

Cultural Catalyst

THE RESULT OF A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH,
CANBERRA'S HOTEL HOTEL EMBRACES THE CULTURAL,
EMOTIONAL AND INTELLECTUAL
LIFE OF THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL.

WORDS Elana Castle PHOTO John Golings, courtesy of March Studio

March Studio arranged 3000 reclaimed timbers to link NewActon to Nishi Residential and the hotel's ground-floor spaces.

External architecture is the work of Australian firm Fender Katsalidis, in collaboration with Japanese practice Suppose Design Office.



**Bespoke
pieces
furnish
the staged
interiors
with a
cast of
additional
characters**

You have property developers – and then you have Molonglo Group. Shunning the traditional tenanted approach to urban and architectural development, the Canberra-based business, led by brothers-in-arms Nectar and Johnathan Efkarpidis, elevates sustainability and community contribution to the highest level. The duo's latest hospitality project, Hotel Hotel, is no exception. Strategically positioned in the Molonglo-developed NewActon precinct and connected to a host of the hub's amenities, Hotel Hotel acts as a cultural catalyst, bringing locals and visitors together in a city defined by public affairs, art and nature.

The walls of the entrance hall are clad in black perforated mild steel punctuated with yellow glass marbles.
Photos Ross Honeysett

‘Nectar and Johnathan are cultural curators,’ says Don Cameron, acclaimed Australian director of music videos and commercials – and the man responsible for Hotel Hotel’s guest rooms and vintage furniture collection. ‘The genesis of Hotel Hotel was a social experiment, inspired by the salons of Europe and fuelled by the concept of cross-pollination and the exchange of ideas. Nectar established a dialogue by engaging a range of creatives to contribute to the design of the building.’

Consequently, it’s somewhat of a challenge to present an all-encompassing narrative of the hotel’s many synthesized parts, the outcome of a heady collaboration between Efkarpidis’s team of architects, designers, curators, artists and artisans. ‘Hotel Hotel is anything but formulaic,’ says Cameron. ‘Hotel typologies exist for a reason: they’re familiar and comprehensible. We believe there’s another way of doing things, one that treats guests as individuals and challenges them to possess and engage with the interiors, not just passively inhabit them. Superfluous details have been pared back and replaced with a humanized alternative.’

Located in Molonglo’s Nishi Building, the hotel occupies three floors of a complex that also supports 27 hotel apartments, 220 private apartments and Nishi Commercial, a new development housing government departments, offices,

an art-house cinema and cafés. The hotel also borders the wider NewActon cultural precinct, which features book, music and pop-up stores; independent art galleries; and a suite of designer apartments. ‘Nectar saw the need for pluralism and a non-minimalist design approach,’ says Lou Weis, director of Broached Commissions, which was involved in designing a number of the hotel’s bespoke furniture elements. ‘He wanted every sector of society to be able to identify with some aspect of the Nishi Building.’

As a result, the façade is a palimpsest of materials and forms that respond to Canberra’s built fabric and natural context, and to the architectural language of the surrounding precinct. Although united by a material palette of off-form concrete and recycled timber, the external architecture – designed by Australian firm Fender Katsalidis in collaboration with Japanese practice Suppose Design Office – represents two distinctive approaches. The main ‘pineapple-like’ façade is composed of a series of three-dimensional concrete planes – a nod to the grand urban scale of the city – while the intricate use of timber on the NewActon-facing side of the building references Canberra’s bushy surrounds. Both come together around a central atrium, which draws light and ventilation into the deeper positioned hotel rooms and private residences. L

Hotel Hotel

Location NewActon Nishi, Canberra, Australia **Design** Fender Katsalidis (fkaustralia.com), Suppose Design Office (suppose.jp), March Studio (marchstudio.com.au), Don Cameron (doncameron.biz) **Client** Molonglo Group (molonglogroup.com.au) **Furniture** Restored vintage items and custom pieces **Lighting** Vintage (non-architectural ground-floor lighting), Tobia Scarpa Nictea pendants, Robert Haussmann lighting structures **Area** Approximately 4,500 m² **Cost per night** From A\$285 **Rooms** 68 **Completion** January 2013



In the reception, unadorned materials are stacked in ‘an attempt to bring the handmade into the rigorous, polished building that surrounds them’, says Eggleston. Photos Peter Bennetts, courtesy of March Studio



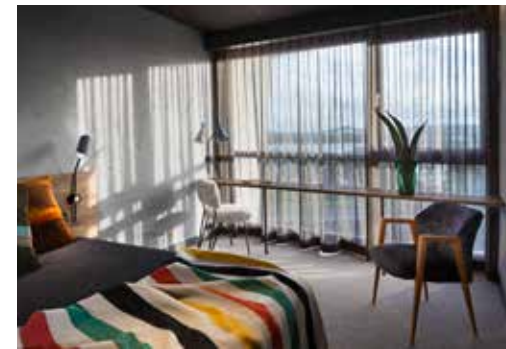
The bar features 12 communal ‘feasting tables’ by furniture designer Adam Goodrum in collaboration with Broached Commissions.

‘The design brief for the rooms is predicated on the idea of the humble Australian shack’

Making Room



CREATIVE Separate spaces have been allocated for work and relaxation.



ORIGINAL Restored 20th-century furniture adds to the cosy atmosphere.



MEANDERING Overlooking the fern-filled atrium, the largest of the three types of hotel rooms is complete with a giant bathtub by Deborah Boyd.

Photos Ross Honeysett



Don Cameron surveys vintage furniture at Ken Neale's Botany Road Warehouse. Photo Geoff Beatty

‘In accordance with Molonglo Group’s concept – a hotel and its amenities interwoven with the broader context – the hotel interiors have been fashioned around two entrances. The primary entrance is defined by a wall of black perforated mild steel with yellow glass marbles – a warm, welcoming precursor to the operational heart of the hotel. Melbourne-based practice March Studio was responsible for the interior architecture of the lobby, reception, concierge area, dining area and bar. A curated library and March Studio’s stark-yet-stunning stacked concierge desk lead to a reception area appropriately earmarked with a tessellated mirrored installation by Sydney artist Lucy McRae and Broached Commissions. ‘Walls, seating, benches and counters in the lobby are all an attempt to bring the handmade into the rigorous, polished building that surrounds them,’ says Rodney Eggleston, co-director of March Studio. ‘Materials like custom glulam timber and precast concrete beams are unadorned, stacked in a simple manner, overlapping, with their joints overrunning and poking out.’ At the other entrance, a dramatic staircase by March Studio (see *Frame* 96, p. 089) links NewActon to Nishi Residential 4



Stacked concrete lintels link the Secret Garden courtyard to Hotel Hotel's foyer. The courtyard was designed by Oculus and Urban Design. Photo Peter Bennetts, courtesy of March Studio

and the hotel's ground-floor spaces. 'The stair's stacked agglomeration of suspended, undulating timber draws people into the building by filtering light and blurring boundaries, while directing views and movement,' says Eggleston. Weaving into the halts and flow of the suspended staircase, the hotel's dedicated social and cultural hub is a bar, dining and meeting space defined by stacked concrete and steel. 'We were engaged to create spaces that encourage residents, guests and visitors to linger,' says Eggleston. Appropriately, the space features 12 communal 'feasting tables' – which can be joined together as one – by furniture designer Adam Goodrum in collaboration with Broached Commissions. Locals, visitors and hotel guests are invited to peruse the loosely scattered design tomes, sample

the cuisine, and work and socialize as if in a re-creation of Nectar's envisaged European salons. A low ceiling is ameliorated by concrete-framed portholes above the bar, which allow glimpses of the central planted courtyard above and filter circular apertures of light down into the otherwise moody interior – a sensitive manipulation of dark and light that has been parlayed into the hotel's suites. 'We wanted to create non-formulaic hotel rooms that were contemplative and moody, yet had attitude,' says Cameron. 'Inspired by vernacular architecture, Nectar developed a design brief for the rooms, predicated on the idea of the humble Australian shack. The simple, adaptable and de-cluttered environments are perfectly suited to repose, reflection and introspection. They're spaces where people can withdraw from – or engage with – the outside world.'

The hotel is divided into internal and external rooms, the latter offering views to Lake Burley Griffin and the former views to the inner courtyard. 'Light is the primary character in the rooms,' says Cameron, the irony not lost on the filmmaker. 'When you enter the atrium-orientated rooms, the recessive cave-like embrace offers a meditative, contemplative and passive ambience. In the external rooms, the effect is different. I used the exposed concrete upstands, raw linen curtains and strong natural daylight to project shadows and filtered lighting effects over the rooms' textured surfaces.'

Extending the shack idea, Cameron limited his tonal range to hues he describes as 'tobacco', 'cognac', 'dust' and 'gravel', underscored by a meticulously assembled material palette. The rooms feature unadorned materials like reclaimed solid oak, natural-fibre wallpaper, oriented strand board, custom Berber-weave wool carpets, aniline leather, linen and various metals, some of which will patinate over time. 'We wanted to offer an honest representation of the materials, as



Hotel Hotel's so-called 'external' rooms offer views of Lake Burley Griffin, Canberra's artificial lake.

Three-Way Table in 6 Steps



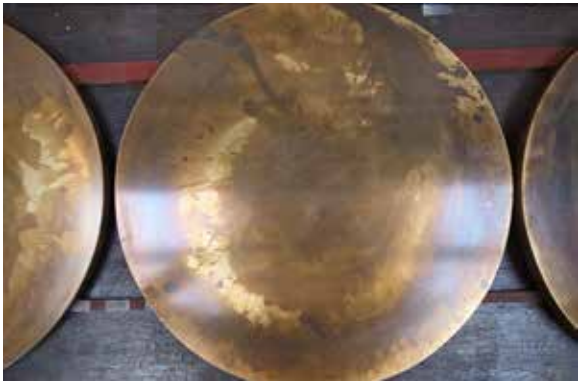
1 Sketches illustrate the inventory of furniture designed by Cameron.



3 Brass spheres with deep grooves slot onto the ends of the table legs to become glides.



2 Multiple brass table-tops are clamped together for gluing.



4 Overclad brass tabletops are chemically treated to produce a patina.



5 Don Cameron and Louis Berczi work out the logistics of the legs on the Three-Way Table at Berczi Copper Company.



6 Cameron's Three-Way Table is one of many custom pieces made for Hotel Hotel.

Close Up

‘We were engaged to create spaces that encourage people to linger’



CONCRETE Stacked precast-concrete lintels in the foyer and textured precast concrete on the walls



WOOD Recycled blackbutt timber flooring, walls clad in eucalyptus oriented strand board, wallpaper featuring natural fibre and cork



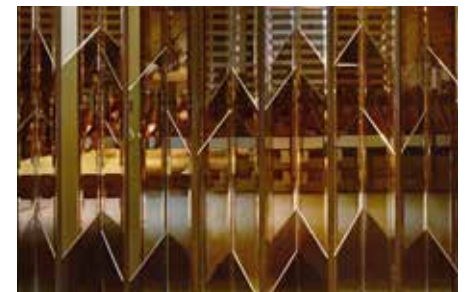
METAL Bronze-anodized 1970s aluminium lamp by Robert Haussmann and an entrance wall of black perforated mild steel



TEXTILE Stool clad in Boucherouite rug and woven-string pendants designed by Don Cameron with Ken Neale



CERAMIC Handmade tiles by Gerard Havekes and clay-rendered bedroom walls



MIRROR Tessellated mirror by Lucy McRae and Broached Commissions in reception

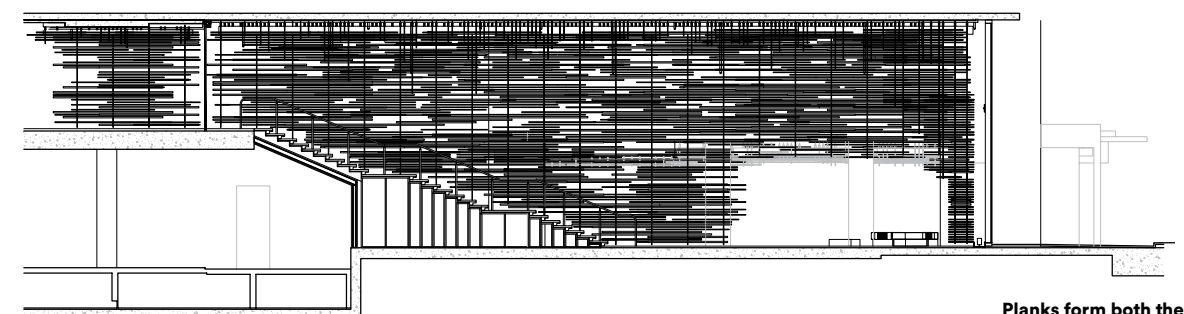
‘as well as to confuse and contrast preconceived perceptions of “rarefied” versus “disposable” materials,’ Cameron continues.

‘In the case of the open wardrobe cabinetry, solid oak [reclaimed from a Loire Valley granary] is set against oriented strand board made of eucalyptus wood in a hi-fi, lo-fi dialogue that gives both materials dignity.’ Cameron and Efkarpidis were equally influenced by crude materiality during the hotel’s construction, opting for wall finishes of rippled and hammered concrete and rugged clay-rendered walls. Even the bathrooms evoke an emotive, raw aesthetic, their walls completely clad in chiselled concrete-like tiles, underscored by oversized cast-concrete bathtubs.

Consistent with the overall theme of the hotel, the rooms also feature a selection of vintage furniture. Eschewing a throw-away culture of consumption, Cameron dedicated

himself to sourcing covetable pieces in collaboration with furniture dealer-collector Ken Neale. Such items were lovingly restored and re-birthed to give each room a different ‘back story’. When they couldn’t find what they wanted, Cameron worked with a range of local artisans and craftspeople to produce bespoke items, including ‘shaggy stools’ (upholstered with vintage Beni Ouarain rugs), kidney-shaped tables overlaid in brass, and purpose-made brass bedside lamps – a cast of additional characters for his staged interiors.

In a city inundated with bland generic hotel options, Hotel Hotel has emerged as a complex but game-changing alternative. Molonglo Group – and its merry band of collaborators – can certainly lay claim to the most exciting urban intervention in Canberra in recent times, cementing their credentials as Australia’s pre-eminent place makers. X



Planks form both the treads and risers of the staircase.
Image courtesy of March Studio