

Condo King extends reach

By Maria Babbage
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When Studio 54 opened in New York, it revolutionized the nightclub industry and went down in history as one of the most notorious celebrity hotspots in the world. Now Toronto might have its own answer to the exclusive club and the trendsetters who made it famous.

Toronto's "condo king," Brad Lamb, is making his first foray into the entertainment industry by opening an exclusive spot in the King Street West area near Spadina called the Temple Bar.

Having established his reputation as a top condominium real estate broker, Lamb says his exclusive, hard-to-find club is just the beginning of his effort to branch out into hospitality. Already, there are plans for a suite hotel within the next year-and-a-half and a boutique hotel farther down the road.

"Toronto is a beautiful city. I love it," says Lamb. "But what I haven't seen in Toronto is an international quality nightclub, where you would see, lounging in the back, a world-famous model or an actor or a young business leader."

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Boutique hotels are next: Lamb

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Lamb's experience in the condominium sales business, a market that is dominated by twenty- and thirty-somethings looking for the latest in stylish residences, has developed his sense of what's trendy. Knowing his clients' preferences as well as the next big condo project has made Lamb successful in real estate, but now he wants to tackle a new market.

"I have a reasonably good knowledge of what's going to be good, current and popular," says the 39-year-old. "I don't know why it is. It goes with clothing, it goes with music, it goes with the housing, car styles — all that stuff."

By the looks of it, Lamb wants to do to Toronto what famed New York nightclub owner and hotelier Ian Schrager — who created Studio 54 with partner Steve Rubell — did to the New York scene.

After a tax-evasion conviction that landed both men in jail and closed the infamous club, Schrager went on to open a number of boutique hotels across the U.S. His first, the Morgan in New York, was known as the first small-scale hotel of its kind and grew famous for its exclusivity and high level of service to celebrities and other VIPs.

"Restaurants and bars are always the talk of the town when they open," says Lamb. "And that could be done in Toronto and it's not — and

for some reason, nobody has really attempted to do that. I think part of the problem is money, part of the problem is the lack of courage to do it — to take a chance and not be the same as everybody else."

Lamb is known for being critical of housing in Toronto. After all, this is the guy who refers to the cookie-cutter suburban developments in Markham and Mississauga as "crapboxes" and refuses to get involved in selling any developments outside the city.

"We've been asked to do stuff in Whitby, Mississauga and parts of Etobicoke. No. Don't want to do it. What this real estate company is all about is trying to build Toronto and create great, world-class housing for the right people."

He sees Toronto as having tremendous potential to grow and develop. Unfortunately, Torontonians don't seem to see their city the same way. While the restaurants are top-quality, he says, most of the nightclubs and hotels are all the same, he explains.

"I wasn't trying to be critical about the people behind the hotels, but basically, I don't think the hotels in Toronto are really up to that world-class standard. I think we need better hotels," he says. "If no one else is doing it, why not me?"

Lamb set out to create a nightclub as a kind of litmus test to his abilities to pull off a larger-scale business. Knowing that getting money to start up a hotel is "very hard to do," Lamb knew he would have to prove his skills to pull it off before taking the real plunge into the hotel business. If he could create a club that in a few years would become the talk of Toronto, it would prove that he could do the "retailing, small end" of the hospitality business.

So he sunk \$300,000 into creating the Temple Bar. "That was kind of the idea — just to create sort of a place that was off the beaten track, hard to find, a little edgy, the music was a bit different than you'd hear in most Toronto nightclubs ... I wanted to do something completely off the map and totally different."

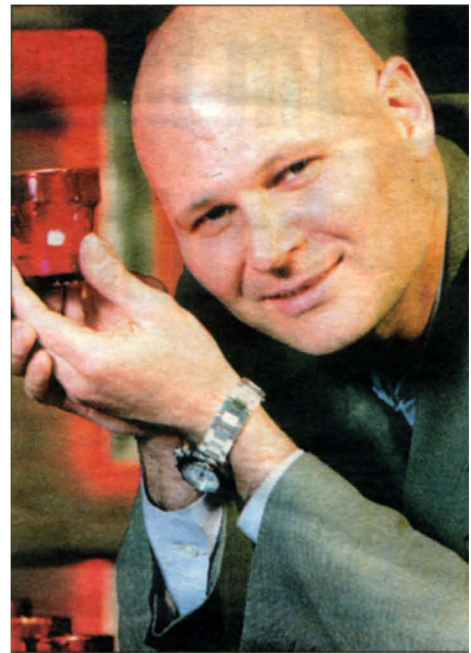
The bar, which is set to open late this week, has only been hosting private parties so far. Renovated from an old loading dock in the King-Spadina area, the club is unmarked, except for a backlit steel cross on the building. "I wanted it to be a place that people could get lost in," he explains.

Already, Lamb has the wheels in motion to open a suite-hotel in the city. He says he is very close to finalizing a deal to take part of a building now under construction and turn it into long-stay rental condo suites. He won't reveal its location yet.

The developer had designed a quarter of the 44-unit, \$8-million condo project to be separate from the rest of the complex, including a separate entrance and set of elevators. Having negotiated a letter of intent

to control this part of the development for the next 10 years, Lamb wants to convert the section into a set of furnished rental units. Called The James, the new condo-hotel should open in a year-and-a-half. If it proves successful, Lamb plans to open a boutique hotel.

"In other cities in the world, there's hotels that have the most popular nightclubs and restaurants in the city — New York, Paris, London, Miami — all those cities have a great hotel scene. Toronto doesn't. Toronto doesn't have a hotel that someone will want to take a picture of and take home to show their friends, 'Oh, I stayed in that place.' So that was one of the things I wanted to do."



Brad Lamb is Toronto's self-proclaimed condo king.