

Life & Leisure

LUXURY

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HOTEL WITH
CONSCIENCE

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TO THRILL

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LATEST SUPERCAR

FASHION FORCE

CHANEL'S CRAFTY
INVESTMENTS

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ON SAFARI

DISCOVER KENYA
WITH SOCIAL SPIRIT

To say hotel hotel in Canberra is not your ordinary place to stay would be an understatement. Leaving aside the unusual name for a minute, my first indication that this would not

become a cookie-cutter "here's a new hotel, you should stay there" feature was the reluctance – nay, complete refusal – of the founder to have his photo taken on his own. It's the team or nothing.

Then again, looking at Nectar Elkarpids – who with his brother Johnathan is the creator of one of Australia's most talked-about new hotels – you wouldn't think this former Macquarie investment banker is responsible, together with his family and their property development company, the Molonglo Group, for virtually single-handedly creating Canberra's NewActon precinct and combining commercial reality with a social conscience.

Elkarpids, 41, has perfected the dishevelled designer chic look – he's sassy spoken, incredibly eloquent, passionate and convincing. I'd go so far as to call him a very likeable corporate hippy.

When we meet in the hotel lobby, housed within the planet-friendly Nishi building (nishi means West in Japanese), for a morning drink – double-shot coffee for me, herbal tea for him – he explains his reluctance for the portrait.

"When you think about Australia and a lot of Western countries, we're very much an individualistic culture, as opposed to a collective culture," he says.

"We need to have the approach of pluralism and tolerance, community working together for the best outcomes.

"In any endeavour, we want to find the one person who's the star celebrity, the chef, the entrepreneur ... behind those people there's a bunch of things going on. My reluctance for that is really an ideological one," he says. "I'm selling everyone else short, it's just one person. Because it's not. It's been hundreds of people over a long period of time." And a long time it's certainly been.

The 68-room hotel's opening was originally slated for 12 months ago, but problems with contractors, builders, disagreements over



COMMUNITY SPIRIT

CANBERRA'S HOTEL HOTEL IS WHERE PEOPLE ARE MADE TO FEEL RIGHT AT HOME, WRITES KATARINA KROSLAKOVA



Concierge

FROM LEFT:
The Jumeirah Hotel team - Phil Buckley, director; Tracy Asherton, general manager; Sean McConnell,
head chef; Socrates Efkaridis, director; Nikos Kalogeropoulos, chief financial officer.

PHOTO: GARY W. BEECHER



FROM ABOVE: The passage that joins the Nixie building with hotel, guest bathroom; the hotel is packed with original artworks.

material quantities, pay, redesigns and legal and council dramas kept delaying the date.

During that time, staff were recruited and remunerated, even though there wasn't a great deal to do while construction was completed. Operating a hotel in a volatile market such as Canberra's is hard enough, without the added expense of salaries with virtually no revenue balancing out the ledger.

How long does Efkarpidis estimate it will take to make up the lost revenue? "I don't

know – it's going to take a while ... We've had to absorb the cost of holding staff.

"But money spent is money spent. We're building a viable business, people are coming, people are staying, that's what matters."

The hotel, designed by architect Fender Katsalidis (who also worked on MONA in Tasmania), had its soft opening late last year, and since then has attracted positive reviews and awards, winning the Gourmet Traveller Best Boutique City Hotel going last month.

Which raises the question, why Canberra? Efkarpidis acknowledges that while Canberra bashing is a bit of a national sport, the key could be managing expectations. "Canberra has a disproportionately high level of exposure for a city of its size," he says. "It has a disproportionately huge influence over media air time and in the mind space of people.

"We then confuse the fact that Parliament and all the decision-making that affects everyone in the country comes from this city, and that this city should be this huge, vibrant metropolis – well, in reality, it's not. Don't think you're coming to Sydney or Melbourne because that's a bizarre concept. It's like going to the Blue Mountains and asking where the Gucci shop is."

With Canberra's population sitting at about 380,000, Efkarpidis says its small size should be its best asset. "You go to visit certain places, like Canberra, precisely for something

different from those big cities. When you start to calibrate what we've got here, a lot of the expectations start to be managed properly."

One of the strengths of the hotel is its model for a mixed-use community space. Its tagline is "a place for people people" (don't ask, but it's basically to do with the emphasis and repetition when you're enthusiastic about something) and, in this case, Efkarpidis says, the people range from uni students to office workers and politicians to locals and guests.

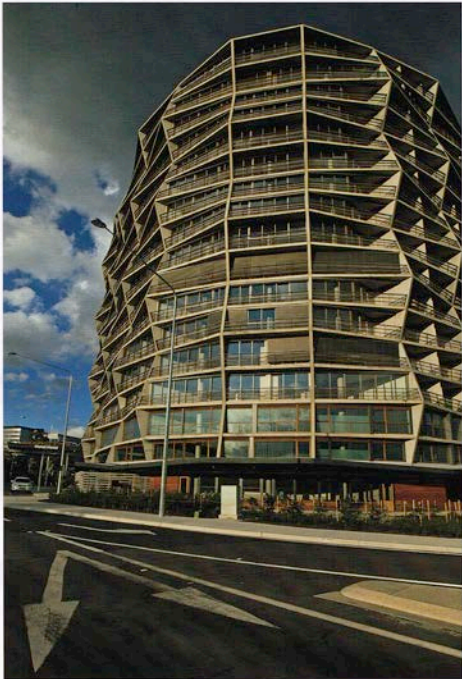
The NewActon precinct includes bars, restaurants, another hotel, a cinema, retail, commercial and residential spaces.

The Molongio Group may be one of Canberra's largest private developers – the bulk of its financial assets accumulated from father Tim's independent chain of supermarkets, which Woolworths bought in 1996 – but hospitality is not its speciality.

"We're not hoteliers," Efkarpidis admits. (In fact, he has no formal training in building, development or architecture.) "But we care enormously about doing the right thing. And it doesn't matter where you do something, what matters is the quality of the endeavour, and the integrity and commitment with which you undertake to do something.

"We undertook building the NewActon precinct not just for Canberra, but for people who visited, and in some small way as a national and international prototype for mixed-use communities." While entering the hotel





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: The hotel was designed by Fender Kazaubidi, the A. Baker restaurant in NewActon; the Nishi building shows its green credentials.

market in Sydney holds no attraction, the Molingo Group already owns a Melbourne site, hopefully for future similar projects.

But rather than throwing around buzzwords and airy ideals, Efkarpidis says a holistic and responsible approach to sustainability is essential for a project such as this, to succeed not just in the hearts of residents but also in terms of a viable business. "Environmental, social, cultural and economic sustainability: they all have to come full circle. You can't just do one of those things right. You've got to do all of them. It's complex, you need to look at the matrix in its entirety and also make [the venture] commercial."

Efkarpidis sees the hotel first and foremost as a public space. "Hotels aren't just about beds. They are, in terms of some of their revenue, but they're also about the public

space for the community," he says. "Hotels are so often like airlines, it's all about yield management, getting people in and out of beds, it's a numbers game. This is a tough business, but we need to offer an opportunity for people to be able to come and meet."

The Canberra-born Efkarpidis spent nearly 10 years working in London before returning to the family business in 2004. He currently divides his time between Brunswick in Melbourne, and Canberra. He cites destinations from London to Tokyo and the Greek Islands to Bhutan as inspiring, and one of his passions is appreciating the well made. His collection of books and crafted objects from his travels is mind-boggling. It is this concept of originality, celebrating local artisans and making a hotel room feel more like home that inspired the fitouts for the rooms.



"We didn't take a traditional architectural view to the rooms. We didn't want to just emulate a boutique hotel model. Rooms are vignettes, you want it to feel like a home. Home is about having a history of something, you collect things over time, those things tell you about where you've been ... that's what place is about," Efkarpidis says.

Every single artwork is original, created predominantly by emerging Australian artists. The objects are handmade, the overall aesthetic is strongly Australian. "It plays on the idea of a shack," he says.

About 60 artisans contributed to the objects found within hotel hotel. "Some are expensive, and others are not – but they're no less valuable," Efkarpidis says, as he points out the finer details of the tissue boxes, bins, cabinets, wall hangings, alpaca chair covers and textural wall finishes.

So has the project turned out as expected? "I'm proud of what we've done, but what matters most is still whether the person using it, working here, living here, loves it," he says. "I can think one thing [about it], but if others don't find it the same way, we've failed. There's no doubt when you look at the usage and the levels of activity, you'll see it's vibrant, thriving – people are enjoying it."

"If they feel connected, we've done our job. If you give them a sense of confidence and pride, then those people end up owning that car and when they own it, they end up caring about it. When they care about it, then they love it; when they love it, everything else works because they'll do everything they need to do to look after it. You need people to have an investment and that comes from when they feel a bond and a commitment." **E**

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