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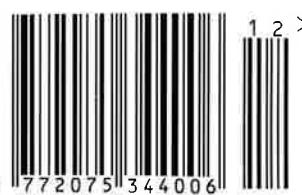
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TURBINE INSPIRATION



WORDS ATHANE SCHOLTZ PHOTOGRAPHS IAN & WARREN FLEMING

Entrepreneurs Geoff Engel and his life partner Dandré Lerm went to heroic lengths to retain the historical value of the old wood-fired power station on Thesen Island in its amazing transformation into the unique and fascinating Turbine Hotel.



nysna's old timers will remember the power station on Thesen Island for the wood soot it deposited on nearby homes for decades, or its noisy, warm interior, filled with boilers and spinning turbines.

Electricity production stopped in 2001 and the station fell into disrepair. Not many people would have looked upon the weird old building, full of massive chunks of machinery and heavy piping, and imagined its latter day conversion into a luxury boutique hotel.

Even fewer would have had the courage to take on the massive task. The Turbine Hotel and spa, incorporating a tapas bar and the Island Café, is testimony that Geoff and Dandré had both the imagination and the courage by the truckload.

It was no easy task. In addition to the numerous and sometimes complicated requirements of restoring a Heritage Foundation-registered building, the original power station was designed around the working of its machinery – resulting in floors on different levels, gaps in strange places and holes in the floors – all filled with metal contraptions several storeys high.

Fortunately, Geoff is a turnaround specialist, albeit one who is more used to turning failing businesses into successful ones. A qualified chartered accountant but businessman at heart, Geoff has been part of the entertainment industry on-and-off since the 1980s. He was an MP before the country's first democratic elections and a business partner in the well-known Old Cape Farm Stall in Constantia during a time that he fondly refers to as his "chill-out years".

Then he hooked up with former business partners and started The Next Step – a holding company with interests in entertainment, distribution and retail. The company's successes included the financial turnaround of



Spitz Shoes and the Loads of Living homeware stores, as well as film and television programming distribution company Next Entertainment.

But Geoff and Dandré were looking for something new that they could tackle from scratch, a project that would be their own and preferably in the hospitality industry – Dandré's chosen profession.

"During my CA-articles, my clients were mainly hotels and the diversity of the industry fascinated me from the start. I suppose it was also a bit in my blood as my mother worked at the Dorchester Hotel in London for many years and loved it," says Geoff.

The pair first bought the Walkersons Hotel and Spa in Dullstroom, Mpumalanga, less than three hours' drive from Johannesburg, where they are still partly based.

"We had in mind a group of maybe six country hotels in different settings around South Africa, but that was before we spent most of our capital on The Turbine... We might have to stick

to just the two now," he laughs.

Advertised as a heritage building for sale with the proviso that it had to be turned into a boutique hotel whilst retaining certain historic elements, the power station site seemed a steal at R6,5-million. The guys took ownership in March 2008 and initiated one of the greatest challenges of their careers, frustratingly kick-started with a notice from Knysna municipality that their electricity requirements could not immediately be met.

"We went about our merry ways nonetheless, starting a clean-up of incomprehensible proportions. The site had stood unoccupied since 2001 and was used as the general dumping ground for old building materials, rubbish and scrap metal. As we wanted to salvage original equipment from the power station, we had to systematically work through everything – with the help of people who had worked at the Thesens factory in the hope of saving the correct pieces to be reused later in the hotel interior."

Mike Louw of Chris Mulder and Associates Incorporated (CMAI) and Cape Town-based architect Annelie Rode ingeniously linked spaces, creating interesting nooks and crannies that could be turned into hotel rooms and suites. The old metal shack behind the power station was recreated on its original footprint to house several rooms, and the old courtyard between the two buildings was smartly closed in with glass doors and roofed (partly with glass) – successfully linking the two buildings and creating a leisure area that incorporates the restored turbines and the Island Café. An outside wooden deck overlooking the canal completes the scene.

The original power station door has been painted red and leads into the high-ceilinged reception area. The rugged, high walls are covered with original paintings by emerging South African artists. Brightly painted pipes and machinery are everywhere, even on display under glass in a hole in the



ground. Behind the reception desk is an original control board full of interesting knobs and dials.

The hotel has 24 unique rooms, a spa and conference facility – all designed to fit in and around the old machinery. “Irrespective of the heritage requirements that we had to keep at least one turbine and one boiler, we wanted to keep as much of the old equipment as we could – the charm and history of it all appealed to us and we thought that our guests would want to see it too.”

The enormous boiler eventually posed so many architectural problems that special permission was obtained to cut it in half to make space for the conference facility, but even then the designers covered the cut-off pipes with glass to leave them visible to visitors.

Three old turbines have been used as the Island Café’s centrepiece. Restored and painted in their original colours, the turbines set the theme for the hotel interior and have become a tourist attraction in their own right.

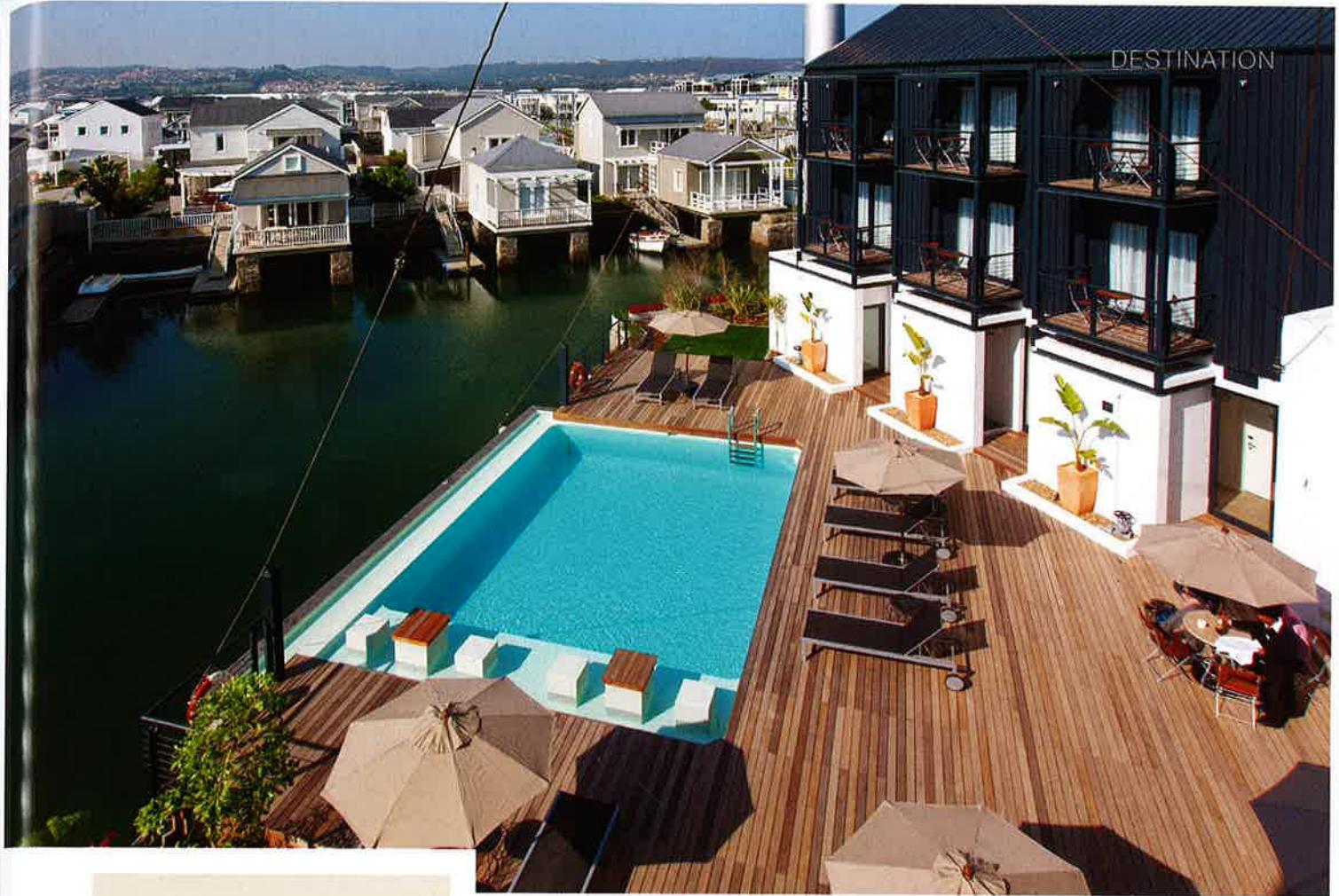
Loads of Living creative director Laurence Brick and marketing manager Joy Rea were roped in to design and decorate the interior.

Describing The Turbine as the project of her life, Joy says she spent weeks with Knysna Museums curator Melanie Groenewald, looking at old photographs and researching different aspects of Knysna’s history and the Thesen family.

“When we started the building was just a shell, filled with rusted pipes and debris, with only ladders connecting the different levels. During the clean-up we saved anything interesting-looking: old books, ledgers and documents, signage, knobs, dials and twisted pipes. We even salvaged yellowwood floor planks and bricks from walls we tore down.”

Using Knysna, its history and environment as a strong theme throughout, hotel wings and rooms have been named and themed individually, with a focus on luxury and comfort. Cushions individually covered in fabric photographs of old Knysna

“We saved anything interesting-looking: old books, ledgers and documents, signage, knobs, dials and twisted pipes.”



THE HISTORY

Once known as Paarden Island, Thesen Island was named after its long-time owner Charles William Thesen, a Norwegian who arrived in Knysna with his family in 1870 and established several businesses. He bought the island in 1904 and began processing timber on the land in 1922. Wood waste from the timber mill was burnt to drive the power station turbines, generating electricity for both Knysna and Plettenberg Bay until the mid 1970s.

The power station was built in 1939/40, but various structures of the original building were relocated around the island over the years, often without documented plans.

Industrial conglomerate Barlow Rand (now Barloworld) purchased the logging operation in 1974, but the mill was later decommissioned because of its adverse environmental impact. The island was sold off to developers CMAI, who built luxury houses and created Thesen Harbour Town.

The power station continued to operate until June 2001.

introduce the theme in each room. An item of restored equipment (mostly interestingly shaped piping) has been used as a feature 'art piece' inside every room. Restored dials, knobs and signage have been attached to cupboards and walls for added atmosphere.

The shell-theme honeymoon suite is the masterpiece, a stunning top floor room in silvers and whites, overlooking the canal. The suite boasts a beautiful mirror frame decorated with cut shells, handmade by talented South African crafter Reinette Katzoff.

Joy added turquoise to the turbine and pipe colours in the restaurant to brighten things up – incorporating specially designed upholstery featuring local symbols such as the Knysna Loerie (Turaco) and Knysna Seahorse.

Another special feature is the hotel-as-gallery concept. The large factory walls present the perfect white-walled backdrop for large canvases, which Geoff immediately recognised as an ideal spot to showcase emerging South African artists. Guests can literally buy art off the walls – at prices ranging from R5,000 to R20,000 a piece.

The metamorphosis of The Turbine, and the relationships that evolved during its development, have resulted in a growing affinity for Knysna and the subsequent move of Geoff and Dandré's home base from the city to the Garden Route.

"Knysna is a good balance between metropolitan accessibility and smaller town lifestyle. The Turbine is a unique place where history meets modern interpretation. During our upgrades here, we have met many people from very different backgrounds whose lives have in some way or another been affected by the power station, the timber factory and its surrounding environments. We continue to be fascinated by its history and we aim to collect as much information about its different aspects. We intend adding to the displays – information plates and photographs – to enrich this place, which we consider a living museum." ■

www.turbinehotel.co.za

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Log on to www.southmagazine.co.za for an account by Athane Scholtz or regular visits to the then fully operational power station.