

Condo marketer passes the bar

Somewhere in an industrial alley is a new club with red velvet, cold steel

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BY DEE GIBNEY

If you build it they will come - provided they can find it.

What is it about a club with no address, hidden in an industrial alley, that spells cachet?

Intrigue, according to Brad Lamb, whose company markets resale condos and provides marketing and sales services to condo developers.

"I always check out the bars in different cities when I travel. I'm interested in the core areas of old cities. And in European cities- like Barcelona for instance- you have these ancient fortress structures, and as you walk down the little alleys you come across these great little bars where you wouldn't expect to find anything. Some are holes in the wall – just little boîtes; some, incredible examples of modern design. And they're all packed.

"In New York, there's a club called Lotus. It's in the middle of the meat-packing district, just a dark warehouse with a couple of doormen outside and all these people lined up hoping to be recognized and let in. You'd never find it as a tourist and if you did, you wouldn't be able to get in."

Even Lamb, who cuts a striking figure with his tall, solid frame, black suits and Yul Brynner dome, didn't make the grade.

"These places are mysterious. Some are intimidating, especially for women. It's a counter appeal kind of thing. No one likes someone who is too goody-goody. Women tend to be attracted to men who are not that good for them. And men are the same."

Lamb says his idea is to capitalize on this element of intrigue and to embody it from a design perspective in his new club which, to give you a hint, is off the beaten track in the Spadina-King area.

It starts with an imposing exterior with massive steel doors.

"There's no indication of what it could be. There are no windows so you can't see what is going on inside. There could be nobody there. Or it could be full. You don't know what to expect."

Because Toronto doesn't have a labyrinth of naturally occurring side streets and alleyways as do many older European cities, it was more the manipulation of the idea.

"People said, 'You want to build a bar where no one can find it?' Exactly. Everyone else is vying for window space on King St. So you have to be different. We're thumbing our nose at convention. You have to work a little harder to find me.

"If you meet a woman who gives it all up immediately, you lose interest. If you have to work really hard to win her heart, there's the satisfying sense you have earned it.

"What I'm trying to accomplish is all about the city and city lifestyle. I'm trying to bring in an element of style and good design.

"You don't want a city like Berlin, all grey and nondescript because they rebuilt so quickly (after World War II).

"Toronto has an international reputation for being boring and I think that's misplaced. It's really a fun city and we need to embrace that and to foster that image."

So Lamb indulged his fantasies. Reading about the Crusades and the Knights Templar with their white robes and red crosses inspired him.

"You go through these great old iron gates and down a cobblestone alley to a nondescript building between two warehouses. I didn't want there to be a sign – only a steel cross backlit in red. And I decided to call it 'the temple bar'."

Is he concerned about changed views since the Sept. 11 terrorist attack in New York and the Taliban's declaration of war in the name of Islam?

"Whenever you do things on the edge, you'll offend some people," he says. He feels, however, that we live in a relatively benign religious culture, where the cross has become more of a design icon than a religious statement. In fact, the cross could be the "t" in the name "temple bar," he points out.

Inside the bar, red velvet and cold steel form an incongruous design alliance. Post and beam ceilings and aged duct work speak of another incarnation.

A long concrete bar runs the length of the lower level on one side, a long narrow back-lit steel-strip drink shelf spans the other. Cable hung metal shelves hold the bar supplies.

Metal stairs suspended with steel cable and inset with glass squares of light lead up to the second level, suddenly redolent with plush red, black and maroon sofas.

One wall is covered in heavy velvet drapes. The back wall is exposed brick – and again, a large steel cross, backlit in red.

The lush red sofas are pure movie camp. *Interview with the Vampire*, based on an Anne Rice book, was Lamb's inspiration.

"I wanted it to be dark and romantic with swoopy lines and candles everywhere. So I bought up every Victorian sofa in the city and had them rebuilt."

Lamb says he's targeting the 28 to 45 age group. "It's not a place for kids."

Although the bar officially opened yesterday it has been operating under a special occasions permit since the spring – an invitation-only party venue for promotional events – while waiting for its liquor licence.

Until the police stepped in that is, and laid several charges – violations against the special occasions permit.

This, for Lamb, was a good thing. It added to the intrigue, polishing the dark image, fomenting talk.

"I must have been asked 300 times, 'When is the temple bar going to open?'" He smiles. "It served us well."