

Otahuna Lodge

An Elegant Update for the Historic Queen Anne Style Homestead in New Zealand

Interior Design by Stephen Cashmore/Text by Michael Frank/Photography by Tony Sheffield



IN MAY OF 2005 HALL CANNON and Miles Refo arrived in New Zealand with a strong conviction that they wanted to reinvent their lives but uncertain as to what form that reinvention might take. In New York, Cannon had worked in property development, specializing in the conversion of old commercial lofts; Refo's

field was marketing. Their quest for change had taken them on investigative visits to the west coasts of both Canada and the United States. In New Zealand they drove from one end of the country to another, and throughout their travels they were deeply impressed, Cannon remembers, by the "extraordinary beauty of the

country, the diversity of its landscape, the honesty and laid-back character of the New Zealanders. We looked at each other and said, "This is where we want to be."

There was one key question, however: What were they going to do with their lives?

The question was answered
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A Queen Anne style house designed by architect Frederick Strouts in 1895, near Christchurch, New Zealand, is now an exclusive seven-suite hotel. Otahuna Lodge's owners, Hall Cannon and Miles Refo, recently renovated the property. They worked with a team of gardeners and consultants to revive the grounds.



ABOVE: The gabled entrance portico and veranda. The lodge—the former homestead of politician Sir Heaton Rhodes—is listed on the New Zealand Historic Places Trust. It features restored architectural details, including turned posts and an elaborately carved second-floor veranda rail.



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by Otahuna, a substantial 1895 Queen Anne style house near Christchurch that was—and is—considered an iconic property, with a Category 1 listing from the New Zealand Historic Places Trust, one of a handful of residences to receive that ranking. The men de-

cidied to buy the house, which had been run as a hotel since 2003, upgrade its interiors and its gardens and dive into the hospitality business.

The place that so profoundly captivated Cannon and Refo was, for New Zealand, a rare if tarnished treasure. An early house for the region, it had an

exterior that had hardly been touched over the years. Much of its rich late-Victorian interior detailing, rendered in native timber, was intact, as were a few examples of its original imitation-leather wall hangings. In Maori, *otahuna* means “little hill among the hills.” Indeed the house, built by architect Frederick Strouts for Heaton Rhodes, the son of one of the country’s early settlers and landowners, stands on a small hill between the rocky outcroppings of the Banks Peninsula. The property’s 30 acres (down from an original 5,000)

features orchards of old fruit trees, a Dutch garden, a kitchen garden, historic daffodil fields and several outbuildings.

On the negative side, and there was one, the place appeared to be lacking “both soul and magic,” says Stephen Cashmore, the Auckland-based designer Cannon and Refo soon engaged. Cashmore, who specializes in historic restoration, says the house was “impersonal in the extreme, where every room was painted in a variation of what we came to call Otahuna cream.”

Cannon and Refo gave Cashmore a clear mandate: Awaken the house; use local materials, craftsmen and manufacturers wherever possible; and make sure that the work honors Otahuna’s original intentions. “We asked Stephen,” says Cannon, “to express the absolute

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LEFT: Designer Stephen Cashmore covered the entrance hall walls with a green fabric to contrast with the kauri and rimu details and hand-painted ceiling paper. **ABOVE:** The leaded windows in the fireside sitting area are original. Chair fabrics from Colefax & Fowler.



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ABOVE: Guests can join chef Jimmy McIntyre in the garden to choose their own vegetables. RIGHT AND ABOVE RIGHT: Selections from the restaurant's five-course dinner.



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best of what was possible in our new home—and homeland.”

While Otahuna had undergone two fairly recent sets of renovations that addressed structural issues and improved systems, the organization of the bedrooms was not conducive to its anticipated use as a luxury hotel. The baths were inadequate; there was no commercial kitchen or laundry; the gardens, while still beautiful, were in many places neglected. And then there was the larger problem of that missing soul.

One of the first things that Cashmore did was to study the house through his preservationist's eye. “The farther away in time you get,” he says, “the harder it is to see back into the original spirit of a place.” For Cashmore, seeing back meant

ABOVE: The dining room, with its ornate hand-carved spandrels, fire surround, paneling and other millwork, “is the least changed room in the homestead,” Cashmore says. “The pressed and gilded wallpaper is protected by the New Zealand historic trust.”

understanding how a grand house of its day worked. “In the reception area, for example, a large-scale room by New Zealand standards, you are meant to be impressed with the extravagance of the decoration—but that effect had been muted.

“Obviously we weren't going to go back to 1895,” he explains, adding that period photographs show rooms cluttered with potted palms, mounted deer heads and spindly Sheraton Revival furniture.

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“We arrived at a comfortable country style that nevertheless gives guests an understanding of the history of Otahuna.”

LEFT: Furnishings in the Veranda Suite are based on period models. The Duke of York, later George VI, may have stayed in the room in 1927. Works by leading New Zealand artists hang in the bedroom, as throughout the house. The striped fabric is from Fabricut.



ABOVE: The Veranda Suite’s private balcony. “From there you can see across the gardens to the Southern Alps,” Cashmore notes. Dedon table and armchairs. **RIGHT:** The octagonal turret overlooks the pool terrace. Plantings in the garden include roses, camellias and laurel trees.

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The aim was to create an improved sense of the past that would allow the house to function as a hotel. “We arrived at a comfortable country style,” he says, “that nevertheless gives guests an understanding of the history of Otahuna.”

He was not perturbed, as some designers might have been, by the Queen Anne polyglot, where Renaissance, Tudor, and Arts and Crafts motifs, expressed through carved wood, stained glass and patterned wallpaper, all intermingle volubly, like opinionated guests at a cocktail party. Instead he sailed forward, covering all that Otahuna cream with vivid colors. In the entrance hall, he used a strong green, in the form of a strié wallcovering; in the drawing room, by tradition a ladies’ room, he used a pale blue, a paper patterned with garlands of wisteria. In the library, he chose a punchy red. In the dining room, Cashmore found the original sideboard, paneling and pressed and gilded wall-

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Hotels

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paper, which, naturally (as it is protected by the historic trust), he did not touch. He did, however, drop in furnishings that, though not original, look as though they could have been.

Cashmore's fitting out of Otahuna's public and private rooms is sensitive in this way. Armoires, bedsteads, tables and chairs, many of his own design and all fabricated locally, express a refined country house aesthetic without being literal reproductions. He played with the expected, too: In the reception area, club chairs are wittily upholstered in tartan on one side, plain wool on the other. And he was not afraid to seize entire (small) bedrooms and

Canon and Refo, devoted foodies, have revived heirloom seed lines.

reassign them as baths: The hotel now features seven luxurious suites, each designed around a different theme or character.

The visitor today finds Otahuna's soul radiant once again. The interiors glow with oiled woodwork and walls hung with artwork by New Zealand artists.

The grounds are undergoing constant restoration themselves. Cannon and Refo, devoted foodies, have revived heirloom seed lines. Guests can accompany the chef into the all-organic garden to pick vegetables for their evening meal. They can also land in helicopters on the front lawn or take off in them to fly across the Canterbury Plains or into the Southern Alps. They can go horseback riding, tour vineyards or visit cheese makers. But no matter where they venture, when they return to Otahuna, they find waiting for them a carefully tended piece of New Zealand's heritage.

"Many of our guests come expressly for Otahuna," Cannon says. "Houses can be like that. When they capture your imagination, you're done for—as we know better than anyone else." □

Otahuna Lodge

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