When a young experimental hotelier, who formerly was a lawyer, turns an old brothel in Singapore into a boutique hotel that becomes one of the most sought after destinations in the city for travelers and locals alike, it is not unreasonable to expect his latest venture of "twisting-the-plot-on-its-head" to raise eyebrows, or even make heads turn across the hotel and design industries internationally. Loh Lik Peng managed just that when he collaborated with architects at Tonkin Zulaikha Greer and lighting designers PSLab, to create the spanking new Old Clare Hotel in Chippendale, suburban Sydney, Australia.

What was once a quiet neighbourhood, Chippendale today attracts crowds that throng to the multitude of restaurants, bars and art galleries lining the streets. And at one of the busiest intersections of this area, lies the (new) Old Clare Hotel, which was conceived around two distinct landmark buildings - The County Clare Hotel and the Carlton United Brewery Administration Building. A narrow laneway that once segregated the two adjacent structures has now become the stitch that binds them both. Conferred the role of the lobby, the space is embraced by large glass facades on either end to form an impressive atrium. Daylight pours into the elongated volume effortlessly, as do guests, residents and even students who use the passage as a pedestrian shortcut. That is its purpose – to bridge the gap, between structures, the old and new, the historic and contemporary, and even the intimate and luxurious.

Architect Tim Greer describes the lobby as a highly activated space. "The spectacular glass façade of the foyer fills the void between two impermeable structures, capturing natural light and pulling it into the depths of the former laneway. Once inside you can see how the natural light filters through creating a complex forest of shadows and patterns, intensified with the reflective surfaces used on the bridge walkways connecting the two buildings." At night, the lobby comes alive in a dramatic chicness as the light filled volume is transformed into an intimate experience offered by custom made wall lights by PSLab. Car headlight fittings mounted onto smooth lacquer finished steel brackets are attached to rustic walls in the main areas. Effortlessly placed incandescent lamps cast pools of warm light, facilitating

A PASSAGE THROUGH TIME

Tonkin Zulaikha Greer Architects marry the old and new, linking heritage value with contemporary aesthetics in the refurbishment of two heritage buildings into the ritzy Old Clare Hotel in Sydney. Mrinalini Ghadiok walks through the twin structures to discover a rich reference to the buildings’ historicity delicately contrasted with bespoke lighting details dipped in fastidious novelty by PSLab.
an easy transition from day to night. The Old Clare Hotel has clutched onto its heritage and often makes references to its past context. Artifacts that were once used in the brewery or those perhaps extracted from the former pub are displayed with aplomb, and charter new functions. TZG embraced the industrial heritage of the existing buildings and infused it with common luxuries of present expectations, seen in the exposed brickwork, bare concrete and original timber paneling. While the old fireplace retains its position, torn fragments of graffiti and music posters re-appropriated from the old pub are conserved with honor. The architects explain the course as an exciting journey, “Walking through the hotel is like going on an adventure through a building that seems to be as much about un-building as it is about building. The process of un-building naturally leaves its own record of saw cuts and prop holes, all of which add to the composition of the finished building. In this way, points in history and processes in past construction are captured and revealed in the fabric of the building, leading to a reinvigoration of the past and a sophisticated complexity in the fabric of the architecture.”

In assigning function to the prevalent building structures, TZG found the repetitive organisation of the brewery administration building naturally enfolding hotel suite layouts into its realm, while the north facing erstwhile County Clare Hotel came to house the reception, bar, restaurant, and conference rooms. Walking into the receptions area, one is faced with the old world charm of white marble tiled flooring, darkened walls from where shafts of sunlight make their way through high leveled windows, and what seems to be a sophisticated gilded ceiling. The golden surface dips in a dramatic backlit curve over the elongated reception table made of amber coloured glass. Illuminated from within, the glowing glass box casts a warm glow in the volume, inviting guests to find a seat from the eclectic collection of armchairs or engage with the collage of posters that cover the saloon wall. The coloured glass in hues of ochre further finds its place at the bar within, which sits along the edge of the busy street, enticing hotel guests and passersby for a cooling pit stop. Dressed in subdued tones of yellow and brown, and carpeted to reminisce beer stains, the eatery crafts its own style in juxtaposing retro surfaces with a chic oval structure, luminous in a blonde halo and sparkling with a remarkable collection of glass liquor bottles. The ambience is left casual and comfortable, highlighting eccentric features like an old phone booth that was converted to an art installation, or vintage beer pitches that line the walls.

The other side of the lobby, which is the old brewery administration building, houses two of the three renowned and unique restaurants along one edge of the property, and a series of rooms along the other. The floors above comprise of the remaining suites, totaling 62 in number across 7 categories of varying floor areas and catering to a multitude of requirements. While the lower three floors offer rooms rendered in a semi-industrial vibe, complete with original timber paneling, exposed brick and concrete surfaces, and laden with luxuries; the upper floors comprise of loft style suites that are more contemporary in their design aesthetic, but offer nothing short of the best. Each residential unit fitted with restored original picture windows is inundated with natural light that seeps into the open plan volume, devoid of vertical internal partitions. Glass divisions between the sleeping quarters and bathrooms facilitate daylight to the inner reaches of the space. The high ceilings and somber colour schemes brighten the volume to make it appear bigger, lighter and airier. Textured walls are juxtaposed with smooth...
Painted surfaces, while old chandeliers are complemented with new bespoke fittings designed by PSLab. Ceiling pendants made of blackened steel arms, emblematic of the brand's minimalist language, are suspended in simple austerity within the space. Tailored with custom glass bulbs at the ends, the fixtures draw attention to their simple but elegant appeal, perfectly in sync with the broader architectural language.

The design aesthetic is centered around fine details such as upcycled vintage artifacts, industrial desk lamps made from car jacks by the Rag and Bone Man, and photographs of the hotel construction that find their way in decorating rooms, while mid-century furniture and barber chairs dot the hotel to imbibe a deep sense of nostalgia.

A glorious staircase winds itself around an elevator shaft, visually connecting all the floors as it climbs from the ground level all the way to the top. The terrace holds what is arguably one of the best rooftop bars and swimming pools in the city, boasting of spectacular uninterrupted views into the distance. Rendered in the same old world charm that is evident throughout the hotel, literally breathing a breath of fresh air, the pool deck becomes an ideal respite from the busy city below.

Greer reflects on the design process to say, “The hotel makes most use of natural ambient light, punctuating halls and activating corners otherwise forgotten, with intriguing custom made works of art. The majority of lighting was custom made specifically for this project. This ensured that the designs were completely at one with the structures around them, completely woven into the design intent of The Old Clare Hotel, and complimentary to its historical fabric, some of the works remnants of its former life.”

The Old Clare Hotel, Chippendale, NSW, Australia
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Landscape Architect: Turf Design
Master Planning Consultant: Foster and Partners
Town Planning Consultant: JBA Planning
Structural Engineer: Mott MacDonald
Services Engineer: WSP
Accessibility Consultant: Accessibility Solutions

LIGHTING SPECIFIED

- PSLab: Car headlights Wall Mounted fixture
- PSLab: Bespoke ceiling pendant
- Tonkin Zulaikha Greer: Bespoke lighting systems

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