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WASTE NOT, WANT NOT

Using salvaged materials and student collaborators, Fernando and Humberto Campana have created a unique hotel experience

BY RACHEL HOWARD



↑ On the ground floor, the entrance to NEW Hotel's restaurant is through arched columns covered in long, narrow strips of wood inspired by the Campanas' Favela chair.

THE HEIGHT OF LUXURY when it opened in 1958, the Olympic Palace hotel had lost its lustre by the time billionaire industrialist and hotelier Dakis Joannou snapped it up in 2007. A voracious collector of edgy contemporary art who cruises the Greek islands in a flamboyant yacht customized by Jeff Koons, Joannou is not one to shy away from big statements. His latest hotel carries the cheeky moniker NEW. It's not just the capital letters that scream confidence; the name suggests that this place will never go out of style.

To bring the sparkle back to the 79-room establishment in central Athens, he called on Brazilian designers Fernando and Humberto Campana. The brothers, who had never been to Athens when they agreed to take on their first hotel project,

were struck by the similarities between São Paulo and Athens: gritty, sprawling, vibrant, anarchic. Known for their eco-sensitive ethos and self-styled "aesthetic of deconstruction," they decided to incorporate remnants of the old Olympic Palace into the new hotel. They set up a workshop on site and invited 20 local architecture students to help them reconfigure the original fittings and furnishings.

The result is an intriguing hybrid, where the boundaries between before and after are blurred. For example, some of the old chairs were upcycled: ladderbacks double as clothing rails, and a sliced seat becomes a newspaper rack. On the first day of the workshop, the students were asked to bring something that symbolized Greek popular culture. Some of these objects found their way into the

guest rooms: traditional *Karagiozis* shadow puppets, blue glass pendants to ward off the evil eye, and vintage postcards of Athens have all been turned into feature walls. "We wanted to make the design more democratic," Fernando explains. "In Greece, there's a big gap between the past and modernity. They think anything modern is bad taste. Our aim was to teach the students to develop greater self-confidence about Greek style."

The Campanas' own Favela chairs inspired the installation in the lobby and the restaurant, where walls and columns are clad in a jumble of salvaged furniture and reclaimed wood. With Greece teetering on the brink of economic collapse, the fragmented design seemed a fitting metaphor for a fractured society struggling to pick up the

pieces. The broken theme continues in the bathrooms, with jagged bronze basins and mirrors (sexy, but very smudgy). Bronze, leather and onyx details add a streak of glamour throughout: giant, bell-shaped pendant lights; swaying *Miraggio* mirrors; dark chocolate corridors lined with tactile bark cloth. (The basement gym, wallpapered in shimmering PVC, in homage to the disco that once occupied the space, felt a little too much like a sweaty dance floor.)

In the all-day ground-floor restaurant, breakfast - a perfect cappuccino, warm croissants, and artfully presented platters of fruit - provided a delicious moment of calm as traffic whizzed by the picture windows. Guests will be able to enjoy breakfast with far better views when the rooftop

↑ The lobby features walls and columns clad in a jumble of reclaimed wood. Two Leather Works armchairs, designed by the Campanas for Edra, outfit the reception area.

← The 79-room hotel is located on Filellinon Street in central Athens, a short walk from Syntagma Square.

← Cut-outs inspired by *Karagiozis* shadow puppets decorate one of the guest rooms.

lounge opens in 2012.

I visited in early July, during the week the hotel opened, and when I ventured out in the evening I walked the few blocks to central Syntagma Square, where a group of citizens had gathered to protest the latest round of government cuts in front of the Greek parliament. Their animated debates were drowned out by hawkers selling knock-off handbags, hot souvlaki and cold beer. This 21st-century version of the ancient agora, a few hundred metres from the site where democracy was born, seemed far messier than the elegant experiment in democratic design I had just witnessed at NEW Hotel.



↑ Vintage postcards of Athens enliven a wall in a guest room with a spectacular view.
← In the ensuite bathrooms, jagged mirrors and ruptured forms echo a theme of brokenness and fragmentation that prevails throughout the project.

If you go

WHAT TO SEE

It's worth a trip to the nondescript suburb of Nea Ionia to explore Dakis Joannou's modern art collection at the DESTE Foundation (deste.gr). Founded by another billionaire benefactor, the new Onassis Cultural Centre (sgt.gr) is an elegant rectangle of spliced white marble that contains concert halls, galleries and a rooftop restaurant. Bernard Tschumi's hulking Acropolis Museum jars with its surroundings, but the top-floor gallery is a showstopper, a glass box that reflects the proportions of the Parthenon overhead. At the bold Benaki Museum building on Pireos Street

(benaki.gr), exhibitions focus on contemporary architecture, photography and fashion; the gift shop is a great source of Greek crafts that are more funk than folklore.

WHERE TO SHOP

For witty souvenirs, go to Greece Is for Lovers (greeceisforlovers.com), a trio of designers who poke fun at their Hellenic heritage, from totes emblazoned with "No Sleep till Hades" to "Build Your Myth" dumbbells in the shape of Ionic columns.

WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK

Architects and advertising execs knock back martinis at Nixon (nixon.gr), a speakeasy in grungy Keramikos. A glitzier crowd shares meze and tittle-tattle at Scala Vinoteca (Sina 50, Kolonaki, 210 3610041), a wine bar designed by Kokkinou and Kourkoulas, the architects behind the Benaki Museum.

→ Rates for double accommodation from €160; yeshotels.gr