

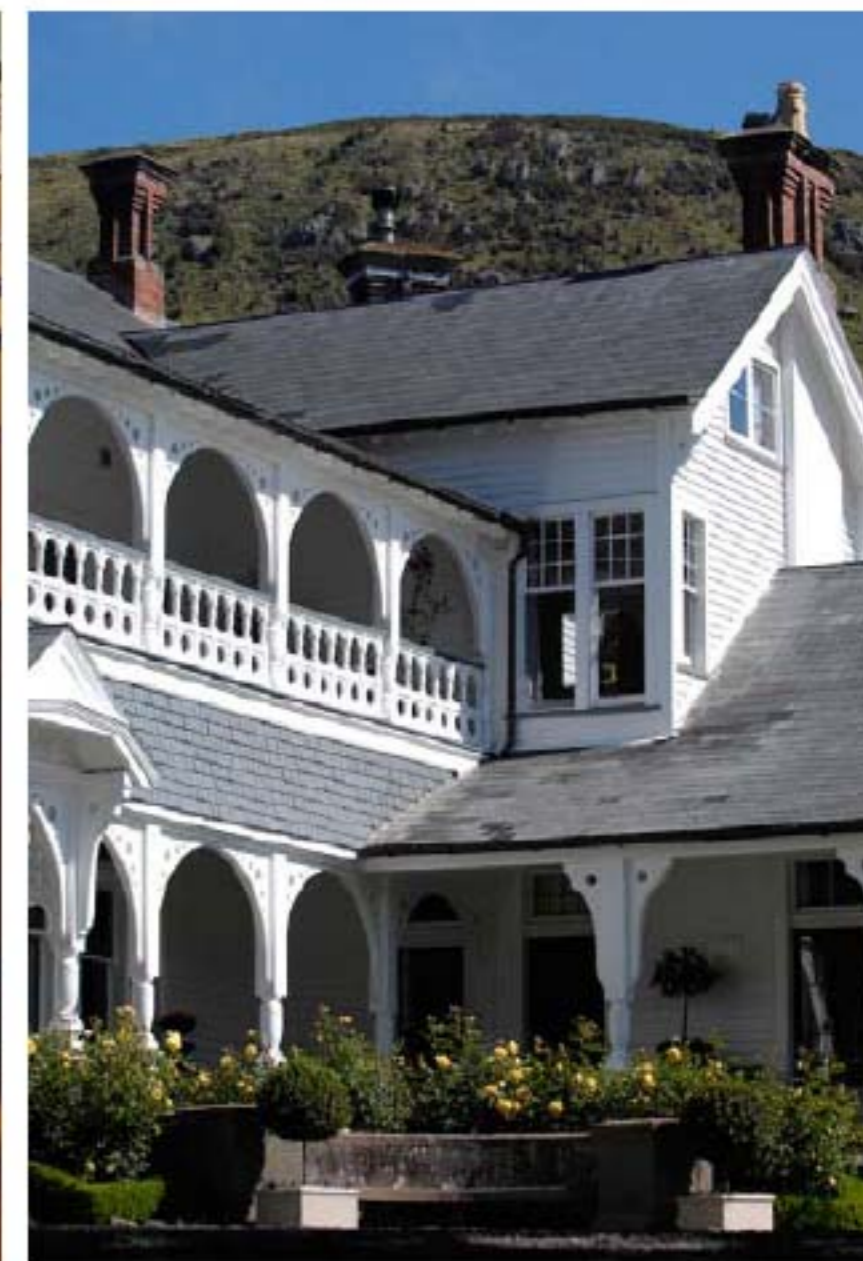
SOUL PRESERVATION

A historic Canterbury homestead accommodates the 21st century in style

STORY: Adrienne Rewi • PHOTOGRAPHS: Daniel Allen

Otahuna's main entry hall, where the gentlemen of the house once gathered after dinner; it boasts a magnificent carved kauri staircase, ornate totara pillars and an elaborately repainted pressed paper ceiling.





The late afternoon sun filters into their soft blue drawing room as Hall Cannon and Miles Refo relax in front of a roaring fire to talk about their first year as the owners of Otahuna. With charming understatement they describe the historic Canterbury homestead as being “quite a change” from the one-bedroom Manhattan apartment of their former lives in New York.

The thirty-year-olds both exude a confidence and sense of place that belies their dramatic change of lifestyle and the hectic few months they have spent restoring their 1672sqm new home.

Built in 1895 and located at Tai Tapu, near Christchurch, the three-storeyed mansion is regarded as one of the finest examples of Queen Anne architecture in Australasia. Its category one Historic Places Trust listing is a testament to its remarkable preservation.

Step over the threshold and it’s easy to see why the original owner, New Zealand parliamentarian Sir Heaton Rhodes, lived here for more than sixty years. It’s also easy to see why Hall and Miles fell for it the first time they saw it.

“We first came to New Zealand in 2004 when I bought Miles a ticket as a birthday present. He had always wanted to come here and I wanted to give him a present that was completely out of the box,” says Hall.

“Otahuna’s previous owners had converted it into a lodge in 2003 and we stayed here. Our first reaction to the property was ‘wow’. It has a magnificent sense of arrival and a sense of history and legacy that is unique in New Zealand.”

Those were the qualities that swayed them when they returned in 2005 for a three-month visit, after quitting their New York jobs – Hall as a developer; Miles as a marketing manager in academic and scientific publishing. >

THIS PAGE: Miles Refo (left) and Hall Cannon. Otahuna is reputedly the finest example of Queen Anne architecture in Australasia.

FACING PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: The guest lounge was once a drawing room, where the ladies gathered after dinner; its most striking feature is a carved fireplace with inglenook seats. Part of the carved kauri staircase in the entry hall. Otahuna originally had twenty fireplaces; fifteen are still functioning and used regularly. The formal dining room has its original acanthus-pattern wallpaper from 1895, in almost pristine condition.



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example of how conservation architecture can meet contemporary needs”

THIS PAGE: Miles entertains guests from the head of the sixteen-seater mahogany dining table.

FACING PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The sunny window seat in the breakfast room off the kitchen is a popular spot with guests. Jimmy McIntyre has been chef at Otahuna Lodge for four years. The kitchens draw on meat and eggs from organically raised pigs and hens. Jimmy designs his menus around fresh produce from Otahuna’s half-hectare vegetable and herb gardens and large orchards. Cookbooks and utensils on well-stocked kitchen shelves.

The enterprising pair were on the lookout for a new direction and a new place to settle and they had picked out several possible locations – New Zealand and various parts of the United States and Canada. After visiting them all, they declared New Zealand the hands-down winner.

As fate would have it, Otahuna was on the market at the time of their second visit and after months of negotiations they clinched the deal and took possession in August 2006.

From the very beginning they were keen to breathe new life into the property’s weary old bones – and they were equally keen to turn it into one of the most prestigious lodges in the country.

They admit they were fortunate in that the home’s two previous owners had both spent a great deal of time and money taking care of the fundamentals.

New plumbing, 260 sprinkler heads, underfloor heating, new carpet, three new bathrooms, a swimming pool and a new kitchen were all installed. Fifteen fireplaces were also restored.

“That aside, it felt like the home had lost its soul. It seemed empty to us. There was no art, no music and the twelve hectares of gardens were overgrown. We bought it because we could see its incredible potential,” says Hall.

Otahuna certainly feels loved again and it invites exploration. When you step into the huge, classic entry hall, replete with rich mahogany panelling, hunter green walls, elaborately framed artworks and a magnificent hand-carved kauri staircase, it’s difficult to resist the urge to discover what lies behind the next door, beyond the next corridor, up the next staircase. >





THIS PAGE: The upstairs Verandah Room looks out over a vast front lawn and lake. The Verandah Room's en suite bathroom has a free-standing French bath tub. A third-storey guest suite known as The Garret has been built into the old wood-panelled attic.

"It's an extraordinary house to live in," says Miles. "But it would be daunting and lonely if it were just the two of us. It's right that so many people come and go; it's lovely when it's filled with guests and staff."

Hall and Miles hired Auckland-based historical conservation designer Stephen Cashmore, of Cashmore & Colleagues, to mastermind the finishing touches that would give the house the required five-star level of contemporary comfort while paying tribute to its historical significance.

"We didn't want Otahuna to be a museum. We wanted it to shine as an example of how conservation architecture can meet contemporary needs. It is very much a melding of old and new and Stephen was the perfect person to oversee that," says Hall.

Twenty-eight original New Zealand artworks were commissioned to adorn Otahuna's walls; an additional twenty works were purchased; and more than thirty-five

historical photographs of Otahuna were reproduced from the collections of the Canterbury Museum and the Alexander Turnbull Library. Eighty pieces of furniture were created in Christchurch – many of them designed by Stephen Cashmore to fit period style. The lodge's seven guest suites, the ballroom and all the other living rooms have been tastefully redecorated with a nod to their original use.

It has been a massive undertaking by everyone involved. Specialist painters and paperhangers worked tirelessly for three months, a new commercial kitchen was added and huge swathes of garden restored to their former glory.

The old underground games house just outside the kitchen was converted into a wine cellar and a romantic dining location, while the entry hall's original pressed paper ceiling was intricately repainted to match the formal dining room. Every suite now glows with new furnishings and extravagant draperies. >

In spring, this part of Otahuna's newly restored gardens is a blaze of yellow daffodils; Hall and Miles have reinstated the annual custom of opening the daffodil gardens to the public.



Today when the house fills with guests – relaxing and dining on fine cuisine courtesy of top chef Jimmy McIntyre – Hall and Miles modestly admit to feeling proud of their commitment to their new home.

“It’s startling to me now, coming into the house, just how much more energy and vibrancy it has than a year ago,” says Hall. “It’s been a huge challenge and we had thirty to forty tradesmen here a day for months on end. But if these wonderful historic environments don’t find contemporary uses they don’t survive. We’re tremendously pleased that we were able to find the right people in New Zealand to bring this great, great house back to life.”

Since 1956, when Sir Heaton Rhodes died, the place spent time as a guest house, a home to a Catholic brotherhood and to three separate families. Now, as a luxury lodge and home to Hall and Miles, it has come into its own. You can almost feel the homestead sighing with satisfaction. ■

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Otahuna looks glorious in this view from across the lake; in spring the foreground is awash with daffodils. Extensive patios spread out from the rear of the house to the pool and barbecue areas. Otahuna’s twelve hectares of grounds include rose gardens close to the house where guests can enjoy them.