by *Grow Op*, there is an effort to emphasize reciprocity of teaching and learning between the public, makers, curators, and the institution. In some ways, therefore, there is an organizational attempt to envision visitors as partners instead of as patrons. This fosters a focus on context rather than only on content (Kopke 2011, 102).

### ENCOUNTERING COMMUNITY AND PARTNERING WITH YOUNG MAMMALS

Performance company Mammalian Diving Reflex has been collaborating with the Gladstone Hotel since 2007. The company's objective has been to involve the hotel in a long-term relationship with youth in the neighborhood as a deliberate corrective to criticisms leveled at the role of culture in the phenomenon of gentrification. The Gladstone Hotel can be understood as a somewhat self-contradictory example of third-wave gentrification—which sees civic leaders intentionally deploying culture to revitalize neighborhoods suffering from divestment after deindustrialization. This approach has its most prominent booster in urban studies theorist Richard Florida. Florida's key recommendation in his *Rise of the Creative Class* (2003) is that in order to be economically competitive, cities need to trigger innovation not by attracting large institutions, which he considers an antiquated strategy, but by attracting creative individuals.

A first wave of critical responses to Florida highlighted the vagueness of his concepts (Markusen 2006), and the tendency for the related policies to privilege consumption and development imperatives over social-welfare (Peck 2005). The Gladstone Hotel's management, since its purchase by the Zeidlers in 2002, has demonstrated critical self-reflexivity with respect to the organization's role in the gentrification of the neighborhood. The Gladstone Hotel has reached something of a *détente* with Florida's ideas, acknowledging the importance of culture to the economy and the necessity of shifting the strategy from promoting consumption to production. This is exemplified by the hotel's curatorial department focusing less on the hotel as tourist, food, and entertainment destination (consumption)—and more on the hotel as part of an assemblage of a community of cultural producers (production). It is within this production-oriented strategy that Mammalian is trying to push the Gladstone further, suggesting that this community of cultural producers can and should also include the multitude of children and youth who call the neighborhood home. Many of these youth are—if not refugees themselves—the children of refugees, including those from the Hungarian Roma, Tibetan, Sri Lankan, and Vietnamese communities. More recently, Mammalian's efforts have extended to include youth living in Toronto's inner ring of suburbs—predominantly of the African Diasporas—who have been identified as particularly disadvantaged both economically and also with respect to their connectivity with the more economically vibrant downtown, with its higher concentration of cultural institutions.

University of Toronto Professor of Social Work David Hulchanski and his research team at St. Christopher House point to a particularly dire future. Their research indicates that growing income disparity in Toronto will



**Figure 2.** A Zero (a collaboration between ALSO Collective and Mason Studio). "Fall of the Walled Garden." *Come Up To My Room*, 2014. Photo courtesy of the Gladstone Hotel.

almost surely reduce the number of middle-range-income earners by 2025, which will result in a very divided city (Hulchanski 2010). High-income earners will be clustered around the subway, Humber Valley, and the Beaches, while the rest of the city will be inhabited by the very poor (Hulchanski 2010). This is the context

within which Mammalian, as former company-in-residence at Parkdale Public School, initiated over fourteen projects between 2005 and 2008, all in collaboration with the children of the school. Mammalian fostered creative collisions among the children, artists, businesses, and cultural institutions in the neighborhood. The Gladstone Hotel played a significant and high-profile role in this strategy, and shared the social and cultural capital that the hotel both represents and possesses.

In 2010 the then-fourteen-year-old Sanjay Ratnan, looking for an artistic activity to do, contacted Mammalian. Together with Sanjay, the company assembled a group of young people with whom Mammalian had worked previously. Together, they formed “The Torontonians,” a youth-led collective. Mammalian began to make serious and long-term efforts to connect these youths to Toronto’s cultural community, including, most visibly and significantly, the Gladstone Hotel, at which The Torontonians were then billed as Teenagers-in-Residence. Ultimately, the relationship with The Torontonians is a succession plan, whereby the youth inherit leadership roles within the company. The hope is that some of these young people who began with Mammalian when they were nine (in 2005) will, as they move through their twenties, assume artistic, administrative and production leadership roles, both within Mammalian and within the wider cultural community—including the Gladstone Hotel.

The following informal principles guide Mammalian’s work with The Torontonians and form a basic set of goals with respect to facilitating the relationship between the youth and the Gladstone Hotel:

1. **Friendship:** Youth are viewed first and foremost as friends to the Mammalian and Gladstone Hotel staff and are treated as such, with the understanding that within the arts and cultural sectors, friendship is often the basis of collaborations.
2. Organically flowing from friendship is **social capital**, understood as the deliberate sharing of professional networks through friendships.
3. **Collegiality:** The youth are Mammalian’s colleagues in a completely real sense, the collaborations having significant effects on the economic health of the company. As Mammalians themselves, the youth are therefore in a relationship of collegiality with the Gladstone Hotel.
4. **Stealth pedagogy:** This is the understanding that the collaborations are triggered not with an overt pedagogical goal to edify the youths, but rather with the more quiet and covert intention to edify Mammalian staff, the hotel staff and the city’s cultural landscape.

This partnership between Mammalian, the Gladstone Hotel and The Torontonians has been an example of collegiality comprised of the collective energies of seemingly disparate entities: a boutique hotel, a performance company, and a motley crew of local youth. These forces joined to launch the “Teens Take Over” program at the Gladstone in the spring of 2013. Teens Take Over is a teens-in-residency program that sees the Torontonians take over the Mammalian’s office in the Gladstone Hotel as their own creative space to collaborate on art projects under the umbrella of Gladstone Hotel programming (Figure 3). As artistic partners, the youth are paid honoraria, receive training, and are credited as co-authors for their work.

As with any other form of partnership, it is not without certain challenges when it comes to sharing. What a residency implies is the use of space and resources, and thus the sharing of control of how a space is used to facilitate production and engagement. But as a commercial enterprise with fiscal responsibilities, the extent to which the Gladstone Hotel can accommodate the youth programming, however, is contingent on availability rather than priority. This means a paying client can, at any time, take over a space reservation made by a resident. This dilemma demonstrates a delicate balance between privileging an open cultural space and the reality of a sustainable business structure. Hence, the Gladstone Hotel not only takes a curatorial risk but also a monetary risk by sharing the space. Faced with an opportunity to invest in unconventional art practices that show signs of aesthetic innovation, yet little promise for fiscal return, decision-makers must weigh practical, ethical, and social concerns. The ways in which curatorial bodies find ways of navigating these issues to benefit different parties requires intense creativity in order to balance economical, cultural, and aesthetic values, a type of creativity the art world—for better or worse—gives little credit to.

In the case of *Teens Take Over*, a few questions remain at the foreground of the residency: how does one create a teen residency program and integrate the presence of local youth within the Gladstone Hotel's arts community, without jeopardizing business operations? Furthermore, how can this be done so youth feel accepted rather than merely tolerated, and are accepted as local cultural producers in a neighborhood cultural space? In its half-year mark, *Teens Take Over* has been an ongoing experiment of negotiation on a case-



**Figure 3.** Playing with strangers at the Torontonians program *Dare Night Lockdown*, 2012. Photo by Michael Barker, courtesy of *Mammalian Diving Reflex*.

by-case basis. The past few months have shown interesting results, with some Torontonians activity finding a platform at the Gladstone, such as a “teen room” installation for *Come Up to My Room* (2013). Additionally, a twelve-hour tour-de-force overnight program, “*Dare Night Lockdown*,” provided the teens with the opportunity to coordinate an event independently. For this program, the Torontonians oversaw all details including marketing, administration, and budgeting, as well as job-shadowing Gladstone Hotel staff in order to better understand

### **THIS COMMUNITY OF CULTURAL PRODUCERS CAN AND SHOULD ALSO INCLUDE THE MULTITUDE OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH WHO CALL THE NEIGHBORHOOD HOME**

best-practices for events planning. Additionally, the hotel's staff members, such as the front desk clerks, café servers, and baristas, have been trained to be welcoming rather than questioning of the local youth, who are sometimes present within the commercial spaces of the



Hotel, including the restaurant. For the teenagers, this is a new and refreshing phenomenon for, prior to the residency program, these very people were the gatekeepers of the Gladstone Hotel, a neighborhood site where young people often felt unwelcome.

Though this residency is a delicate and ongoing negotiation, the local youth are encouraged to be agents who are equally invested in the economic and cultural development of their neighborhood, in the same way that the Mammalian and the Gladstone Hotel are. For these youths, access to the Gladstone Hotel is, equally, an access to the cultural engine of the neighborhood; this, in turn, validates young people as cultural authors of their own community. By incorporating the resident youth as part of the Parkdale neighborhood's cultural fabric, the residency program aims to initiate an ameliorative cultural growth that counters the wave of gentrification from the West Queen Street West area, which includes the interests and cultural/ethnic identities of the neighborhood's resident young people. These young people are interested in new cultural forums, but often remain excluded from them.

## CONCLUSION

Within the historical context of the turn-of-the-century Gladstone Hotel, the trope of the museum is performed and re-performed on a daily basis, through exhibits that demonstrate living history and artwork in the making. The arts programming at the Gladstone is realized within a fully functioning hotel and restaurant business that hosts over a hundred events per month, including weddings, concerts, fundraisers, reading series, and karaoke nights. The economic and logistical challenges of maintaining the complex relationship between cultural projects and a fully functioning business is an ongoing

negotiation that requires a great deal of sensitivity and collegiality between artists, staff, and patrons. While the Gladstone continues to ask what it means to be inclusive and sustainable, the balance can be tenuous and is, at times, not well-resolved. The outcome, however, produces a contemporary cultural environment that invites the widest possible public, regardless of cultural and socioeconomic background to explore and champion art, design and discourse. **END**

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