

FEEL THE BURN

When a fire ripped through its just-completed renovation, rather than give up, Richmond Club Hotel levelled up.

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“Arrive onsite to find a small army of railway officials standing round the crane. Tony explains: apparently the train drivers have gone on strike. Turns out a 12-tonne steel beam looks pretty scary when it’s swinging 50 feet in the air at the top of a crane and you’re travelling towards it at about 80kmh in the driver’s compartment of a commuter train.”

In case you missed it, that was an excerpt from Matt Mullins’ fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants run-through of Richmond Club Hotel’s eventful rebuild (Smooth Operator, Issue 45). It’s just one anecdote in a long list of sometimes hilarious, but mostly frustrating setbacks and delays that involved a Brook Shields impersonation, two AFL Grand Finals, and a VCAT objection from a guy who couldn’t rightly put a finger on why he objected.

It was far from a rosy experience, and to top it all off, it was the second time round that Matt and the rest of the team at Sand Hill Road had renovated the site. They had just finished a major renovation of the first floor in November 2008, when the whole thing went up in smoke. After a head count to make sure everyone was alright, the boys took a deep breath and got to work again. “We’d just finished a complete reno of the place, upstairs and down, inside and out,” said Matt Mullins. “And it had been so well received. The business had never been stronger.”

The other problem was that the boys’ architect, Justin Northrop of Techné Architects — the guy that knew the building more intimately than anyone — had just skived off to New York to live. “That was a curveball,” admits Mullins. “Justin knew the hotel inside and out. He was clearly the man to rebuild it. But the architectural process we employ is highly collaborative. My partners and I spend long hours face to face with the architect, locking in a brief, discussing ideas, drawing and redrawing plans. Doing that from halfway across the globe just didn’t seem possible. But then we thought: hold on, New York’s the coolest city on earth, with the coolest bars on earth. And it’s rooftop nirvana. The whole bloody city is rooftop after rooftop. A New-York based architect is exactly what we need!”

Although it might be über-cool to contract an architect situated in a creative melting pot like New York, it doesn’t make for easy meetings. The solution: enter the modern age of e-architecture. All day, every day, one computer in the Sand Hill Road office was dedicated to screen watching Justin’s progress, while another was re-commissioned as a Skype video conferencing portal to New York. “Because of the time difference,” said Mullins. “We’d often have these meetings at the end of the day New York time, when Justin was just getting home from some new bar or rooftop he’d discovered. He’d upload to our screen a photo he’d just taken at some flash new place, which would start a whole new design chat, and away we’d go.”

RAISING THE ROOF

As devastating as the fire was, the Richmond Club Hotel did benefit from the destruction. The roof, which had previously been a capping point for any extensions was now entirely gone allowing the hotel breathing room for a third level. Likewise, the original Level One floor plan — a brick wall layout of old accommodation rooms — that had remained from the original 19th century hotel design had been exhumed. In a way the fire took it upon itself to do what had always been in the too hard basket. Paving the way for a carte blanche, new hotel.

A blank canvas is a good place to start, but with a bar-hopping architect in New York, the temptation to mimic Big Apple bars wholesale could have spelt problems for a died-in-the-wool local crowd. “We’re a community hotel,” says Mullins. “We’ve owned

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this place for over five years now, and we've owned other venues on this street for a decade. I live two streets away. This is very much our community. In designing the new Richmond Club we were determined to maintain all the character that made it such a locals' favourite for so long. But we also wanted to make sure we were building something our neighbours would be happy with. In particular, we wanted to ensure we didn't affect the amenity of the neighbourhood."

Although the objection that dragged the process through VCAT ended up being a bogus protest from some guy who didn't even live on the map of the area, Sand Hill Road still takes its neighbour's peace and quiet very seriously. That's why the orientation of the hotel is directed at the nine-line Richmond railway viaduct lining the back of the property and not the Swan Street frontage. An inner-city urban aspect that would perfectly suit any New York design influences.

The charred remains of the hotel inspired a lot of the design: with the brick walls now exposed, the towering brick chimneys and blackened and charred steel. The remnants had an industrial quality that was amplified by an internal staircase lined with raw steel mesh like a warehouse elevator shaft, a bar hob supported by a heavy steel beam, a corrugated iron rear fascia, and fluorescents lighting the rear deck. The rustic charm is offset by bold and bright lights and upholstery, just steering the whole interior clear of feeling overly similar to a warehouse.

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The chance to rebuild the internal structure of the hotel paved the way for some handy architectural solutions. The levels of the Richmond Club aren't merely separate floors linked by a staircase. There are levels within levels that are as interconnected by sightlines as by steps. There are private areas, or at least simple seating arrangements that allow groups to form their own circle. But the public bar influence is never turned off at the Richmond Club Hotel. Even the most removed areas tap into the broader social scene. At one end of the upper level, a generous circular banquette sits proud on a plinth. But a square cutout in the adjoining brickwork prevents even this enclosed circle from becoming exclusive.

There are a couple of ways to move up and down the layers of the hotel, the interior staircase and the back stairway from the beer garden. Spinning off both paths are a collection of balconies, alcoves and booths where patrons can get cosy for the night, but best of all are the birdcages on Level Two. Five individual pods cantilevered off the side of the building provide the premier destination for the view. Like static cars on a ferris wheel, lit up by coloured string lights and taking in everything across the railway line from the Dimmeys and Nylex clocks to the East and South, through to the twinkling light show of AAMI stadium and the mountains of Melbourne's sporting precinct looming beyond it. It's Melbourne in a single glance, from the comfort of a glass-wrapped, individually-heated pod with retractable roofing, separate bar and bathroom.

Easy to say now but Richmond locals should be grateful for the fire —The Richmond Club Hotel has just got a whole lot better. **venue**



Building A Working Relationship

Visual Builders built the new look Richmond Club Hotel. It's one of many the company has completed for Sand Hill Road, having developed a working relationship that works. "Tony (Lewis, of Visual Builders), Justin and I have worked together on five or six different Sand Hill Road projects now," says Mullins. "We've developed a way of working, a shorthand, that's priceless. We find we can cut time from our schedule, and cash from our budget, by streamlining the design and documentation process, and by retaining some flexibility right through from concept to completion. We don't draw anything Tony hasn't already told us he can build efficiently and cost-effectively.

