

IMMERSE AND ENGAGE

A hospitality revolution is happening in Hong Kong's Jordan at Eaton Workshop, writes SARAH ENGSTRAND

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HEN DOES A hotel become more than a hotel? And more importantly, why? The first answer is simple: when its vision is bigger than folded towels and turn-down service. The second, however, is more complex. The world is changing and a new generation is coming up to replace the old, even in the realm of property development.

Katherine Lo, daughter of real estate magnate Lo Ka-shui, is revitalising her family's Eaton brand, evolving the established hotels into something new. Equal parts Soho House and activist headquarters, the newly launched Eaton Workshop marks a fresh era for hospitality. Divided into two concepts, there is the hotel – a place for socially minded travellers to immerse and engage in the city – and there is Eaton House – a Warhol Factory-inspired co-working space geared towards “innovators, progressive thinkers and creatives” with pricing options to make it as accessible as possible; it has already attracted the likes of Sally Coco owner Vera Lui and artist Stanley Wong, amongst others. A number of residencies are also available for artists and activists.

From the outside of the Nathan Road location in Jordan, not much has changed. But follow the neon signs in and you'll find a space like Hong Kong has never seen. Designed by AvroKo to be a fully functional, ever-evolving home of art, activism, social enterprise and hospitality, it's a retro-decked out warren. A towering atrium looks over an eclectic food court, commissioned wall art leads to a maze of social enterprises in the members-only Eaton House and there's an in-house radio



station. There are even hotel rooms, and guests can enjoy new-age wellness treatments, a rooftop pool and yoga studio.

“It's a crazy journey, walking through it and seeing it come to life after years of planning,” says Lo. Eaton Workshop is open but not quite finished when we meet. Behind her, artists work diligently to finish their pieces as guests wander through. “It's surreal how the things in my head became real.” She's fresh off a flight from the US, where she's already opened the first Eaton Workshop in Washington DC.

Lo is no ordinary hotelier – and so it follows that what she's created is no ordinary hotel. Growing up in a wealthy family, splitting time between the US and Hong Kong, it would have been easy for her to do anything at all, really. But the Yale graduate chose to become an art devotee – earning herself a master's degree in film from the University of Southern California – and an activist, campaigning for global social and environmental justice. When her father approached her to join the family business in 2011, it was a tough choice.

“My father asked me if I would make a hotel brand for him that would reflect the changing world around us,” she recalls. “I thought for a long time and decided it would be a really great opportunity to take all my passions for social justice and art, and actually funnel it through the platform of a hotel or a real estate company – which is really unusual.”

Having campaigned for years, Lo knows the frustration that comes from lack of funding and how hard it is to make an impact. This hotel would be her solution, a way to give a home to those she stood with on the streets, a concrete megaphone that would amplify their picket chants – in a chic space, of course. “Usually, when you're an artist, you're always trying to get funding, or as an activist you're doing a petition that has no impact,” she says. “But to really take these

resources of a global company and channel it into making a real difference in the world, that's what inspired me.”

Despite the lingering of a cold and a bit of jet lag, Lo is instantly charming. There's no pretence here – just a woman at the start of a new empire, trying to make something good for the world. She has all the makings of an entrepreneurial success story. She can get a point across without being rude. When I asked about the DC Eaton Workshop's position as an “anti-Trump hotel” – a reference to a recent *Washington Post* article – she laughs. Over the interjections of her PR handler, she says simply: “I never said that. The journalist definitely called it that, which I can understand.”

When asked about her opinions on Hong Kong politics and Eaton Workshop's alignment, she explains her brand's core values of planet, tribe, consciousness and creativity. They are “progressive” and “radical” and, she says, attract people who feel the same. “Anyone who relates to our shared values is welcome to stay here and hang out here.”

And what a place to hang out. Though many in Hong Kong may view Jordan as an unusual location for this type of venture, it's a popular area with diverse restaurants,

From left: Katherine Lo, founder and president of Eaton Workshop; the Eaton Hong Kong is a strong contender for having Kowloon's best rooftop pool

shopping and (slightly more) affordable rent. You could almost describe it as Brooklyn before hipsters. And that's exactly why it's the location of the new Eaton Workshop.

"My father is especially interested in the transformations of neighbourhoods," says Lo, explaining why there are no Workshops in already-trendy areas. In Washington DC, America's capital city, the new Eaton Workshop is located on K Street. Far from the pristine marble of the nation's famed monuments, it's where lobbyists and political decision-makers congregate. It is, she says, a destination stop – or rather, it will be.

The same goes for Jordan. "What we're building is so different to what's here," she says. "If we build these amazing events and offerings inside, people who are craving that will come. There are so few spaces to hang out; you're forced to go to shopping malls or cafes that eventually kick you out. I think we can fill that gap."

Buy a coffee or not, they want you in the space. Whether you're interacting with one of the rotating exhibits, doing homework or grabbing lunch, Eaton Workshop is determined to be the social heart of Kowloon. To get there, Lo has enlisted a team of culture experts including Chantal Wong, the brand's director of culture, and James Avey, its director of sound. They've been tasked with creating the atmosphere in Eaton Workshop and making it work for Hong Kong. In DC, Lo tapped the founding editor and chief of digital video channel Nowness to be her head of all creative. Soon, Eaton Workshop will launch a digital platform and it's commissioned its first film. "We're putting a lot of resources into original content," says Lo excitedly. "Film, video, radio – you know, art and activism are our two main pillars."

The pillars are mentioned repeatedly. These foundations will help Eaton Workshop attain its ultimate goal: creating a space where everybody can be their best and most authentic self, travellers and locals alike. The team use words like "manifest" and talk about "activation". It couldn't be more perfect for 2018 unless it was built of crystals and matcha.

"[Hong Kong-based artist and Chochukmo vocalist] Jan Curious is so inspired by being able to draw directly on a wall, he's going to draw around the entire space," explains Wong, gesturing as an artist brings characters to life across the room. "That's the difference between having people like us work here – it's authentic." Coming from an arts background herself, Wong is able to create a cohesive community of creatives. Unlike galleries that can sometimes take up to 50 per cent of a commission, Eaton Workshop is dedicated to protecting the people it works with. "It's a small, tight-knit community, and if people think you're here for them, they're going to want to be here and speak highly of you," she says.

Outside, the venture is planning billboards that will change every few years (and possibly a large-scale installation over the swimming pool), while inside there will be a frequently rotating "and slightly more conceptual" gallery and ever-changing street photography exhibitions. The space will be available for groups and communities to use as needed, including this month's Women's Festival.

The first of its kind in the city, Eaton Workshop, Sally Coco and Reel Women Hong Kong are coming together to create nine days of women's empowerment through panel discussions, film screenings and workshops. The event, which will be mostly in Cantonese, is intended to spark a dialogue about diversity and #MeToo, and encourage attendees to find their voices – as people and as women.



There will even be workshops exploring everything from menopause to guided bondage. "Gender equality is one of the core issues we are committed to supporting with Eaton Workshop" says Lo. "The women of Hong Kong have long deserved a platform and spotlight, and we are proud to be part of the changing tides for redefining what it means to be a modern woman in our society today."

One wonders if it might be too much for Hong Kong, the city that has made an art of lamenting the lack of culture while simultaneously strangling its development. This doesn't bother the Eaton Workshop team at all. "It's exciting!" exclaims Wong, while Avey takes a more pragmatic approach, "Where else are they going to go?" he asks, with an easy laugh.

They are, of course, both right. Eaton Workshop will deliver it all: design, community, art and more – and guests are free to use it as they please. "It's a long-term vision," Wong adds, "If we can show other companies that this is possible, we can really change things." #

From top: A vintage neon sign welcomes guests; inside Eaton Workshop, a co-working space within the Eaton Hong Kong