

VENUE FOR ARTS

The collaboration of creatives at Hotel Hotel

BY ANJA FAHS

Canberra is actually a compromise. As the rivalry between Melbourne and Sydney prevented a decision in favour of either of these Australian cities becoming the capital of the country, Canberra was simply declared the capital back in 1908. Today, the city, which lies around 300 kilometres southwest of Sydney, is considered an international centre of design. Created about 100 years ago on the basis of the visionary development plans of Walter Burley Griffin and his wife Marion, the city is now a place of continual change, something akin to a living design lab. It is home to ever new ideas aimed at making the city more liveable for its residents. It is undoubtedly the perfect setting for a very special kind of hotel, a hotel that, just like Canberra itself, is dedicated to constant transformation.

Nikos Kalogeropoulos is Director and CFO of the Molonglo Group, which developed and operates 'Hotel Hotel'. He explains the philosophy behind 'Hotel Hotel' and how it uses its own originality to take a stand against uniformity.

How did you come up with the name "Hotel Hotel", why a double "Hotel"?

We thought of very many names before deciding on the name 'Hotel Hotel'. They all felt loaded and a bit grandiose. We wanted something simple that didn't have any baggage. Many languages employ diminutives that express familiarity. Something we do in English is to repeat a first name as a term of endearment. Jo becomes Jo Jo, Claire becomes Claire Claire. And Hotel became Hotel Hotel. As it turns out, everything has been thought of before. We realised after finally agreeing on the name that it is actually also the name of an art series produced by Martin Kippenberger, who did a series of drawings in the 80s and 90s on hotel stationery that he and his friends collected during their hotel stays. His work is compiled in an aptly named book called 'Hotel Hotel'. Hotel Hotel is located in New Acton, the art and culture precinct of Canberra. Is this why it puts such a big focus on art and design?

For us at Molonglo Group, we believe that art provides us with the knowledge to better understand humanity, which inevitably leads to deeper introspection and a voice for self-expression. It is not an option to contemplate life without art and culture. We treasure simple human interactions and making every day experiences interesting and special. Design is important only as a mechanism for creating an environment where these human experiences can flourish. It is this prospect of the human encounter that is at the heart of New Acton and Hotel Hotel.

The hotel is the brainchild of Molonglo Group, an artisan focused property and production house. What exactly does the Molonglo Group do?

We seek no answer to what we do, as this will only serve to bind us. We are a collective of fantasists resisting the spread of homogeneity.

And how does Hotel Hotel represent that?

Hotel Hotel was always conceived of as a vessel for ongoing artistic and cultural creation and disruption. This man-

ifests itself with our creative projects, where we work with others on exhibitions at our Nishi Gallery, small exhibitions in the cabinets on our ground floor. There are also performances, talks, workshops, as well as publications and films. In shifting the paradigm of what a hotel ought to be, we have sowed new and renewed mythologies about ourselves and how this relates to pluralistic and diverse societies.

What can the guests expect in the 68 rooms?

With the rooms we aimed at reimagining the textures and layers of the Australian landscape and shack. Canberra is nicknamed the 'bush capital', and the trees and mountains here are really what sets this city apart from other cities both in Australia and around the world, and we wanted to speak to that context. We did this by using raw, stripped back materials. The beds are made from reclaimed oak, the walls are a mix of concrete, cork, earthen clay, and natural fibre wallpapers. The rooms are dressed with restored and reupholstered 20th century Australian furniture and laden with original artworks, mostly made by Australian artists, that we collected over ten years. Each room is different. In terms of views, half of them look out to the lake or the bush, we call these Sun rooms. The other half look into our internal atrium populated with ferns from Tasmanian forests destined for clearance, and we call these Atrium rooms.

So "Australia" as a country and especially the locally surrounding landscape of Canberra influenced the design of Hotel Hotel?

The design is quintessentially Australian vernacular. The captivating Canberra landscape, its remoteness yet rich biodiversity and natural ecosystems set against a backdrop of hills and alpine mountains was expressed in the hotel through the expansive use of raw materials. The textures and patinas remind us of the bush, big trees, well-worn t-shirts and old wise faces that in every line reflect the enormity and joy of a life well lived. They reflect our love for the well made, the curious and the comfortable, celebrating the stories of Australia as both a place and a people.

Are the public spaces of the hotel designed in the same matter?

The importance of art and culture continues through the hotel's public spaces. As with the rooms, the public spaces act as a catalogue of collected and reclaimed 20th century furniture principally from Australia and occasionally from New Zealand, Italy, France and Brazil. The hotel's public lounge is a series of nested spaces made of woven rough formed concrete structural lintels. The public lounge houses the reception, concierge and library, two large fireplaces, and the Monster kitchen and bar. Two tiled walls mark the entry to and from the Mosaic room. The tiles were sourced from the estate of the late Dutch immigrant ceramic sculptor Gerard Havekes, hand placed by multiple individuals. The result is two giant ceramic patchwork walls.

Leading up to the hotel is the grand stair. How was that stair created and built?

As with all our endeavours, the grand stair was a collaboration. We, that is the Molonglo Group, Oculus and March Studios, designed several iterations before we were happy. It was conceived of as a place without any commercial intent, »





The materials processed in the hotel are a reminder of Canberra and its fascinating landscape. All materials and objects recall the joy of life and love for the history of Australia.



as a place of congregation, like a town square. It is made of over 2,250 pieces of timber that were salvaged from the Nishi building construction site, a basketball court and a demolished house and pieced together with 1,200 steel rods that hold the wood in place. The wood and rods were painstakingly assembled over five months by builders CBD Contracting and local carpenters Deep in the Woods. In a sense, it echoes the Nishi building site itself - apparent chaos that has in fact been intricately and precisely design. No two pieces of wood are the same, no two steel rods are the same; each one was individually designed to fit together and make the whole. **Tell us more about the art and artists who are involved in Hotel Hotel.**

There are many stories to tell, too many to tell here. But the tessellated mirror behind the reception desk on the ground floor for example was thought up by Australian artist Lucy McRae. She drew on the primitive modernism of Canberra's original designers, the American architect and landscape architect Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin.

Many elements inside the rooms were made in collaboration with artists and artisans. The glass pendant lights were made by a local glass cutter Amos Enders, for example. The stools and kidney tables were made by metal fabricators in Sydney. Then there is the collection of artworks that live in the rooms and on the ground floor and were hoarded over ten years by our creative director, Nectar Efkarpidis. The collection includes a plethora of local artists including Mariana del Castillo, Edmund Hogan, Adam John Kinninmont, Eadie Newman, and works by national artists such as Rhys Lee, Catherine Staughton and Jahne Pasco-White and Craig Rochfort. Even international artists such as Rik Meijers from the Netherlands, Taylor McKimens from the US, and Japan's Hidehisa Tachibana are on show.

Hotel Hotel sits in Canberra's environmentally thoughtful Nishi building. Please tell us about the environmental considerations of Hotel Hotel.

We approach environmental sustainability from a number of different angles at Hotel Hotel, and as with all proposals it is multi-layered. The fact that we sit in the Nishi building goes a long way towards helping us to accomplish our goals. Our hotel rooms were designed with windows that open to reduce the need for air-conditioning and are fitted with sensors that turn off the air-conditioning when they are opened. Similarly, our rooms are fitted with light sensors that turn off the lights after 20 minutes if no movement is detected. Being in the Nishi building also means that we have the capacity to do things like harvest rainwater to irrigate our surrounding gardens.

When it came to fitting the rooms, we always sought the most environmentally considerate option in terms of materials. We used wool carpets instead of synthetic fibres, bamboo, grasses, clay and cork for our walls, oriented strand board, which are off-cuts from other carpentry products, for the wardrobes, sourced salvaged wood for the bedheads. This thinking was applied all the way down to small details such as using beeswax to seal raw surfaces instead of chemical based sealants and using low VOC paints.

Operationally, we also try to make the most considerate choices. For example, our rooms are stocked with large, refillable bottles of bathroom products rather than single use bottles. Our minibar is sourced locally and organically when possible and we have chosen not to supply plastic bottles of water in the rooms. We source organic and/or biodegradable guest amenities such as cotton buds and toothbrushes. The Monster kitchen and bar sources locally, seasonally and directly from producers whenever possible, therefore reducing food miles and packaging. They only use biodegradable packaging and manage their own beehives. Whenever possible we choose suppliers that have an environmental management plan over those that don't. These choices are continually reassessed through the lens of sustainable innovation.

Hotel Hotel is made from and with art. Is there a regular cultural programme as well?

Hotel Hotel is also a vessel for ongoing cultural creation. This creation comes in the form of cultural programming, curation, and content publishing. Cultural programming activates the Hotel Hotel spaces by way of gigs and performances at the Monster kitchen and bar. We hold the annual Art Not Apart festival and more intimate workshops. The Hotel Hotel B-side art and objects exhibitions show regularly at the Nishi Gallery in New Acton. At times these are Hotel Hotel collaborative exhibitions and at times they are curated by invitation.

How will Hotel Hotel develop further and change in the future? For example, are there any kind of new spaces to add to the hotel?

Hotel Hotel is a vessel for creation and dialogue continually seeking ways to remind us of our transience. We are currently reimagining several exciting new spaces. We can't wait to show our guests.

hotel-hotel.com.au

NIKOS KALOGEROPOULOS

As Director and CFO of Molonglo Group, Nikos is responsible for the financial strategy and management of the group. He partners with all elements of the business to ensure commercial viability and growth while transforming numbers into cultural endeavours. When the opportunity presents itself, we may occasionally see Nikos performing live music, delivering stand up poetry or debating the philosophy of urban design.