

'Anti-Trump hotel' opens in Washington DC

Eaton DC offers platform for campaigners as world's first 'activist' hotel. Clever marketing or genuine attempt to broker change?

[Tyler Wetherall](#) Thu 4 Oct 2018 07.13 EDT



Making room for politics ... the opening of Eaton DC on September 29. Photograph: Tasos Katopodis/Getty Images

Join the “group sound bath” in the wellness centre, stop by the civic engagement workshop in the lobby, then settle in for a rousing performance of protest songs from the all-women Resistance Revival Chorus on the rooftop bar. This is a small sample of the events that were on offer at the opening weekend of [the Eaton Hotel](#) in Washington DC – the world's first “activist hotel”.

Founded on an ethos of progressive ideals and social and environmental justice – and located just a few blocks from President Trump's eponymous

hotel chain – the 209-room Eaton Workshop has, unsurprisingly, been dubbed the “anti-Trump hotel”.

When asked about the moniker, founder and president Katherine Lo smiles. “I definitely don’t mind,” she said, speaking from the lobby’s Radical Library, its shelves lined with freethinking writers (Maxine Hong Kingston, Roxanne Gay, Langston Hughes, etc), a collection selected by campaigners [Teaching for Change](#). “The [hotel] concept was created in 2014, but after the 2016 election it gave our mission more gravitas and even more urgency to accomplish what we set out do.”



Radical thinking? The hotel library. Photograph: Tasos Katopodis/Getty Images

Lo, 36, is the daughter of real estate billionaire Lo Ka Shui, the chairman of Great Eagle Holdings, which owns the luxury Langham hotels along with Eaton. After attending Yale (where she became a student delegate with Greenpeace), she did a master’s in fine arts in film and returned to her native Hong Kong to work in the film industry. But her father set her a task.

“He asked me to create a brand that would change everything, ‘the Tesla of hotels’,” she said. “It was a huge request and I’m not saying that’s what I

created, but I thought it was incredibly forward-thinking of him.”

On first impressions, Eaton looks like another hip eco-conscious hotel. It's stylish with lots of clean, wood lines, dazzling light and cool retro features, like the record-players in each room and the framed family photos, sourced from yard sales. Small details point toward its politics: sustainable bamboo hangers in the closets, a UN Declaration of Human Rights rather than the Bible on the bedside table, and gender-neutral bathroom signage. The rooftop bar, Wild Days, serves plant-based Impossible Foods nachos and there are plans for an urban farm. As part of the media arm of the company, there's an in-house radio station at the entrance, inspired by radical New York broadcaster East Village Radio, where you can watch as visiting activists and musicians are interviewed, and an art deco cinema room. The wellness centre leans toward the new age and spiritual practices: reiki, crystal healing, and “shamanic journeys”. There is also a 300-member co-working space, Eaton House.

None of that is breaking new ground. But the hotel, with rooms starting at \$199 a night, is just one pillar of Eaton Workshop and serves as a source of revenue for its nonprofit initiatives. This includes a progressive events programme, run by an artist, activist and former social worker, with Eaton itself commissioning film and artwork.

The first piece sits in the lobby: a multimedia installation by AJ Schnack playing 700 hours of presidential campaign footage on loop. Eaton will also create a residency scheme for investigative journalists and offer its meeting rooms free to campaigners to host events. The hotel is intended to act as a radical HQ of sorts in the centre of the storm.

The precise percentage of profits earmarked for these causes was unclear at the time of writing. Lo, however, intends to register the hotel as a B

Corporation – a certification denoting social and environmental performance and legal accountability to balance profit and purpose – after which such details would be publicly available.

“We’re all curious whether we can prove it’s successful; that you can be ethical and environmental and also profitable at the same time,” Lo said.



One of the 209 rooms at the hotel

With plans for three further hotels already afoot, it seems investors are banking on that success. Eaton Hong Kong has its official opening later this year, and branches in Seattle and San Francisco are planned for 2019.

It would be easy to characterise Eaton as yet another corporation co-opting activism for profit – the [Kendall Jenner Pepsi ad](#) of the hospitality trade. But there is a level of sincerity operating among those involved that goes beyond PR. Activists and performers from around the US swapped notes and contact details – Lo’s vision in practice – during the opening weekend. Others were content drinking \$16 cocktails at the bar. Lo also put her skills to use when co-producing the first film commissioned by Eaton Media, joining its director and production team on a road trip across America interviewing environmental activists.

There is a nascent trend for hotels touting a social conscience, such as the [Standard's Ring Your Rep](#) phone booths or [11 Howard donating a portion of the room cost to the Global Poverty Project](#). Eaton takes this a step further. It's hard to imagine the investors from Great Eagle agreeing to finance a project that will alienate a conservative clientele without Lo's family connection to the company. It is perhaps best seen as an unlikely experiment that happened due to the good fortune of a billionaire's daughter having right-on politics and the vision to pull it off.

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