



Known as a hotspot for after-hours political machinations and, more recently just as a hotspot, after fire ripped through it twice in months, the Backbencher Bar is back. Ignoring the obvious signs of divine vengeance, the building's owners were set on a rebuild, engaging the Wellington office of HBO+EMTB to design the refurbishment. The space, which is comprised of wine bar, restaurant and sports bar, has been reconfigured for better flow.

RISING FROM THE ASHES

Ask anyone who's ever visited Wellington's Backbencher Bar, a pint's throw from the Beehive, and they'll probably get misty eyed about rubbing shoulders with politicians, judges and business leaders, about menu listings such as Shipley's Soup and Lange's Lasagne, or the political TV show filmed there. They'll most certainly wax lyrical about the life-sized puppets that satirised the occupants of the round house across the street.

But in June 2012, a fire almost destroyed the Backbencher; six months later, workmen accidentally started another blaze, further damaging the iconic watering hole. Niki Harrison, whose architecture firm HBO+EMTB was charged with rebuilding the Backbencher, says the scar tissue wasn't pretty.

"Our brief was to retain the essence of the bar, but create more of an elegant, gastro-pub feel. It was a big challenge to develop that from what remained."

In tandem with earthquake strengthening, Harrison's Wellington and Auckland teams worked within the existing 370m² footprint but opened up the space, creating "layers of interest and perspective".

The old kitchen has been turned into a cosy lounge/club area, more suited to coffee meetings than raucous nights out. Harrison says the leather banquettes are removable, allowing the space to be used for functions and weddings.

Warm wood wraps around you like a cosy duvet in this space, from the jarrah floorboards salvaged from a nearby warehouse to the Thonet chairs and tables. The former exposed brick walls have gone, now rendered and painted a soft dove grey.

On the Molesworth Street side, the original 'shop frontage' has been reinstated, with floor-to-ceiling bi-fold doors providing access to a courtyard area. Glossy green subway tiles, a nod to traditional Australian pubs, feature throughout the fit-out, including behind the wall of craft beer taps to one side of the bar. A strategic placement of hundreds of wine glasses works as chandelier.

Relocating the kitchen to owner Alistair Boyce's former office, adjacent to the public bar, further opens the space and improves flow for both staff and customers.

Due to space restrictions, Harrison says the classic horse-shoe bar had to be reshaped. "We've retained the original shape but set up the space and flow better."

And it wouldn't be the Backbencher without the framed political cartoons and latex puppets, several of which survived the two fires. They've been supplemented by several new figures, this time provided by the creative geniuses at Weta Workshop.

This is one Phoenix, it appears, that has well and truly risen from the ashes... SHARON STEPHENSON