

Bathrooms display a giant feature wall
Images supplied by Ohtel



An Ohtel with a difference

By Kathy Ombler

It is eco-friendly and combines modern and mid-last century design features. Ohtel, Wellington's newest luxury hotel is an eclectic and purpose-built property which has introduced a point of difference to the city's accommodation offerings. Designer-turned-hotelier Alan Blundell saw a gap in the styles and standards of accommodation offered in Wellington so he created Ohtel, a four-storey, 10-room hotel jammed tight against the cliff and in between the historic wooden villas which line the approach to Oriental Bay. It is a prime Wellington waterfront location; the new, expansively landscaped Waitangi Park sprawls directly across the

road, the city's theatres and restaurants are but a stone's throw away, and harbour views can be enjoyed from most rooms. Yet it's the inner view – from the bathroom, no less – that creates the big impression in the Ohtel guest rooms. Each of the very spacious bathrooms displays a giant feature-wall image of a New Zealand landscape, subtly backlit by fluorescent lighting. The colourings of the rooms match the tones of the image; green for the fern-filled rainforest, blue for the raging white surf and blue sky, and brown for the boulders on the sandy beach, for example. "Rather than being locked away behind a wall, as is standard in a lot of hotel rooms, I wanted the bathroom to become a backdrop to the room, and to go beyond the concept of mirrors on the wall to

artwork. So you have a view looking out the window of the park or the harbour. You also have a view looking back into the room," says Blundell. Some of the photographic images are Blundell's own. "I didn't want photos you see in every tourism brochure, these are more about how I see New Zealand." The bathrooms are separated from the rest of the guest room by glass (there is a stylish, dark curtain, should privacy be required), and feature two-person baths, over-sized showers and Evolu bathroom amenities (natural New Zealand-made products used in several five-star resorts throughout the country). The configuration of each is dependent on the room type, be it studio, deluxe or junior suite.

The guest rooms themselves are also spacious, and offer king-size beds (some can be adapted to twin), on-demand digital audio, movies and Sky TV on flat screens, complimentary high-speed Internet, laptop-size safes and gourmet mini-bars. In a nod towards Kiwiana, bed throws and cushions are from Native Agent, New Zealand textile and clothing designers whose creations embody colonial and tribal histories. But the major point of difference in the Ohtel rooms is the mid last-century theme, with furniture – chairs, tables, writing desks and drawers, plus crockery, clocks, decorative ornaments and knick-knacks – all genuine articles from the 1950s and 60s. We are talking an era between Art Deco and the 1970-80s

(loosely described as retro). The pieces come from Blundell's private collection, which he has been gathering from various sources for the past two years. Mid-century design represented an optimistic vision of modern life in post-war times, writes Blundell on the Ohtel website. "Designers from other disciplines such as architecture, fine art or graphic design used natural materials such as timber, glass and leather to create objects whose sculptural and aesthetic qualities were paralleled only by their functional attributes. "Many iconic pieces are still made under licence today, while the originals are destined to become the next generation of antiques." The nice thing about using these pieces

is that they provide the hotel with a true point of difference, says Blundell. "The furniture is all from a consistent time period yet it is different from room to room." Other aspects of Ohtel are very much contemporary, for example the nod towards environmental considerations. All windows are double glazed, providing positive thermal and acoustic effects (traffic noise from busy Oriental Parade is barely discernible). Water is heated by solar power, all cleaning products are biodegradable and guest rooms have separate recycling rubbish bins. "We have sourced everything we can locally. We haven't imported from China." Page 20 ►



Ohtel has a prime waterfront location

Page 19 ► From the outside, the new, concrete-clad Ohtel has attracted attention. One city urban design blogger has this to say: “The fun presentation of the building disguises the rigid box height of limits that it is required to fit into... it’s resolutely asymmetrical and non-conformist ... and certainly more graceful than the tired and oddly shaped houses nearby... a feat of clever engineering.” Designing a hotel to fit such a tight space with rigorous height restrictions might be expected to prove challenging but Blundell, whose company RAB Design has been designing Wellington apartments and homes for 22 years, shrugs at this suggestion. “Every site has planning restrictions. One of the main constraints here was that we were not allowed a car park. Originally we planned a car stacker system but we decided against that, instead we have a valet arrangement with the Te Papa car park. That’s perfectly suitable and

it means we have enhanced our lobby space.” The lobby is nevertheless small – intimate is the word used – though it is expected to form an integral part of the essence of Ohtel. There’s an open gas fire, easy chairs and an eight-seater dining table, all retaining the mid last-century theme, right down to the Crown Lynn crockery. Complimentary evening canapés will be served for guests, plus there’s a menu for breakfast, a ‘light lobby lunch’ and platters and snacks available to guests and off-the-street customers. Guests and local corporates are invited to make use of the space for private dinners or board meetings. There will also be a major food and beverage focus on room service. Ohtel chef BJ Meekings is excited by the opportunities. “We’ll present a menu of seasonal, fresh Kiwiana styles with hints of the South Pacific, South East Asia and Mediterranean. We’re using New Zealand

produce, for example Martinborough olive oil, Christchurch walnut oil, Kaitaia avocado oil and Supreme coffee. Our wine list is fantastic and it’s nearly all from New Zealand, except for one Aussie shiraz and a couple of Champagnes.” Auckland-born Meekings was trained at London’s Park Lane Hotel. For the past 17 years he has run his own, much-awarded Spostato Restaurant in Palmerston North. Also joining the small Ohtel team is Shelley Hughes, formerly general manager at Wellington’s Museum Hotel and Central Stratford Apartments, and Wellingtonian Michael Carthy. Hughes, Carthy and Blundell will share the role of duty manager. “We want to provide a friendly touch with attention to detail and attention from staff. We really want to have a nice homely feel as well as a luxury feel, so that we are providing two of the most sought after feelings,” says Blundell.

New to the hotel industry, Blundell has been pleasantly surprised by his experience so far. “Everything I’ve touched in terms of the local tourism industry has been friendly and supportive, from Positively Wellington Tourism to other hotel operators. It’s like if you come from Wellington you are part of a bigger team.” He has engaged the marketing services of Navigate Oceania, whose clients include some of New Zealand’s most salubrious tourism properties. “From my point of view, as an outsider to the industry, to attend trade shows overseas is too hard, and it would likely be two or three years by the time I get follow-on business. Navigate are delivering good results in terms of doors they’ve opened for us.” And while he would have preferred a larger property, he feels he has created something viable from the space available. “If we can achieve sufficient occupancy at the right room rate, there is no reason why this won’t work.”

Ohtel - it's all in the name



The Oh! movie clip on the Ohtel website

Finding a name for a new hotel was a challenge, says hotelier Alan Blundell. “Names are copyrighted, domain names are gone. If it’s remotely related to a hotel name, somebody already has it. “You only have two or three seconds to make a first impression and you don’t want to waste that explaining what your business is, so I played around with variations of the word hotel.” As it turns out, the resulting Ohtel has been great, he says. “It has given us a lot of branding opportunities. (Check the Oh! movie clip on the Ohtel website!) And speaking of websites, it took some hard bargaining with the former American ‘owner’ but he’s also managed to buy the domain name www.ohtel.com.