



hotel hotel

LOOKING MORE LIKE POST-MODERN ART AND SOUNDING LIKE A SUSTAINABILITY EXPERIMENT, THE BROTHERS BEHIND THIS NEW DEVELOPMENT SAY THE BIG IDEA BEHIND THEIR BUILDING IS HELPING PEOPLE CONNECT.

Writer Jessica Friedmann Photographer Lee Grant



YOU'D THINK THAT AFTER PLANNING AND BUILDING AN ENTIRE HOTEL, HANGING A DOOR WOULD BE A FAIRLY SIMPLE PROCESS: THE ICING, OR THE CHERRY ON TOP. FOR NECTAR EFKARPIDIS, IT WAS MORE LIKE TAKING A SLEDGEHAMMER TO THE CAKE ITSELF.

"We had to go through the concrete around the doorframe to hang the door and we burst the hydronic heating system," he explains. "The process is messy, and it has to be messy... In some ways you've got to be crazy about wanting to undertake something like this."

The door in question weighs 600 kilograms – that's three or four professional footballers, depending on what code you follow – which certainly contributes to the madness. So does the fact that Nectar, though incredibly precise about his vision and savvy about how to accomplish it, has no formal training in building, development or architecture.

Instead, he's relying on gut feeling, an impeccably assembled team and pure chutzpah to put together Hotel Hotel, a new space in Canberra that he hopes will be "filled with people all going about their daily lives and interacting in honest ways". Less 4000-thread count Egyptian cotton and more sitting at the bar with a stranger, drinking beer from recycled glasses, it's an ambitious project that could see Nectar emerge as one of Australia's most forward-thinking hoteliers. That's if he isn't crushed to death by a giant door first.

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Sitting in the lounge room of his Melbourne home in battered suit pants and a t-shirt, 40-year-old Nectar doesn't look like the kind of guy who'd build a hotel. His vision for the property, which he's in the final stages of constructing with his brother Johnathan, isn't obvious either. "We see the opportunity for hotels to be places where people

come to hang out. Not necessarily to buy an \$8 coffee or spend lots of money on a drink," he says. It's an idea and a project that's ballooned out to take over his life; unexpectedly, but in a way that somehow makes a lot of sense.

Born in Canberra to Greek migrant parents, Nectar didn't set out to be a hotelier, or a property tycoon, or a tycoon of any stripe. He seems more like a philosophy graduate (which he is) than a bachelor of economics (he's one of those too). He attributes his involvement in the world of development to "mistake", though he's fantasised about building a hotel for years. The turning point came when he was working as an investment banker with Macquarie Bank in London, and his brother called from Canberra.

"He said, 'Come on, I need your bloody help. I'm sick of doing this all myself,'" Nectar says with a laugh. Only 14 months apart in age, Nectar and Johnathan grew up "hating and loving each other", but the brothers didn't hesitate to work together. "There's nothing like having someone that you totally, totally trust," Nectar says. "If you don't trust someone, you spend all your time thinking about how to mitigate getting fucked over. And not just him, everyone in our organisation, we're all family."

That family is the Molonglo Group, and the Molonglo Group are developers. They used to run an independent chain of supermarkets, before selling them to Woolworths in 1996, and they're currently focused on developing numerous sites in and around Canberra. Hotel Hotel occupies three floors and 99 rooms in the 'pineapple-shaped' Nishi residential building, which the company has been working on for seven years. "I'm not going to sit here and tell you that this is some social enterprise. It's not," Nectar says. "This is a commercial activity; we just care about doing it well. We believe that it can provide as an economic model, but we

also believe in development as a vehicle to help address some of the issues we're all facing around cultural, social, environmental and economic sustainability. We want this to be a national, and hopefully international, prototyping model of how you build a great place."

So when you want to build a hotel, where do you start? "It's an enormous question," Nectar admits. "After you conceive of it and say, 'I want to build a hotel,' you've got to work out whether there's a viable business model that a financier believes in. If there is, you need to convince people that you can run one." That's been the biggest challenge for the brothers; Hotel Hotel is their first. "So many times people have looked at us and said, 'You do property development. Why the hell do you want to do a hotel?'" Nectar says. "If there's a secret to making this happen, it's to get the best people possible to work with you; people with a lot of hotel experience, but who are prepared to think differently."

Hotel Hotel's wider team is made up of experts in their fields. Its exterior shell – the Nishi building – was a collaboration between architecture firm Fender Katsalidis (which recently designed Hobart's Museum of Old and New Art), Japan's Suppose Design Office and landscape architects Oculus. The rough-formed concrete lintels in the foyer were completed by Oculus and designers March Studio. The functional objects – tables, lights and the 600-kilogram door – were hammered out by blacksmith David Aarons, who spent weeks drilling, welding and testing from his nearby workshop in Mitchell. The rooms – built from recycled timber and off-form concrete – reflect the Molonglo Group's vision: a twist on the Australian shack. Then there are people whose roles are less obvious, like Herbie the metal polisher or filmmaker Don Cameron, who spent months realising the look and feel of each room.

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An external view of the Nishi building, home to Hotel Hotel.

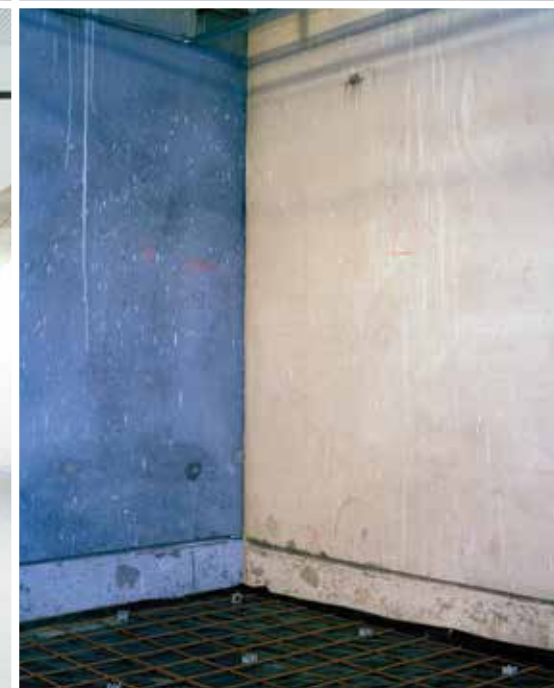


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Johnathan (left) and Nectar Efkarpidis.

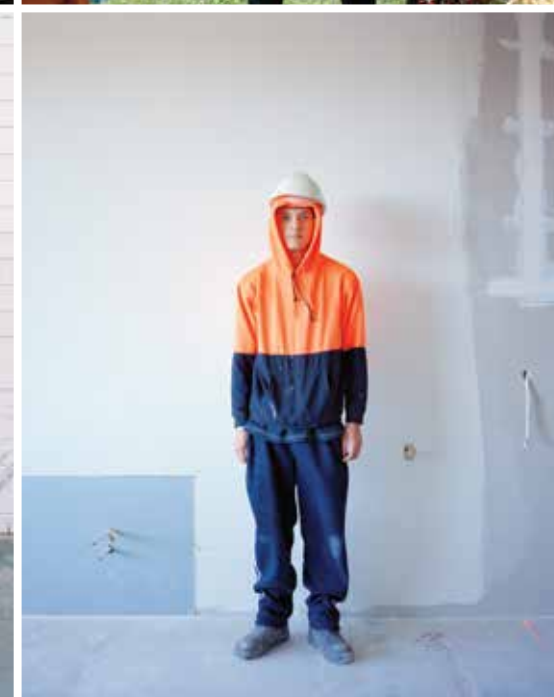
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Top row, left-right: Interior wall of Hotel Hotel. Sean McConnell, Molonglo Group Head Chef, with his dogs Bulla and Basse. The repurposed drafting table used by Hotel Hotel blacksmith David Aarons. Filmmaker Don Cameron. Interior electrical wiring.

Middle row, left-right: Blacksmith David Aarons. Nishi commercial office space. Hotel Hotel room #1. Falk Peuser, Nishi project architect from Fender Katsilidis, with his son Fen. Yun, steel fabricator.

Bottom row, left-right: Hotel Hotel room #3. Judith Avery, local resident, with her dogs Ruby and Hetty. A bench vice for clamping objects. Nico, labourer, on his second-last day on site. Hotel Hotel room wall.



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Hotel Hotel room 107.
(photographer Ross Honeysett)



ULTIMATELY, YOU WANT THE BUSINESS GUEST AND A STUDENT, THE LOCALS AND SOMEONE TRAVELLING FROM THE OUTSKIRTS OF CANBERRA STAYING WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS, TO SIT DOWN BESIDE EACH OTHER AND HAVE A CONVERSATION.



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Nectar stresses that Hotel Hotel, rather than being the vision of “one crazy person”, is the result of three years of intense collaboration. “To do a development is extremely difficult; it’s high-risk, it’s coordinating hundreds or thousands of people in a very compressed period of time,” he says. “And it doesn’t generally allow people to mess that process up.” To the frustration of their building managers, Nectar and Johnathan are trying to build in space for evolution, experiments and mess. “What we’ve tried to do is leave enough room, enough hooks for people to go in and fill the spaces; colour the space in ways we hadn’t imagined... Hopefully when the hotel opens it’ll be owned and adopted by those who work there, and those who visit.”

In Canberra, that might not sound like such an exciting prospect; the nation’s capital, after all, has a fairly dry reputation. “Those who work there” could be code for ‘politicians’ and “those who visit”, ‘lobbyists’. But some of the country’s greatest cultural institutions are also found in the city, and a large number of artisans and makers exist on its fringe. Nectar’s particularly excited about commissioned sculptures by artists Alfio Bonanno and Steven Siegel; a piece by the latter made from a year’s worth of *Canberra Times* that will decompose over 15-25 years. “There isn’t a need for a bronze sculpture that will last for the next 3000 years,” he says. “I mean, there’s something lovely about a bronze sculpture, but there’s something lovely about the narrative of the wasted newspapers that end up being compost.”

A commitment to sustainability runs right through the project. “Marketing campaigns about being green, being ethical, they’re not interesting,” Nectar states. “Things that are made with a level of care and the stories they tell, those are rich.” The commercial area of the Nishi complex has the largest solar panel installation on an office building in Australia; it’s now

occupied by the Department of Climate Change. On a smaller scale, artist-makers have been engaged to develop new and sustainable pieces for every aspect: lighting, furniture, uniforms and art. “When someone spends six years, every day, doing something, you can’t look at it and not be moved,” Nectar says. But this intention and investment comes with its own set of challenges. What’s the point of ordering 3000 handmade glasses if they make the hotel too pricey for the maker? “From the beginning we’ve been conscious of ensuring that what we do, and the way we want to do it, doesn’t translate into an end result that’s inaccessible to the average person,” Nectar explains. “Yes, sure, you can get artisanal makers handcrafting everything, but if that means it’s not accessible, it’s not really a model that works.”

Because at the end of it, after all the careful consideration of light on concrete and decomposing newspaper, is the theory that a hotel can function as a genuine cortex of public life. “What matters most,” he says, “not only in hotels but in all of the third spaces we occupy as citizens, is the content and the resonance of the place. You hope to design a place that immediately says, ‘We’re open and tolerant.’ Ultimately, you want the business guest and a student, the locals and someone travelling from the outskirts of Canberra staying with family and friends, to sit down beside each other and have a conversation.”

It’s a seemingly modest goal that requires a phenomenal amount of coordination, money, time and vision, but Nectar remains undaunted. “Someone once said to me, ‘Good luck with your ill-conceived, mismanaged pipe dream.’” He laughs. “I think we’re going to emblazon that in front of the door.”

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