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later, signalling the ascension of a new uber-tower and the arrival of a big idea; if Katsalidis is right, buildings will no longer be so much built as manufactured, and much of the workforce of the future will be taken off-site to work under cover in a safe environment entirely immune from the vicissitudes of weather.

"We're hoping our process will make a significant difference to the building industry," he explains in his gravel voice and non-nonsense manner during an interview at the Southbank offices of architecture and design firm Fender-Katsalidis, which he founded with Karl Fender in the mid-1990s.

"Construction costs are being driven increasingly by high labour costs in this country, and we're sending people up into high-rise buildings to do the work that they can do on the ground. As things stand, they spend a lot of time in lifts, and there's a lot of down time. Out of an eight-hour day you might only get six or four hours of work. There's also the safety aspect, and when you do things on the ground in safe and controlled conditions it increases the quality of the product. For all these reasons we expect the process to be adapted quite widely. We've had huge interest in Australia and Asia. The Singaporean government has come to us and invited us to apply, and we're working closely with Samsung to develop some prototypes for use in South East Asia."

Katsalidis is speaking as a businessman with something to sell — he is dressed as one in slim-fit white shirt and grey trousers — and the one thing he is careful not to convey is doubt. Yet observers note the commercial risk involved in this high-wire act of architectural entrepreneurship. Charles Justin, for example, while acknowledging that he is not privy to any financial details, reckons Katsalidis has "put significant financial resources" into Unitised Building. "He likes to push boundaries and he's prepared to back himself," Justin says. "It's almost like a gambling streak where you throw everything on one last bet." The suggestion might help to explain, in part, the architect's close relationship with David Walsh, for whom he has built a bijoux home on Tasmania's east coast.

A distinct aura hovers over Nonda Katsalidis in Australian architectural circles, and particularly in Melbourne. This has little to do with his recent metamorphosis into Nonda the Builder, and everything to do with the craft-like qualities he imparts to smaller-scale buildings dating from the early 90s. One of these, a home at St Andrews Beach, Rye, is a low-lying citadel of russet-hued Corten steel and weathered timber set in windblown coastal scrubland. The building looks not unlike a shipping container that has washed ashore and been left to weather, and that was precisely the architect's intention. St Andrews is a little piece of austere architectural poetry that speaks to several traditions — industrial, agricultural, and Australian coastal — all at once.

The other significant Katsalidis building of this period, Melbourne Terrace, is an apartment development with an assertive public presence at the corner of Franklin and Queen streets near Queen Victoria Market. One of the late-modernist jewels in Melbourne's prized urban fabric, Melbourne Terrace is the closest thing to a hand-crafted building that the economics of modern construction will allow, and it has been lauded as one of the top 20 Australian buildings of the last century by Architecture Australia. The complex houses 60 apartments within four buildings, each bearing a Latinate name — Equus, Mondo, Roma and Fortuna — and a Peter Corlett sculpture at its entrance. The moulds for the distinctive balconies, finished in oxidised copper, were cast by students from nearby RMIT, and the roofline is punctuated rhythmically by large vertical slabs with serrated edges. The project as a whole is immersed, playfully, in the early 20th-century inheritance of European modernism.

During our interview I tell Katsalidis that Melbourne Terrace has just been put forward for heritage listing by the city, of which he is unaware. How does he feel about



A new homespun vernacular

Canberra's Hotel Hotel has a warm aesthetic created by Greek-Australian architects collaborating with Japanese craftsmen



On the first three floors of Canberra's new Nishi building, in its final construction phase, sits a boutique hotel with a hand-crafted air conceived with a strong social vision. All this despite its unprepossessing name: Hotel Hotel. Nectar Efkarpidis is co-director of the Molonglo Group, developers for the NewActon precinct in central Canberra, of which Hotel Hotel is a small though vital element. Aside from the three integrated floors of the hotel, apartments of different sizes are dispersed throughout the building.

Efkarpidis's family company charged Melbourne firm Fender Katsalidis with the masterplanning and architectural design of NewActon back in 2001, and the same firm was given the task of co-ordinating Nishi's architecture. After interviewing eight of Japan's leading architects in Tokyo, Efkarpidis and the design team contracted Hiroshima's Suppose Design Office to handle Nishi residential. "I'm fascinated by the approach of the Japanese, largely because of their dedication to craftsmanship," he says.

The move was fired not only by an appreciation for the Japanese craft tradition. Efkarpidis, who

looks askance at the size of the average Australian home, was drawn to a design culture with the "capacity to understand small spaces" and to construct them in an exquisite way. By reaching out to Suppose, he added an extra layer of nuance and complexity to the project, particularly as Suppose employed no English speakers.

Added interest comes from the combination of recycled timbers and warm textures in the interior, and a design brief that insists, in Efkarpidis's words, on a "quintessentially Australian vernacular". The hotel also serves a social ideal, Efkarpidis adds, for it is "a hub where people come together".

David Sutherland, director of planning and design at Fender Katsalidis, was a key member of the team for Nishi, and he enjoyed the creative affinity that developed between the Melbourne and Japanese designers. "Suppose came to us with an idea we thought was really nice and we said, 'You guys have got the better idea so let's use that'. The prime idea for the residential facade was theirs. We enjoyed seeing what could flourish from the collaboration."

Luke Slattery