

Don't ask White Hart Hotel owners Harvey Dunlop or Jeremy Thomson what they think of pigeons. The birds have left a large mess all over the fresh paintwork in one corner of the hotel's first-floor veranda.

But the first impression, walking out onto the veranda, isn't the pigeon art – it is the width of the area. Then the view up and down Devon St and down Queen St to the sea comes into focus.

This area could be glassed in, Dunlop says, as the two men start to throw around ideas for different uses for the top floor of the hotel.

Maybe the rooms could be used for small businesses. Who knows? It's all a work in progress.

The restoration of the Devon St and Queen St facades and the veranda of the 125-year-old building is nearly finished.

Only 25 per cent of the building was demolished. The rest has been or will be rejuvenated.

The Snug Lounge opened downstairs last September.

"We have been particularly sensitive in the redevelopment in the Snug Bar to adapt the space to use the old rooms," Thomson says.

The next stage is due to be completed by March. The development is at the back of the hotel. The entrance will be from Queen St and there will be two new retail stores on the ground and office space upstairs.

The new build has about 500 square metres of extra lettable space. Paradise Property Management Ltd directors Dunlop and Thomson need to attract tenants, but they are going to be selective, Thomson says.

"[New tenants] need to be compatible with our existing tenant and to fit in with what is happening in this area."

The next stage to be redeveloped is the adjacent concrete structure built in the 1960s, which was home to the public bar.

"There is another 800sqm on two levels there," Dunlop says.

"We've got some ideas of what it could be adapted for and we are starting to talk to people about that. We would really like to see activity in that area. We are developing this courtyard between the two buildings and it would be great to see people moving in and around there."

The old ceiling will be a feature in a new atrium walkway that will

The White Hart Hotel has been a fixture on the New Plymouth landscape since the early days. It is being restored and rejuvenated to take it into the 21st century. **Helen Harvey reports.**



Back to the future: The facade of the White Hart Hotel has been restored.

Photos: JONATHAN CAMERON

Hart-and-soul restoration

The heritage aspect to the building has added challenges to the project. The White Hart is category A in the New Plymouth District Council's register and the Historic Places Trust ranks it a No 1 heritage building.

The district council contributed \$100,000 from its heritage protection fund to level, strengthen, repair and repaint the Devon St

has a got heritage protection fund to encourage the preservation of historical buildings. But a fair bit of other money is being spent in addition to [the \$100,000].

"This current contract is for \$900,000 plus GST. That excludes a fair bit of work too, any fitout, any engineering or council fees or professional fees or the lining of the shops."



the architectural merits of the building, along with its social and public merits. Fascinating," Dunlop says.

"It also talks about the decay and what needs to be done and what needs to be preserved."

The report went through room by room and ranked the rooms for importance and significance.

serve the two new shops. In the courtyard are cobblestones dating from the 1840s. It is where the first Cobb and Co coach from Whanganui arrived, carrying premier Sir William Fox.

An archaeologist has been working with the developers and recording anything of significance, such as a well discovered when the single-level kitchen area was uncovered. The well has been surveyed and recorded and now has a lid over it.

"We have retained the old fireplace that was in the kitchen and the old gas stove," Thomson says.

Hotel registers, many dating from the 1800s, were found when a wall was stripped away. The registers contain the names of who stayed, what meals they had and who paid. When the project is finished, an archive will be set up of all the artefacts discovered during the renovation. Some of the hotel registers are already on display in The Snug.

West and Queen St facades and veranda.

The facade, which had sunk about 800mm over time, has been raised.

"It came up without any problem and we have underpinned that with a concrete foundation," Thomson says.

"Some of money went there. We have repaired and repainted nearly all the balcony balustrades.

"We haven't yet addressed the cast-iron columns, but it has all been strengthened and double-joined so it can take modern loadings when we find a use for upstairs. There is a new aluminum roof on the veranda."

The grant was also to repair the Devon St West entry, and the foyer and stairs on the Queen St entrance, which has been done, and to install fire protection systems, which is progressively being done.

They are very grateful for the grant of \$100,000, Dunlop says.

"And it is wonderful the council

A lot more money needs to be spent before anyone can move in to the shops. It is a staged development and the biggest challenge is to make it work financially.

"Dealing with that type of building and the costs of restoration and preservation, it's quite hard to make it stack up commercially, so we have to be very strategic in how we plan the project and there were a whole lot of things that had to fall into place for us to be able to fund it to start with.

"That is when we were fortunate to attract the first tenant into the corner.

"The Snug Lounge opened three months after we began the re-development."

The project has been interesting, he says.

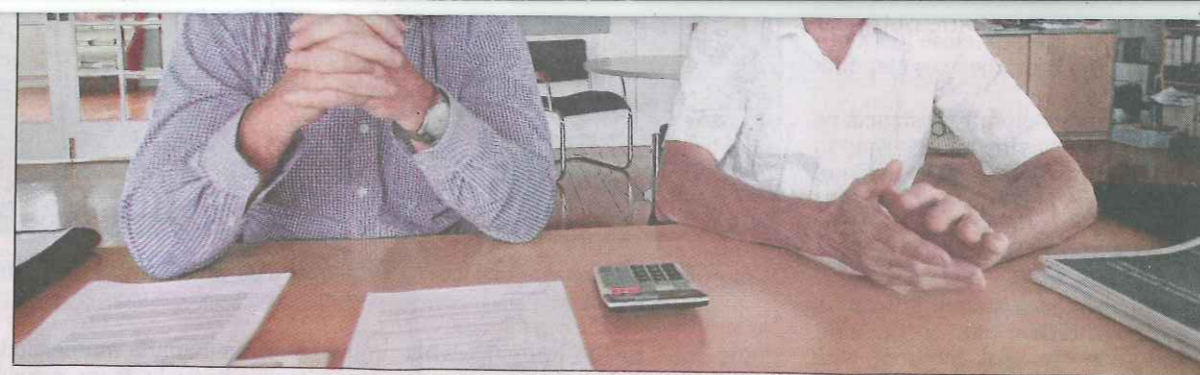
"It's just had so many more dimensions to it than our standard new build. It's been highs and lows. It's challenging. You think you are making progress then something or other happens.

"In 2006, we were all ready to get going, but some things outside our control went against us, like the world economy and the local economy, and trying to fund it and getting tenants to have the confidence. They were quite challenging times."

There has also been public criticism, with people wondering what they were doing and when were they going to do it.

No-one really appreciated what was going on behind the scenes, Dunlop says.

"But now it has turned the corner," Thomson adds. "There were



Men with a mission: Harvey Dunlop, left, and Jeremy Thomson have spent years working out the best use for the old White Hart Hotel.

many unknowns out there – how the Historic Places Trust and the council would view what we were doing. Whether they would approve the plans or not, whether they would assist with funding.

"We now know the situation and that makes the future much clearer."

They know the structure hadn't deteriorated as badly as they were led to believe. When the old building was reroofed, they expected to replace hundreds of metres of timber, but in the end it was all sound except for 10 or 12 metres. "So this has been the process of gaining confidence and knowledge of the building. Now much of the uncertainty is gone and we are dealing with a clean concrete building, a new build, new courtyard, new plumbing, new electrics. The project has been good fun since we got it up and running. It's been quite a process," Thomson says.

Thomson and Dunlop bought the building in 2002.



Olden days: Chas Clarke bought the hotel in 1909.

In 2003, they commissioned a nationally recognised heritage architect Ian Bowman to complete

a conservation plan. "That was the first real documentation that gave us a really good understanding of

In 2006, a structural assessment was done. That scoped out what would need to be done on a structural basis and what was needed to preserve the fabric of the building – what could be retained and what needed to be demolished.

That the building was historical significantly affected what they could do.

"We always knew that we needed to find an adaptive use for the building," Dunlop says.

"We initially looked at accommodation. There was demand from international students coming in at that time."

They looked at other hotel options from 20 rooms to a much larger scale. One of the feasibility studies commissioned looked at the whole area and what would work.

"We gave them a wide brief. We gave them nine different options, which were narrowed down to about five in that report.

"The most favoured one was a 110-room hotel linking into the Showplace and incorporating this building [where their office and the Empire cafe is] and the [still to be built] Boddington building.

"That was pretty visionary and it would have been wonderful to pull that off, but it was just a bit ambitious."

They looked at many different options and ended up deciding to adapt the building to use for retail, hospitality and some office space.

"We've really enjoyed being part of a community project," Thomson says, "and being a part of the rejuvenation of the west end of the town."



Upstairs, downstairs: Downstairs has been partly done up, but a use for it has still to be found.

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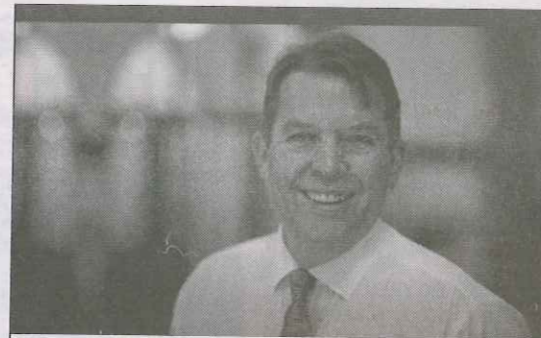
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