



## ON THE WATERFRONT

LISA ALLEN

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THE PAIR BEHIND HALCYON HOUSE ON THE NORTHERN NSW COAST ARE TURNING BRISBANE'S HOWARD SMITH WHARVES INTO A STYLISH RIVERSIDE PRECINCT

Inspired by Capri's JK Place Hotel, a grand cliffside villa overlooking the Gulf of Naples, as well as Kit Kemp's trendy Firmdale hotels in New York, plus a slew of European and North American design boltholes in between, a low-key Brisbane family is transforming the city's decrepit Howard Smith Wharves and bolted-up air raid shelters into a world-class entertainment precinct.

Adam Flaskas and his sister-in-law Elisha Bickle, the brains behind the retro Hamptons-style Halcyon House boutique hotel on the idyllic NSW north coast, are months out from opening the first stage of the \$200 million redevelopment of the heritagelisted Howard Smith Wharves, which have sat idle on the serpentine Brisbane River for decades.

Close to Flaskas's heart is his ambitious plan for an over-water champagne and cocktail bar jutting out into the murky river waters, but there's a craft brewery and a coffee roasting house also in the wings.

A boutique 164-room luxury Art Series hotel (developed by Melbourne's Deague family and since sold to Mantra, which in turn has been picked up by French hospitality giant Accor), plus restaurants specialising in Chinese and Mediterranean cuisine fill out the picture, with farmer's markets and festivals to be introduced from 2019. Chicken coops, beehives, and an olive grove will add a rural air to the development along the famed river walk that connects the hip waterside suburb of New Farm with the city proper and is frequented by 1.5 million tourists, commuters and locals each year.

Flaskas, who hails from one of Brisbane's multilayered Greek families, began his working life as a brickie's labourer. He grew his development spurs working with Melbourne's famed Fox trucking family, and has not taken a backward step. He doesn't hide his lack of academic credentials: "I did an hour at university, I couldn't find a car park and kept driving.

"But I guess my speciality, which I learned from the Fox family, was buying under-utilised, derelict property and bringing it back to life," he says. "And if a building is heritage-listed I have even more interest." For Bickle, who has a strong hospitality background, the idea is to bring to life one of Brisbane's last working wharf precincts. "The plan is to try and keep the wharves as they are as much as we can - we think that's the beauty of the site," she says. "It has a very dramatic cliff running behind it, it already has a lot of natural beauty, we are trying to keep it as natural as possible without over-theming the precinct.

"We think we are adding another layer to Brisbane.

It is growing so much and to date the Brisbane River has been very under-utilised ... I think the most exciting part of it is the fact it is facing the river and embracing it." Bickle and Flaskas are employing Brisbane interior designer Anna Spiro, who helped create Halcyon House's interiors, to work across parts of the 3.4 hectare Howard Smith Wharves site. "There's a lot of creative people we are working with collaboratively to achieve the best design outcome with different designers for each area," Bickle says.

Cleverly, the pair are not targeting one specific age group or social class to the redeveloped site, which was originally built at the behest of the Queensland government to provide locals with relief work during the 1930s depression era. Bickle and Flaskas won the project, named after the coastal shipping company that leased

the wharves for nearly 30 years, against stiff competition from other developers, and will operate it on a 99-year leasehold from the Brisbane City Council.

Says Bickle: "We are going for a completely wide demographic. Our whole philosophy is anyone should be able to come down and enjoy it and by default when tourists come to Brisbane they will ask where the locals go. As for the brewery, it will not be a male-dominated venue, it's for grandparents and children and groups of younger and older people." Even Sydneysider chefs have been drawn to the Howard Smith Wharves site. Jonathan Barthelmess, co-owner of Potts Point favourites, The Apollo and Cho Cho San will run the Mediterranean/Greek restaurant targeting the business lunch market as much as family dinners. Stanley, a Chinese restaurant, is being developed by Brisbane-based restaurateur Andrew Baturo.

Flaskas is reticent about the project's backers, divulging only that they are a group of private investors. "The investors believe in the site and the vision, we know each other well, we are privates. For us it's in our backyard and our city and our whole proposal is a less-is-more approach," he says, before dashing back to Brisbane on the first flight out of Sydney.

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