

FAMILY BUSINESS

NOVEMBER SAW THE RED TAPE CUT ON THE SPARKLING NEW COTTONMILL SPA AT SOPWELL HOUSE, BRINGING A FOUR-YEAR, £14M PROJECT TO A HEAD. THE BEJERANO FAMILY, OWNERS OF THE HOTEL, HAVE BIG AMBITIONS FOR THE NEW THREE-STOREY, PRIVATE MEMBERS SPA, BIDDING FOR THE NEW ADDITION TO BRING A 'DRAMATIC INCREASE' TO REVENUE OVER THE NEXT FEW YEARS. AFTER A YEAR OF RESTRUCTURE FOR AB HOTELS, WE CAUGHT UP WITH RAFI, ALON AND ABRAHAM BEJERANO TO GET THE INSIDE SCOOP.

Over the last two years, Sopwell House in Hertfordshire has seldom been out of the headlines.

Since 2017, the boutique hotel, owned and operated by family brand AB Hotels, has secured 2 AA Rosettes for its restaurant, appointed new general manager Angelina Chua from Stapleford Park and joined luxury hotel consortium Pride of Britain Hotels.

It was at this time that plans for an epic new spa within the hotel began to take shape. In August, the new Cottonmill spa opened at Sopwell House, bringing an extensive £14m project to fruition.

The new three-storey, private members spa and 430 sq mtr spa garden includes two vitality pools, a sauna, steam room and relaxation areas, as well as a gym, studio, relaxation room, dining space, The Pantry and treatment rooms.

Designed by Sparcstudio, the new addition is expected to bring a 'dramatic increase' to the hotel's revenue, which already turns over £15m per year.

It has been created to operate alongside the hotel's already-popular spa and offers two tiers of memberships to both hotel guests and non-residents. While access to Cottonmill will be included for overnight guests, access to the more premium, The Club at Cottonmill, will be on offer to hotel residents for an extra charge.

Features within The Club at Cottonmill comprise a thermal suite with four new steam rooms and saunas, a deep relaxation room, whisper room and garden room.

The epic new three-storey spa and private members' club.



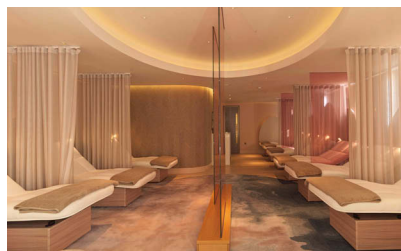
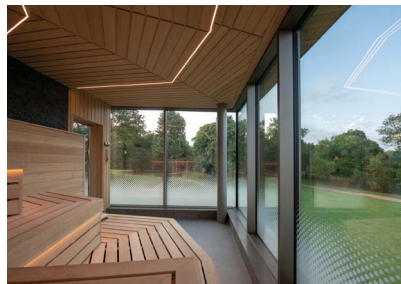
Sopwell House is run by the Bejerano family, headed up by brothers Rafi and Alon, and was first opened in 1986 by their father Abraham. The trio work well together thanks to 'different skill sets and talents' and have built up the reputation of Sopwell House over the past three decades thanks to their drive to stay innovative and relevant.

Aside from the developments at Sopwell House, this year has marked a restructure for AB Hotels as a group.

The Arch in London was opened in 2010 by the Bejerano family and ran by the AB Hotels group until November 2018, when the hotel was acquired by StayWell Holdings, a subsidiary of Prince Hotels Inc. a hotel and leisure company in Japan.

The 82-bedroom hotel was rebranded into The Prince Akatoki following its acquisition and at the time, Abraham Bejerano said the decision to sell was 'very difficult'.

The portfolio also comprises Five Lakes Resort in Colchester, which



“OUR REVENUES ARE EXPECTED TO INCREASE SUBSTANTIALLY AND OUR OBJECTIVE IS TO MORE THAN DOUBLE OUR REVENUE”

operated as part of the Crowne Plaza brand, with the family moving the Essex hotel back into independent status in February after seven years.

It's been quite the 12 months for AB Hotels, with the jewel in the crown undoubtedly the new Cottonmill spa and its dazzling new features. We caught up with brothers Rafi and Alon and their father Abraham at the launch of the new facility to get an exclusive insight into how Cottonmill will impact business and the inspiration behind the masterpiece.

What were some of the major challenges during the construction phase?

Our biggest challenges were minimising the impact on our customers as we continued to operate throughout the redevelopment, but

we also had a major problem with one of the main building contractors who faced their own financial difficulties in the middle of the project. At one stage, we were on the brink of having to close the site but happily it all worked out in the end and the job was interpreted and finished to the high quality we were demanding exactly as we envisioned. In addition, a lot of thought went into the design and there are an incredible amount of intricate details. These details take time and specialist tradesmen to execute properly so sourcing those was not an easy task.

How much has been invested altogether?

We have invested over £14m to build our spa as the UK's first private members' spa, combining the serenity of a spa with the exclusivity of a club.

How do the three of you work together?

Luckily, the reason this family business works so well is because the three directors have very different skill sets and talents.

Abraham has been involved in spas for over 30 years since 1988 when he decided to build the first spa to open in Hertfordshire which opened at Sopwell House in 1991 following a £3m investment. There is not a lot Abraham does not know about the industry and it was his vision that first catapulted the project into a reality.

Alon was responsible for leading the project overall, all the way through from the concept design, through the planning process, and managing the contractors and the design team. Alon also oversaw the finances and budget controls.

Rafi has a hotel operational background, having spent all his working career in hotels and catering. He moved into a revenue generating role for a while with The Arch which put him in good stead and he now finds himself overseeing operations, people and strategy at Sopwell House. He also handles the sales, marketing and PR and now has the responsibility of driving revenue and delivering five star standards at Cottonmill and the hotel.

As with any family we all have our own views on how things should be done and they are not always the same! However we shared the same goal and worked together to achieve it despite the ups and downs.

We have each played a huge pivotal part in the project which is only successful due to daily consultation and communication to maintain the same vision and overcome challenges together.

What was the initial aim behind the development?

The demand for increased space in the spa was the main catalyst for expansion initially. On the back of running a very successful and popular spa for almost the last 30 years, the spa's popularity couldn't be fully satisfied in the existing

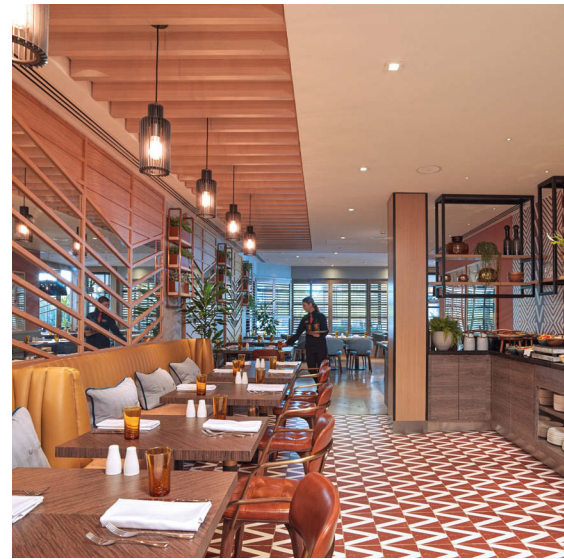


WORDS FROM THE DESIGNERS... SPARCSTUDIO

Beverley Bayes, creative director from Sparcstudio says:

"We at Sparcstudio are extremely proud of the completed Cottonmill spa. It was a joy as designers to have a budget (all thanks to the Bejranos) that enabled us to create so many bespoke designed elements; it is this that helps create the spa's unique character and style which we describe as 'refined nature.'

"Our aim was to create a spa that is truly luxurious and sumptuous whilst at the same time informal and fun."



two sides which is a real "wow" factor.

We added an amazing spa garden designed by RHS Chelsea gold medal winner Ann-Marie Powell and the result is like no other spa garden anywhere in the country. Sparcstudio were the masterminds behind the design details and the concept of barefoot luxury with rooms flooded with natural light, complemented with the warm palette of natural tones with some beautiful accent details and bespoke joinery and light fittings.

Can you talk me through how the membership structure will work?

We offer two main types of membership. A very exclusive and limited Club at Cottonmill membership and a general Cottonmill membership. The Club option works like a private member's club application process and it entitles the member to access all our new indoor and outdoor relaxation areas. Cottonmill members cannot access much of the new part of the spa but still have a fabulous pool area with terrace, thermals, refurbished relaxation space, gym, studio and new lounge, The Sitting Room.

Why introduce the membership?

We've always had a thriving membership and many ambassadors of our spa. With our size and space available we are able to accommodate members as well as day guests and

space so we knew we needed to expand. What was originally going to be a humble expansion turned into a fully blown super-luxury spa with the overall aim being to propel Sopwell House to one of the leading spa destinations in the country. We guess we couldn't curb our enthusiasm!

What has proved the most expensive element?

The most expensive elements were probably the basement construction. Due to the nature of the ground conditions and working alongside the existing building, we had to install 268 piles into the ground and excavate 5m down, 3m of which was below the groundwater table. Consequently for 12 weeks the water had to be pumped out of the ground whilst we were excavating and piped around the hotel into the nearby river, not to mention the 30 lorry loads of soil excavated daily for a month that had to be negotiated through the car park.

Was it easy to get planning

consent?

Easy probably isn't a word that describes any planning permission process, particularly for a listed building in a conservation area within the green belt, however we are lucky enough to have an excellent relationship with the local council planning department who we involved and consulted throughout the project. It was important we could work together to create something that was really special and unique for the city of St Albans so whilst it was a long process, taking over four years, we worked hard to ensure both parties were happy with the outcome.

What was the inspiration behind the design?

Our inspiration was to build something unique that was a blend of cutting edge technology inside a nature inspired haven – we wanted to bring the beauty of the outdoors inside.

Not many spas can boast a glass walled sauna overlooking gardens, but we have two, and our 1st floor three tiered panoramic sauna has glass on

hotel residents. Now with even extra capacity we hope to increase what was our existing membership size.

How much revenue does your spa bring you now compared to before the new addition?

Our revenues are expected to increase substantially and our objective is to more than double our revenue however we understand that this will take some time and so have given ourselves two years to reach maturity to achieve this.

Early signs however have exceeded all expectation and we have been overwhelmed with the feedback from both the industry and guests, both locally and afar on what an exceptional experience we have created.

When do you expect to start paying back the investment into the new development?

We expect to start paying back our investment sometime during year two. It's hard to say exactly but we are in it

COTTONMILL HIGHLIGHTS

- Dressing rooms feature Tom Dixon marble wall lights, with stone heated flooring and Dornbracht showers and Dyson Supersonic hairdryers.
- Cottonmill has partnered with ELEMIS, ESPA and Aromatherapy Associates, with signature treatments based around the 'soothing and healing powers of sand and water'.
- The spa is the first in the UK to introduce treatments on an Amber & Quartz Crystal Bed, which delivers thermal therapy by immersing the body in hot sand.
- Specific treatments include Cottonmill Sound & Sand, during which the bed gently vibrates while singing bowls are chimed, and the ELEMIS Quartz Poultrice Massage, which incorporates warm quartz poultices to increase circulation and release tense muscles.
- Cottonmill is also home to the rose relaxation room, where walls are lined with acoustic 'petals' and zones are divided by rose-tinted glass screens.

for the long term.

What are the future plans for the spa and the hotel?

We'd love to see the spa get busier and busier and we're sure that it will. In the longer term we have lots of further ideas and plans to improve, renovate and innovate in the hotel but for the

immediate future we just want to focus on our daily operation and rest a little! For our little family business with the sale of the Arch just before Christmas and now our new spa opening it has been a really hectic time. We wish to look forward to 2020 with no major plans other than to appreciate what we have and what we have achieved. 🍷

