

CIRCLE OF LIFE

The pursuit of excellence in NSW's Steel City

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It's quite an achievement for a new hotel to render you dizzy, but that's my experience at Newcastle's Crystalbrook Kingsley. Housed in the city's former Council Administration Centre, a 1970s landmark with a brutalist, concrete exterior, the building's circular design makes an impact inside and out. A series of unfortunate Covid-related events have delayed my visit, but I'm excited to finally be here. As I exit the lift to find my room, I unthinkingly head right and start doing the rounds. It's only when I begin to feel giddy that it twigs – I've almost come full circle. Silly me; a left turn and a couple of steps would have brought me to my door.

Stepping inside revives memories of the board game Trivial Pursuit. Readers may recall the popular 1980s pastime in which players answer questions to earn slices of coloured "pie" that slot into a circular playing piece. At Crystalbrook Kingsley, guests stay in their own "slice of pie"; 130 wedge-shaped rooms radiate out from the central lift shaft and overlook, variously, the greenery of Civic Park, the busy harbour or Newcastle's cityscape. Clever design by local firm EJE Architecture has made the most of the unconventional space, inserting a separate toilet at the narrow end of each sector and a bathroom in the middle, leaving the broadest curved expanse for a king-size bed, circular table and chairs and those strikingly deep-set windows framed by concrete.

But let's take the Trivial Pursuit analogy even further because Crystalbrook Kingsley has something to offer in all six general knowledge categories: history, geography, entertainment, art and literature, science and nature, and sports and leisure. First up, a little history.

The Roundhouse, as Novocastrians have

long called it (along with the Shuttlecock, the Wedding Cake and the Champagne Cork), caused quite a stir when it opened in 1977. Its distinctive profile, conceived by local architects Wilson and Suters with Melbourne firm Romberg and Boyd, was partly inspired by Boston City Hall in Massachusetts. After decades of doing duty for the council, the nine-storey tower was snapped up in 2019 by Crystalbrook Collection, owned by Dubai-based billionaire Ghassan Aboud, who set about creating Newcastle's first five-star hotel. With a name that references the location's early 19th-century moniker of Kingston, it opened in June last year, although the pandemic ensured its introduction was a little stop-start.

And so to geography. Newcastle's is dominated by its harbour. Views from the building's new rooftop level embrace the busy port through floor-to-ceiling glass. From Romberg's bar and Roundhouse restaurant on Level 9 you can watch pilot boats shepherd container ships through into the Hunter River and see out to Nobbys Head and the breakwater.

In an acknowledgment of the city's coal-mining past, let's segue into a bit of geology, too, while also touching on art. Suede Interior Design has drawn on the region's mining heritage by using charcoal and canary yellow as the core palette for the fit-out. Linen throws and cushions by Melbourne textile creators Bonnie and Neil are printed with the pretty birds once sent into the depths to help monitor air quality. Ms Mary, a casual bar and eatery that adjoins the lobby on the ground floor, has a stunning canary mosaic created with tiles made by Syrian refugees, and chairs that envelop occupants in elegant bird cages. It's named for Mary Eckford, a convict from Devon who became a prominent pioneering woman in the district. (On the literature front, try Dymphna Cusack's 1953 novel *Southern Steel*, set in Newcastle during World War II.)