

RIGHT FORMULA

The Albert Park Hotel is dressed and ready for success after a long time in hibernation.

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A small renovation turned into something altogether more ambitious. For Six Degrees this was the architectural firm's third or fourth Albert Park Hotel reno., might be more, but who's counting! Back in 2016, when the Morris Group (which owns the Colonial Leisure Group) engaged them, the plan was to give the old girl a freshen up. CLG had purchase the Albert Park Hotel from the Melbourne Pub Group and by the time it changed hands the venue needed more than a lick of paint — the doors were closed for some months and a cloud was hanging over the pub.

"We took a fresh look at what we could do with the pub," recalls Morris Group executive, Andrew Lewis. "We explored the idea of turning some of it into residential, for example. Then the decision was made to house the Morris Group's operations here — effectively, moving the Morris Group's headquarters from Port Melbourne to the pub."

"That's when the proposition changed for us," continues John Hajko, who was Six Degrees' project architect. "It turned the project from essentially being a hospitality refit to a whole redevelopment of the site — a complete reimagining of the hotel."

FAMILY BUSINESS

The new Albert Park Hotel now comprises two levels of hospitality and two of office space. The Morris Group has interests in other hospitality and leisure companies, as well as technology. It's very much a family affair as well. The upper floors are replete with Morris family members, some working on the Morris Family Foundation, a philanthropic arm of the group. Which is all to say: this project is a very personal one for the pub owners. The Morris family live locally, they now work in the venue and the Albert Park Hotel plays a key role in their day to day lives — both work and leisure.

Just not yet... at least, not in June when venue paid a visit to the pub in deepest darkest Covid lockdown.

"We had a soft opening early in the year then the lockdown was enforced so we're yet to see the venue going full throttle," explains Andrew Lewis.

THE FITOUT

"Just look at the atrium!" Yes, it's hard to miss the atrium with the 'aerobridge' walkway, and the

enormous glazed aspect to the back of the pub. It's a reminder that apart from the heritage-listed facade and some original brickwork, the Albert Park Hotel is effectively a new venue.

Not to say there aren't some familiar Six Degrees touches that ensure the pub isn't a complete stranger to those who remember her.

Before the fitout, everyone wanted to be at the street front," explains architect John Hajko. "It meant that the front half of the pub would be packed, then you would run into all the service areas in the middle, and the back half with external courtyards over time got built out by the neighbours and sat overshadowed. The upstairs areas were popular during peak periods but were otherwise not in the action. We have now reconfigured all these spaces making the whole venue active."

"For me, the pub was very much a 'Spring Carnival' pub," posits Andrew Lewis. "It was a place you associated with good weather. We've managed to warm the venue up and make upstairs more accessible."

COVID REFLECTIONS

Covid has been an unmitigated disaster for hospitality. But if there's the merest glimpse of a silver lining for the Albert Park Hotel is that it's enjoyed the longest soft opening in the history of pub launches.

"It's not a bad way to get everything tweaked," remarks a philosophical Andrew Lewis. "Before the second lockdown we were doing really quite impressive numbers from just 20 people in each area."

"The truth is, without the lockdown we would have got slammed in the opening weeks and it would have been a tough baptism of fire for staff, so... who knows? This all could be better for us in the long, long term."

ANATOMY OF A LOCKDOWN

What are the economics of running a large pub venture when numbers are capped? Morris Group's Andrew Lewis explains:

"Really, it depends on whether you own the property. The Albert Park Hotel is the only CLG pub open during the lockdown. We own the building and it's the only one that makes sense to keep open. We lease most of the others."

ALBERT PARK HOTEL AUDIO

Zelo's Sales & Design Manager, Stephen Sokolowski provides more detail on the pub's audio design and integration: "The original client brief was for a s***-hot sound system that would sound great at low and high volume, and above all else, be consistent throughout the pub. And to keep the neighbours happy — to minimise leakage to the resident next door.

"We've used a lot of speakers, it's not a lot different to any other venue we've done — we always put coverage before anything else; we're not an integrator that puts four speakers in a corner, a sub in the middle, and turns it up. We used EASE to model the venue. We treat the whole venue as one acoustic wave, with sound emanating from a point source outwards — everything is time aligned and tuned.

"Each EAW VFR89 loudspeaker is running in pairs, and in stereo. All the subs are acoustically isolated from the structure which prevents bass travel through the ground to the walls, exciting the building. We used 12-inch EAW SB120 subwoofers to prevent that low end summation, which you can get down at around 30Hz. The 12-inch subs give you that really nice punchy bass, around 40Hz. We have a sub for every three or four full-range loudspeaker.

"We have Symetrix DSP taking care of the processing and Powersoft amplifiers. We use Dante networked audio for sound distribution. A Crestron control system provides the client with an elegant user interface.

"The upstairs dancefloor required some specialised audio design to provide a level of excitement for patrons without exciting the structure of the building and exciting the neighbours' lawyers.

"We wanted to achieve solid impact on the dancefloor, but that was going to be a big challenge with the neighbours only a brickwall away. We employed a cardioid sub array to cancel as much bass as we could in the direction of the perimeter wall. Again, we used the EAW SB120 subs, ceiling mounted. We achieved about 15dB rejection and that helped us be within the acceptable limits. Specialised technical audio assistance came from Ben Clarke at PAVT, who was most helpful.

"The pub has spent the right amount of money to do it properly. It's been a long project. But we're really happy with the results."

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"If you are on a compromise lease arrangement with the landlord, then there's little point opening up and paying rent for 20 people in the venue."

"The number of people you have on Jobkeeper is another consideration. We pulled up some staff on Jobkeeper from Half Moon to the Albert Park Hotel because, naturally, we didn't have any front of house staff on Jobkeeper here."

"Running a pub during a lockdown is difficult. Every instinct and bone in your body is geared to make people happy and ensure people have a good night. But with reduced numbers, you're forced to move people on. I had friends ring me during lockdown to get a table. I couldn't. And it kills you to let people down and be the fun police. You don't want to be the fun police in hospitality."

"What's the outlook for pubs? The good operators will survive — good operators who have sound leases in place, without astronomical rents. Fortunately, our pubs have good lease agreements, they're run by good managers, and have good staff. They'll survive. Unfortunately, there'll be a lot of pubs that won't survive."

"My concern isn't so much about the survival but it's about operating in a recession. It's going to be tough trading conditions for quite a while. People won't be spending as much: they'll be eating out once a week rather than twice; there will be less spending on the corporate card; disposable incomes will down as people are on reduced hours."

AUDIO STANDOUT

One standout feature of the Albert Park Hotel fitout is the superior audio. The design and integration was taken care of by Zelo with Stephen Sokolowski managing the job. Andrew Lewis, has a good number of venue launches under his belt, including nightclub openings in the far east, and he's acutely aware of the importance of good sound to a venue's success.

"Sound and lighting are crucial. Done well, and they instantly create the right mood. The brief to Zelo was for clean sound throughout the venue, even when the venue is full," reports Andrew Lew-

is. "I don't want the sound to disappear; I want the sound system to have plenty in reserve."

"That's right, power and consistency of coverage were the watchwords for the brief," concurs Stephen Sokolowski. "And to not upset the neighbours."

The neighbour is on the other side of a perimeter wall and ensured a job for the acoustic engineers. The audio designs were stringently run through acoustic modelling and resulted in a few windows being bricked in upstairs.

To ensure even coverage, Stephen employed a battalion of EAW loudspeakers powered by banks of Powersoft amplifiers. By having one channel connected to only one or two loudspeakers, it's possible to fine tune the sound and the levels in the space, ensuring a consistent experience for everyone in venue. The subwoofers use isolation mounts to reduce vibration and low frequency energy through the floor and structure of the building. The subs use a comparatively modest 12-inch speaker — "we find the 12-inch EAW SB120 subs give the sense of low frequency power without the subsonic rumble that can make life difficult with neighbours," explains Stephen Sokolowski.

Many architects might blanche at seeing their venue quite so replete with surfacemount loudspeakers, but Six Degrees' John Hajko is more pragmatic than most. "This is not a venue where you can have a record player and one pair of giant speakers. The sound system had to be designed around the atrium and work over multiple levels, and meet the client's brief for an experience in every space."

"I don't think people notice them, to be honest," insists Andrew Lewis. "We take our heating seriously in this pub to keep people warm. I don't expect people to come to the venue and complain: 'Why have you got so many hydronic heaters?!'"

ANOTHER CHAPTER

The Albert Park Hotel is a gutsy rebuild — 're-fit' doesn't do the renovation justice. It warms the heart to see Six Degrees, which has such a long association with the building, given the chance to

refashion the pub into something that will hold it in good stead for decades to come. The atrium — with the extraordinary rear glass wall and roof — really is something else, but ultimately people will keep coming back for the food, the drink and the good company.

"Working within the heritage overlay was a real challenge," reflects Morris Group's Andrew Lewis. "I'll be honest, there were times when I wished we could bulldoze it all and start again. But now that we're finished, and you see the old brick wall going up through the stairwell, and the history and the link with the original pub and its character and all that history, there's a real sense of satisfaction there. It's a long term play and this pub will be around for a long time to come."

DONE RIGHT

So has the Albert Park Hotel become the new jewel in the Colonial Leisure Group crown?

"Well, it's a bit tough to say," according to Andrew Lewis. "We've got some pretty nice venues. For example, the Portsea Hotel has been recently refurbished and is looking better than ever. Half Moon is a great pub, and does exceptionally well. Print Hall in Perth, Raffles... there are some good venues there. But for me personally, I do have a soft spot for the Albert Park Hotel. I live nearby and I used to come to this pub a lot when I was a younger man."

"I've opened a few venues in my time and it's often nerve wracking and you're always wondering if you've done the concept properly. I don't have that concern with this pub — I'm convinced we have the offering right."

Six Degrees: sixdegrees.com.au

Directitude Management: www.directitude.com.au

