

Urbois

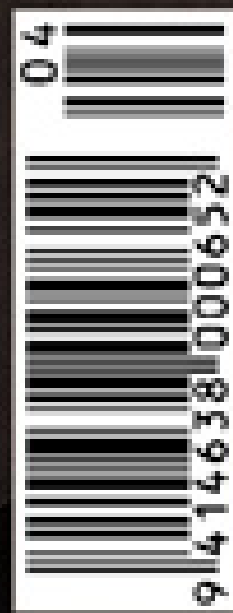
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DESIGN / LIVING / ARCHITECTURE

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BOUTIQUE RETREATS

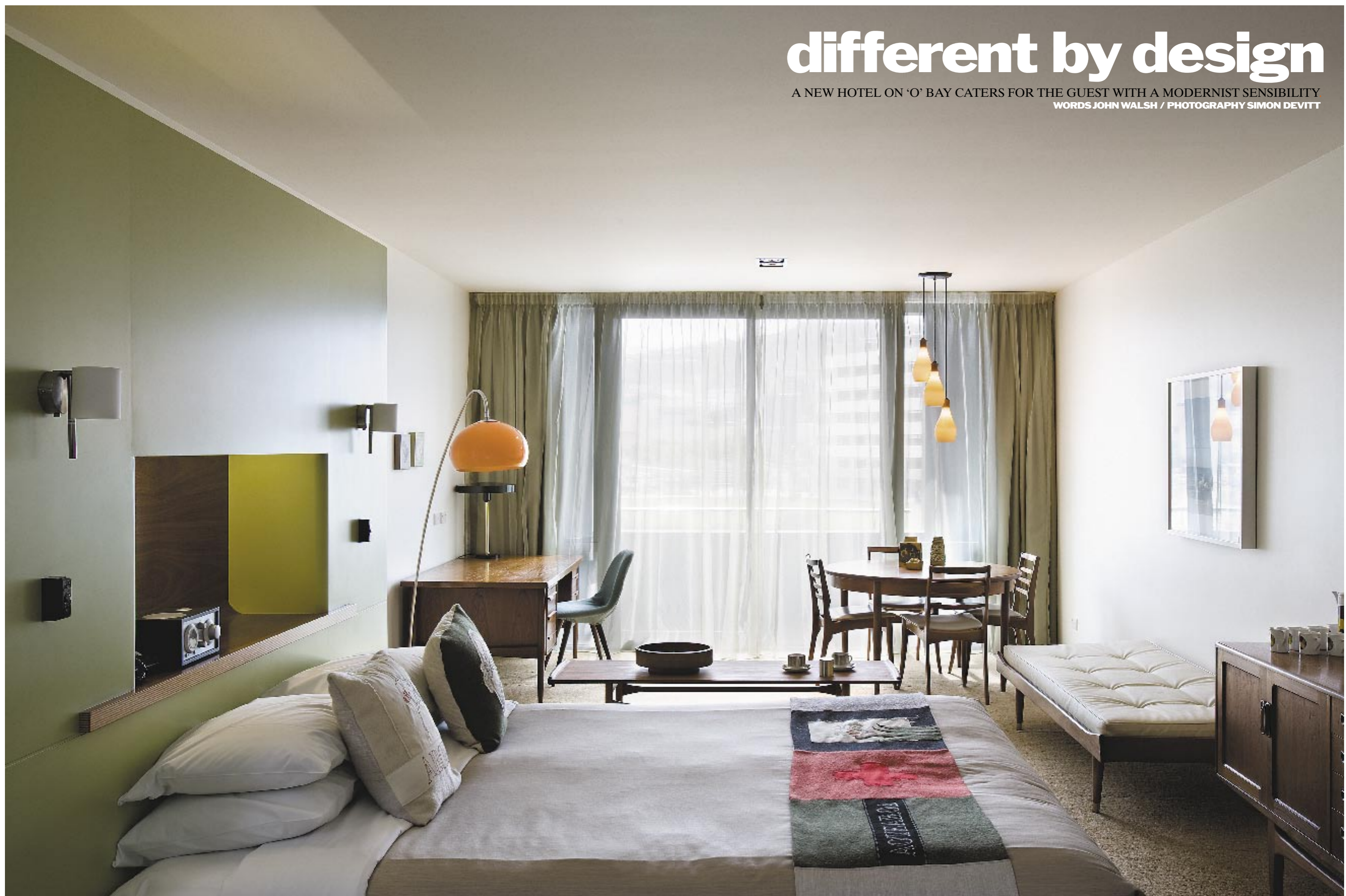
Bay of Islands, Wellington & Wanaka



KITCHENS & BATHROOMS + MADE IN NZ

different by design

A NEW HOTEL ON 'O' BAY CATERS FOR THE GUEST WITH A MODERNIST SENSIBILITY
WORDS JOHN WALSH / PHOTOGRAPHY SIMON DEVITT



FOR YEARS THERE WAS a dearth of good hotel accommodation in Wellington, but no shortage of over-priced rooms. Maybe it was because visits to the city tended to be matters of necessity not discretion. Employees summoned to head office, lobbyists making their case to the government, auto-tourists trying to reach the South Island – they were all a captive market for Wellington’s hoteliers. There wasn’t much incentive to try harder and as a result visitor accommodation in Wellington was a cartel of expensive mediocrity.

This comfortable situation – for the hosts, that is, if not their guests – began to change at the end of last century when Wellington decided to market itself as a visitor destination in its own right. Now, the capital presents itself as a “city of culture” and actively competes for the tourist dollar. In the past few years several new upmarket hotels have opened, and established hotels have sharpened their act. A room in Wellington is rarely a bargain, but at least now there’s more chance that you’ll get what you pay for.

As the quality of accommodation has increased, so has its variety. The boutique hotel is now a type that can be found in Wellington, and its most recent and slickest manifestation is Ohtel, a purpose-built establishment at the southern end of Oriental (“O”) Bay. Shoehorned onto a precious plot of flat land at the foot of Mt Victoria, the four-storey, concrete building looks across Waitangi Park to Te Papa, and beyond to the hills that loom above the CBD. Hard against a cliff, right on the footpath, Ohtel occupies a site that’s absolutely, positively Wellington.

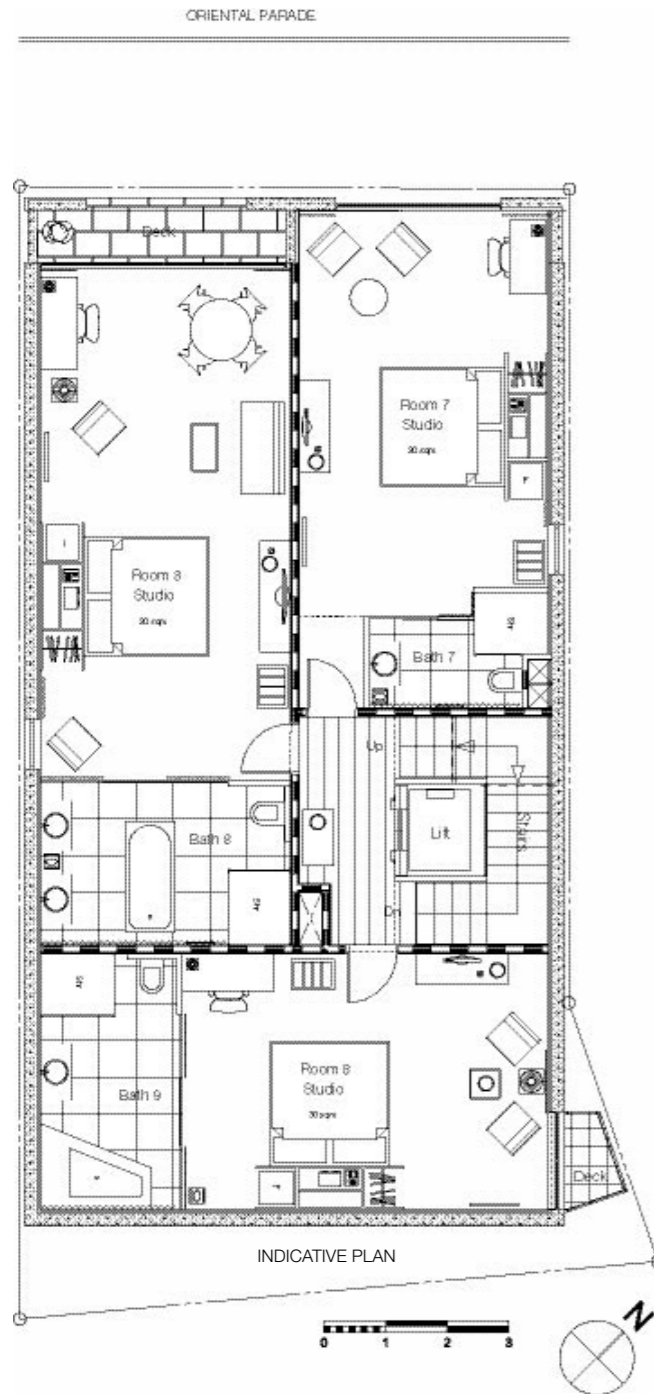
Ohtel, which opened in 2008, is the creation of its owner, Alan Blundell. After 20 years working as an architectural draughtsman and designer Mr Blundell wanted to change his life. His idea of starting a small hotel took on more definite shape after an inspirational week in New York, checking out some of the city’s designer accommodation. Back in Wellington, Mr Blundell had bought a property on Oriental Parade. He considered renovating the existing house on the site, but decided it would be better to start from scratch, and design a new building.

The size of the building platform is daunting enough, but the vertical slope at the rear is downright scary (at least, to a visitor from Auckland). Mr Blundell, though, had a more sanguine approach to the building project. “I’m from Wellington, and most of my jobs have been on tricky sites. I’m used to dealing with difficult engineering”. Mr Blundell shored up and anchored the slope, and then got on with the task of drawing up the ten-roomed hotel.

Already, Mr Blundell knew how he would fit out Ohtel. A fan of Modernist design, he had started buying mid-twentieth century furniture even while he planned his hotel. As he found out, he was hardly the only collector of classic Scandinavian pieces. “Prices skyrocketed,” he says, “but once I’d started, I had to keep doing it”. The other main influence on Ohtel’s interior design is its proprietor’s determination to use New Zealand art and craft objects throughout, both in the guests’ rooms and in the ground floor lobby / café area.

Any career change takes some courage, and Mr Blundell’s resolve has certainly been tested by current straightened circumstances – Ohtel opened just in time for the recession – and by the inherent challenges of the hotel business. But his commitment is impressive and, for visitors who are interested in design, and who want to experience New Zealand’s best promenade, Ohtel is an attractive alternative to the Capital’s chain hotels and bland apartments. **u**

www.ohtel.com



OPENING SPREAD: An upper-level, west-facing guest room at Wellington’s Ohtel. The Modernist furniture and New Zealand craft and design elements are typical of Alan Blundell’s fit-out. FACING PAGE: The hotel lobby contains a seating area (pictured), and small café / dining room.



ABOVE: The street elevation of the hotel, which is shoehorned onto a pocket of flat land under Mt Victoria. Alan Blundell, a draughtsman for 20 years, designed the building. **FACING PAGE:** The Ohtel dining room also serves as a small neighbourhood café.

