

Canberra's Vertical Village *Hotel Hotel and Beyond*

Hotel Hotel brings together the work of more than 30 of the country's top creatives to unveil a meticulously considered hotel experience, in Canberra.

BY CAROLINE CLEMENTS · PHOTOGRAPHY BY LEE GRANT

Look at the building restrictions of any city will uncover a host of challenges to the progressively minded developer. In Canberra there is a restriction that ensures that no structure can be built taller than the height of the flagpole on Parliament House. "Nothing," explains Canberra local Michael Gray, "can look down on the pole." Grey's knowledge of the rules which safeguard the primacy of this major public building stems from his role as maître d' at Hotel Hotel, the centrepiece of Canberra's most exciting new development, Nishi.

Proof of the intense consideration behind all aspects of Nishi can be found in the approach to the restrictions which govern Canberra's distinct horizontal landscape. Height measurements are based on elevation above sea level, which must be no more than 548 metres. But if a development is close to Lake Burley Griffin, the lowest part of the city, potential heads skyward. So when property developers the Molonglo Group

bought a plot of land known as NewActon not far from the lake, they saw rare potential for high-density development.

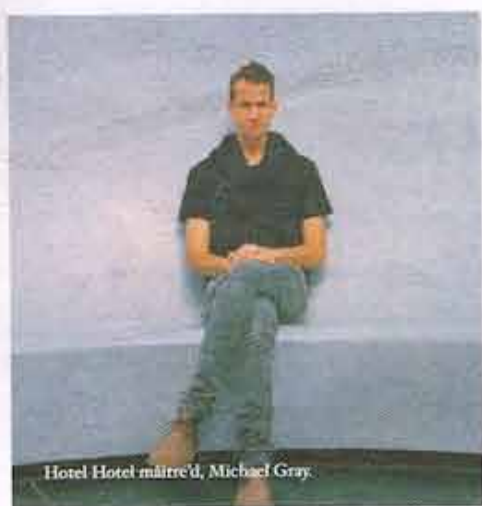
Enter Molonglo Group directors Nectar and Johnathan Efkarpidis. Canberra locals with Greek migrant heritage, the two brothers share an interest in orchestrating sustainably minded urban-design projects, and have the resources to do so. Nectar's background is design, architecture and economics, while Johnathan complements his skills with IT and management experience. Responding to the global groundswell around sustainable building and development, the Efkarpidis brothers thought up Nishi, a precinct within NewActon that includes 450 residential apartments and a series of commercial businesses including cafes, restaurants, bars, a Palace cinema and a gallery. But it's the incredible, design-driven, 68-room five-star boutique hotel that is the real show stopper.

A huge undertaking on many levels, Nishi has been in the works for more than five years, but it was not until late December 2013 that the much-anticipated Hotel Hotel was unveiled.



Ian Cameron, hotel room interior designer





Hotel Hotel maître'd, Michael Gray.



Nishi building exterior.

A large part of what makes Hotel Hotel so striking is how it challenges decades of hotel convention. "We're conscious of the balance between not being bogged-down in Hyatt models and Inter-Continental approaches to hospitality, but also working with people who have the right experience," Gray explains. This is reflected in the fact that previous hospitality experience is not a key factor in building the hotel's team. "For the recruitment of front-line roles at the hotel, we weren't necessarily trying to attract people who have hotel experience. I've always worked in restaurants," says Gray, who was previously at Vue de Monde in Melbourne, "and at Hotel Hotel we've aspired to deliver food and drink that is better than what you would expect from a hotel. We want it to feel more like an owner-operator experience, rather than something that's cookie-cutter or procedure based."

Hotel Hotel is the result of collaboration at every level, and includes contributions from a mind-boggling 30-odd independent design teams. But what could have been a logistical nightmare has turned out an amazingly cohesive result. From March Studios to Studio Round, Right Angle Studio, The Good Copy, The CoOp, Oculus and Broached Commissions, contributors to the hotel are a rollcall of Australia's top designers, curators and creatives from the fields of architecture, interiors, graphics, art, food and production.

Hotel Hotel occupies the bottom-three floors of the Nishi building, designed by Fender Katsalidis. The architecture firm applied a similar aesthetic to the one it took to Hobart's MONA – visitors to both will recognise a dark, subterranean feeling. For the upper levels, the Australian architects worked closely with Japan's Suppose Design Office to create compact apartment living. The exterior, built from recycled timber and concrete, creates an urban, geometric-looking structure lined with native planter boxes to create a vision that stands out from the neighbouring landscape.

The interior of the hotel continues the focus on art and nature with a series of conceptual design commissions. The foyer and grand wooden staircase, designed by March Studio, uses recycled timber off cuts, some from a basket ball court, layered to create vast spaces in the communal areas of the hotel. A cool, low-lit foyer is filled with furniture and objects from Broached Commissions, who created bespoke pieces for the hotel. "With Nishi, the Molonglo Group – as cultural curators – wanted to build something extraordinary," says Don Cameron, a Sydney-based filmmaker who designed the interiors of the hotel rooms. "They challenged people from a variety of creative disciplines to contribute outside their creative field of specialisation. There were no precedents to follow."

Other collaborators include artist Lucy McRae, who created a tessellated mirror behind the reception desk which references Lake Burley Griffin; Anna-Wili Highfield, whose chandeliers contain Bogong moth and owl motifs; Perimeter Books, which has curated the magazines and books in the hotel's library; and Kloke, who designed the staff uniforms.

The rooms are open spaces, and can feel cosy, roomy, or meandering. Some are light-filled, with urban vantages and showers that look over the freeway, while others face inward, with views of the building's centre and more MONA-esque low lighting. It's the kind of place where you could sleep for days. "Art direction has always been the main aspect of my film work," says Cameron of his filmic approach to the room interiors. "If I have the right set or location, I know I have half



Uniforms by Kloke.

the film. Creating the rooms at Hotel Hotel was an exercise in crafting rooms that have meaning and are emotionally engaging. The biggest challenge was maintaining these ideals and still providing serviceability and fitting into existing notions of house keeping."

Rendered mud-brick walls, wood-chip cupboards, ancient oak, linen, clay and brass convey a sense of raw, material luxury in the rooms, with homey items by Adam Goodrum, Robert Gordon and Mud Australia. Examples of pieces designed by Cameron include lozenge-shaped tables, shave stools and toilet-roll holders; towel rails and ergonomic bedside lamps. "Don is a great example of the personalities involved in creating the hotel," says Gray. "He's a filmmaker and designer with no experience in interior design or hotels, and he's built beautiful environments. The bathroom is a nightmare for trying to apply makeup, I hear, but these rooms have just the most incredible, cinematic feel."

The attention to detail flows into food and drink with Sean McConnell (the youngest brother of noted chefs Andrew and Matt), consulting on all food and beverage output across the Nishi community. This is seen in a bakery (A.Bakery); an underground bar (A.Baker Speakeasy); an Italian eatery (Bicicletta); and a wholefood cafe-cum-restaurant (Mocan and Green Grass). This last business is the first hospitality venture for another sibling team, local industrial designers Miles and David Mocan. It originally opened as a hole-in-the-wall espresso bar and has now expanded to an all-day eatery that seats 30 and uses fresh local produce delivered daily – the resourceful venue having no cool room or storage for food. The brothers also run the Goodspeed Bicycle Co, making custom bikes, some of which are available at the hotel's concierge for guests to use during their stay.

Set to open in March, it is the hotel's centrepiece, the foyer dining space, where McConnell will really flex his culinary muscle. "We're pretty ambitious with what we want to do with the hotel," explains Gray. "We're open for breakfast, lunch and dinner, seven days a week. We're going to cook right through to ram, so we need infrastructure." McConnell and his team are working on this at the moment, but are waiting on the high-rise apartments to be completed before they start building the kitchen.

With so many individual designers and their teams working on this project, its scope is hard to comprehend at first glance, especially when you consider the unified outcome. But it's working. This is the kind of hotel you want to linger in. Similar to the Ace Hotel model in the US, where guests and the general public meet and mingle in the large foyer, Hotel Hotel is investing in inclusion. "We're focused on creating what we think is the perfect community," says Gray, "and the hotel is a distillation of that spirit. We're really conscious of making that ground floor a public space – anyone can come, hotel guests and locals, even uni students who want to sit around using the wi-fi."

To add a further string to this bow, a sustainable mentality is at the heart of this ambitious project. "We don't want to shove it down people's throats," says Gray, "but the sustainability story of this building is incredible. It's been built into the very conception of the building and is very much part of the vision: doing everything we can to lower the impact." This includes recycling all water from the building using an Ozone Water System for cleaning, using sensor lights in all rooms to save energy and sourcing food as locally as possible to minimise food miles and packaging.

Drilling down to the details like this, at every opportunity, is certainly a luxury, but one that is bolstered by uncompromising quality at every turn. And despite Hotel Hotel's isolated location in the country's political epicentre, the result is a truly unique offering for visitors and locals alike.

"We're playing a long game," Gray says. "The Molonglo Group is not a conventional developer; it could have made a lot more money, much faster, if it had developed it in the usual residential way. But this is a long-term project, and one that's more reflective of Canberra and Australia. It's a unique offering ... it's certainly not your average hotel stay."

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