

# 'Keep robot brothels out of Houston': sex doll company faces pushback

Kinky S Dolls, a Canadian firm, is targeting Houston as the first market in a planned US expansion

Houston's perhaps lesser-known status as a sex trade hub was noted by Texas's governor, Greg Abbott, in June when he lamented that the city had more brothels than Starbucks outlets. And this city has a lot of coffee shops. But what Houston is apparently badly missing is a robot brothel, so called. Now a Canadian company is trying to fill that yawning gap.

Kinky S Dolls, a firm that bills itself as the first "adult love dolls rent-before-you-buy service in North America", sells realistic-looking life-size dolls with basic artificial intelligence functions – and also offers them for use by the half-hour or hour at a warehouse in Toronto.

Now the firm is targeting Houston as the first market in a planned US expansion, but is meeting resistance from a Christian anti-sex trafficking and anti-pornography group and the city's mayor.

"It's not the sort of business that I want in the city of Houston," the city's Democratic mayor, Sylvester Turner, said at a press conference last week, adding that he has asked the city's legal and health departments to examine the proposal.

Kinky S Dolls, which did not respond to a request for comment, had reportedly intended to open its new location imminently. "The States is a bigger market, and a healthier market, and God bless Trump," owner Yuval Gavriel told the Washington Examiner, referencing the United States' 45th president, Donald Trump.

But city officials have frustrated that hope, at least for now. The city "has told the lessor or owners of the property to cease demolition and/or construction work there until they obtain a city construction permit – for which they have not yet applied," a spokesman for the mayor's office told the Guardian.

There do not appear to be any local, state or federal laws specifically banning "robot brothels" but Elijah Rising, a Houston not-for-profit that gives public tours of areas where sex trafficking is common, hopes moral pressure will force a rethink. It started a "Keep Robot Brothels Out of Houston" online petition that as of Monday had more than 12,600 signatures.

"We want to see the end of this systemic problem. We said, this robot thing looks very similar to pornography, in that when men engage with pornography it sort of detaches them from any sort of human relation, and we've noticed that with sex buyers," said a staff member, David Gamboa.

He fears that realistic sex dolls will increase, not lower, demand for human prostitution and embolden men to act out violent fantasies. "We've been seeing a lot of people on social media say this is going to solve the issue of sex trafficking. That is not our stance. We saw it as going to actually encourage men, or at least create that proclivity in men, to go out and purchase a woman," he said.

Gamboa spoke at Elijah Rising's office, a squat brown building next to a freeway near central Houston. Close to some of the city's richest and poorest neighborhoods, the location is typically eclectic in a place that prides itself on its lack of official zoning regulations: three doors down there is a 24-hour "bikini lounge" next to a dog day-care centre. A Ferrari dealership, a gun range and a country music saloon are only a short drive away, as is the proposed Kinky S Dolls store, in a plain two-story building just off a busy road.

Elijah Rising consulted with Kathleen Richardson, professor of ethics and culture of robots and AI at De Montfort University in Leicester, in the UK, and founder of the Campaign Against Sex Robots. "Sex dolls are merely a new niche market in the sex trade," she said by email.

"While these dolls are hidden from the public at the present there is nothing stopping any of the buyers taking their 'sex doll' to the supermarket, on the school run, or in any public space. Therefore we have to consider the dolls as a form of 3D pornography.

Claims about social benefits of sex robots greatly overstated, say experts

"There are also issues about what happens when you normalise a culture where women as the prostituted become visibly and openly interchangeable with dolls."

Kinky S Dolls offers nine dolls for sale on its website, all young-looking, light-skinned females. A part-silicone blonde doll for sale at \$3,499, "Kim", is listed as 153cm tall and weighing 35kg with a voice and heated body. Another company is reportedly opening a sex doll brothel in Vancouver.

A company in California has produced a prototype hyper-realistic sex robot that can tell jokes, quote Shakespeare and remember birthdays.

As developments in animatronics and artificial intelligence make "sexbots" ever more lifelike, the sphere of internet-connected sex toys is also set for a boost since a US "teledildonics" patent that was blamed for stifling innovation expired in August.

## *Houston Lawmakers Aim to Block First U.S. Sex-Robot Brothel*

**The City Council is floating an ordinance change that would effectively put the high-tech house of ill-repute out of business before it even opens.**

**Daily Beast - Emily Shugerman, 10.01.18 3:25 PM ET**

A Canadian company wants to open the first sex-robot brothel in the U.S.—and city leaders in Houston aren't feeling the love.

KinkyDolls already operates a storefront in Toronto, where customers can rent and test their lifelike sex dolls—complete with “VaginalAnal orifices that feel just like the real thing”—before deciding to buy them. But when the company announced plans to open its first American “Adult Love Dolls Brothel” in Texas last month, it sparked backlash from community groups and questions over its permits. Now, the City Council is attempting to throw cold water on the whole thing.

In a press conference last week, Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner said the brothel was “not the sort of business I’m looking for in the city of Houston.”

“I’m not trying to be the moral police or anything like that, but I am charged with the health and safety of the people within our city,” Turner said, adding that he would review city ordinances for possible restrictions on the new business.

This week, an agenda item popped up on the Houston City Council’s website suggesting the expansion of an existing ordinance on “sexual arcades” to include businesses that carry “anthropomorphic devices and objects utilized for entertainment.”

The amendment would allow for the sale of such devices, but would prohibit customers from using them at the store. A violation could result in the business’s permit being revoked, according to the proposal. The city council is set to tackle the measure on Wednesday.

Meanwhile, it appears the brothel may no longer have a storefront to call home.

On the day of the mayor’s press conference, inspectors from the Houston Public Works Department performed a “very routine” stop at the planned site, a spokesperson for the mayor’s office told The Daily Beast. The inspectors discovered that demolition had occurred at the site without a permit and “red-tagged” the building, indicating that any further development could land the business owners in municipal court.

Then, over the weekend, the owner of the property claimed he never actually signed a lease agreement with the business. A lawyer for the owner told ABC13 that the brothel had been “misrepresented as an

art gallery,” and that his client wanted “no part in this story or any type of any sexually oriented business.”

The brothel is also facing criticism from a local anti-sex-trafficking group, which claims the business will increase the demand for prostitution. The anti-trafficking group—a religious organization called Elijah Rising, whose stated mission is to “end sex trafficking through prayer, awareness, intervention, and restoration”—started an online petition that has garnered more than 12,000 signatures.

David Gamboa, the group’s communication manager, told The Daily Beast that the group plans to meet with the city council this week to discuss options. He added that Elijah Rising sees the robot brothel as similar to prostitution or pornography—institutions that give men permission to rehearse “deviant sexual conduct.”

“These businesses that are going to be renting out sex robots, we see that impacting the buyers,” he said. “It tells them it’s ok to go to an establishment and purchase sex; that consent is purchasable.”

But proponents say the business is perfectly legal, and could even benefit local sex workers. When a similar business opened in Toronto this summer, sex worker advocate Monica Forrester told CityNews she hoped it would start a conversation about the decriminalization of prostitution.

“I think it’ll open up a bigger conversation hopefully around... how decriminalization will allow sex workers to work in safety, to have rights, and to validate that it’s a form of work,” she said.

KinkySdolls did not return multiple requests for comment.

The idea of renting out silicone women for sex has been controversial outside of Texas, too. Italy’s first sex doll brothel, LumiDolls, closed its doors last month after municipal police raided the Turin-based business just nine days after it opened. France’s first sex doll brothel, Xdolls in Paris, continues to attract criticism from local politicians and feminists activists after almost a year in operation.

# The Proposed Sex Robot Brothel in Houston

Yes, that's a real thing.

Texas Monthly – Dan Soloman, October 3, 2018

The future is a weird place. And as anxiety-producing fiction like *Blade Runner*, *Westworld* (the HBO show or the Yul Brynner original), and *Black Mirror* has shown us, it's because of technology. If you're not a sci-fi person, though, you may be unprepared for a reality that will soon be descending upon us, signified by three little words: Sex robot brothel.

Last month, Toronto-based company KinkyDolls announced that—following a successful launch in Canada's most populous city—it would be expanding to the U.S. Specifically, the location of its first American sex robot brothel would be Houston. You have questions, we're sure. We have (some) answers.

What is a sex robot brothel?

First, just take a moment and consider if you really want this information in your head before you proceed. Once you learn something, you can't un-learn it. Are you certain that you want to know?

OK, here we go: A sex robot brothel is a place where people go to interact with sex toys that look like women and have parts that simulate the sexual characteristics one would associate with women. And this isn't just a Fleshlight. They are fairly sophisticated—the people who make the robots claim that they're so convincing, people are capable of falling in love with them.

They have some degree of AI, using the same basic voice recognition technology that's in your phone or an Alexa device, and the advanced models can make facial expressions to react to the things a person says to them. The field of teledildonics (which we swear to gosh is a real term and not something we just made up) is rapidly expanding its technological capacity too. The devices, which are covered in silicone, are built with heaters that can simulate body warmth, and newer models can be “seduced,” requiring stimulation to the parts you would probably expect in order to activate.

So that's what a sex robot is. They're in the vanguard of sex technology—a \$30 billion a year industry—and they're expected to become more common in the years to come. A sex robot brothel, meanwhile, is a facility in which there are a lot of these things, and people can pay a fee to, er, interact with them in a short-term, private, on-site rental. It's like a video arcade, but for sex robots.

Is this legal?

Ehhhhh. We'll go with “it's not illegal.” Perhaps unsurprisingly, many civic leaders are not especially excited about being the home of a sex robot brothel! “This is not the kind of business I would like to see in Houston, and certainly this is not the kind of business the city is seeking to attract,” Mayor Sylvester Turner told the *Houston Chronicle*. In Italy, a robot sex brothel that opened in September lasted only two weeks before it was shut down by police. The business model is more widespread in Europe, with locations in cities as far-flung as Barcelona and Moscow.

Currently, Houston is trying to slow down the construction of the KinkyDolls business through the permitting process, requiring the company to submit a demolition permit at the location at which it intends to build, and be approved by the city. The city may attempt to pass an ordinance that would restrict such businesses, but at the moment, there's no such law in place. Texas law explicitly bans prostitution, but the ordinance in question requires two parties (even if one isn't human) to engage in sexual behavior together for money. In Texas—and every other state except for Alabama, which bans sex toys—there's no state ban that would prevent people from going into a private room to, um, enjoy themselves with whatever devices happen to be lying around.

(Update: Shortly after this story published, the Houston City Council voted to ban sex robot brothels within city limits.)

Is this sanitary?

Uh. It depends. If the patrons all use condoms, then the risk of sexually transmitted diseases is probably low. Stacey Townsend, CEO of Real Love Sex Dolls, the Austin-based company that leads the industry in human-shaped sex toys, told the Houston Chronicle that the devices are meant to be used by one person, and one person only—though her business model does involve selling, and not renting, the devices. They “cannot be completely sterilized after use,” she told the paper.

How much do they cost?

The location in Toronto charges \$80 for thirty minutes, or \$120 for a full hour, according to Vice. (A deluxe package involving two dolls for four hours will run \$960.) Guests who are so smitten with the experience that they want to re-create it at home can purchase the devices from the company starting at around \$4,000.

Does the public find this troublesome?

A lot of people do! Some people think that they're misogynistic wish fulfillment devices. Others believe that they'll lead to the end of human relationships as we know them. Both Christian and Islamic leaders have condemned the use of the devices, saying that they go against God's plan. Living, breathing sex workers consider them dehumanizing and dangerous to people in their line of work.

Reducing sexual interactions to the parts that get rubbed together is probably not great for us, if it becomes widespread in the way that futurists fear it might. The companies behind these devices are confident that they're doing something good for the world—easing loneliness, providing comfort, offering an outlet for certain fantasies that are unacceptable to enact with another human being—but providing men with the simulacrum of an actual willing partner in which consent is entirely removed from the equation is probably not the absolute healthiest thing for a society. There are theorists who've spent a lot of time thinking about this—and it's not all doom and gloom—but if you're feeling squicked out by it, you're not alone.