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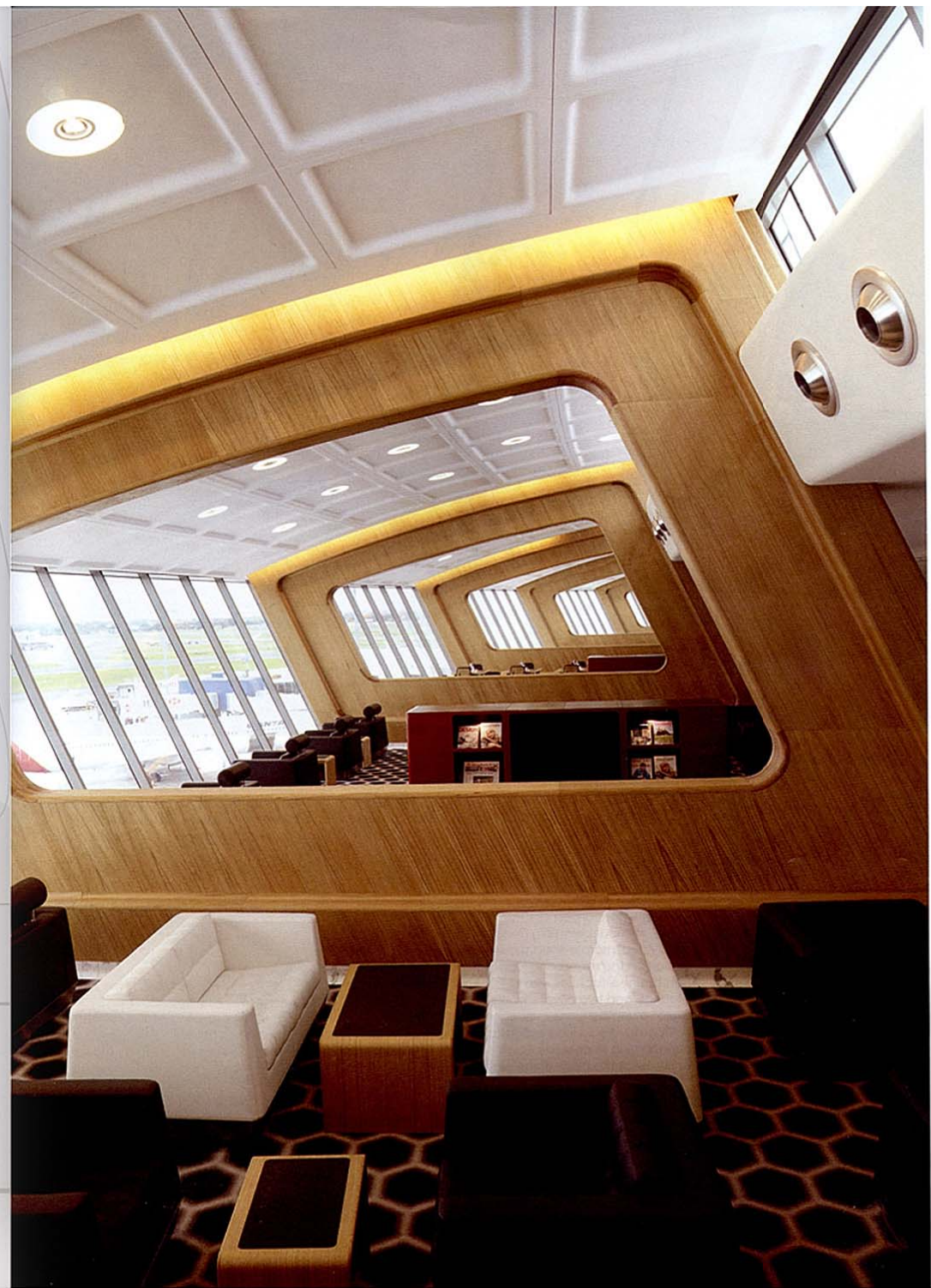
Qantas First Class Lounge Sydney

Flying upstairs in the pointy end now has more perks than you could possibly imagine.

Worldwide major airlines are spending big money on departure lounges for big-spending flyers, turning these areas into slickly-designed venues that would rival the most opulent of inner city hotels. Qantas has now weighed in with arguably the 'last word' in premium passenger lounges — its First Class Lounge at Sydney International Airport. Unlike the vast majority of airport fitouts, the Lounge has been accommodated in a purpose-built structure high on Level 4. Sydney Airport engaged Woods Bagot to design the base building work with its sublime, aeronautically-inspired geometries and abundant natural light; while the Lounge's interior was designed by Marc Newson in collaboration with associate architect Sebastien Segers and Woods Bagot Sydney. The project was managed by CRI Australia and constructed by Built.

The First Shall be Class

The 2500sqm Lounge has been built over two floors with a glass façade overlooking the airline's new Airbus A380 boarding gates. The Lounge includes a number of different zones, including separate lounge areas, a day spa, restaurant and library, all designed with the first-class traveller in mind. Internationally renowned Australian designer Marc Newson was given carte blanche, as he is also Qantas' Creative Director. Newson oversees all Qantas product development — aircraft interiors (including the Airbus A380 fleet arriving from August next year), onboard products and lounges all come under Marc's remit. For the uninitiated, Newson is a rock star of the design world who lives in London and keeps a studio in Paris. He travels 100 days of the year and has been commissioned to design everything from the interiors of private jets and cookware for Tefal to Dom Perignon champagne buckets and a concept car for Ford. Newson grew up in the northern Sydney suburb of Gordon and attended Sydney College of the Arts. Today his works feature in permanent collections of the Musee National d'Art Moderne housed in the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Newson designed almost everything in the lounges including huge European oak sculptures that separate the lounge space into defined areas; the Payot Paris day spa, offering a range of complimentary treatments from a 30-minute express energising facial to a 50-minute full body massage; and a 48-seat open kitchen restaurant with menus by Neil Perry. "The whole idea is to create different niches through the entire space," said Newson, who also brought pointy-end Qantas travellers the Skybed. "The way the space has been divided up ... helps to create more of a sense of intimacy." In other words, first-class passengers will be able to hide from each other — which is exactly what they want, according to Vanessa Hudson, General Manager of Product and Services for Qantas: "We're giving customers a greater sense of space and privacy. People have said an airline needs to deliver that to them."



Woods Bagot has designed plenty of premium Qantas club lounges in its time, but director Vince Pirrello describes this one as "the best airport lounge in the world" and probably, pound for pound, the most expensive flout ever seen in Australia.



Sumptuous

Other enticing features of the lounge include chair-side waiter service throughout the lounge; a library stocked with a selection of newspapers and magazines, best-selling books and board games including chess and backgammon; and a dedicated entertainment zone with banks of plasma screens showing local and international news, sport and weather, and Sony Playstation 3 and Playstation Portable entertainment systems offering a selection of games and movies.

Newson said that his favourite aspect of the design was the 180-degree view across the airport to the city and Botany Bay, which he humbly noted he had "nothing to do with".

Newson says he was lucky to be able to start from scratch: "It was a huge bonus." But, curiously, there's not a lot of Australian input. The deep red, black and brown leather lounge chairs, recliners and sofas are by Italy's Poltrona Frau. Dining chairs and tables are by Cappellini, Tai Ping wool carpets are from Hong Kong, marble from Carrara and quartzite from Switzerland. Newson is unapologetic saying, "Without being big headed, I have the best contacts in the world, so why not use them?"

In the bathrooms there are individual marble-lined shower suites with stereo volume and lighting controls, as well as radiant heating to reduce condensation on the mirrors and luggage racks.

There are also state-of-the-art business facilities with 11 PC workstations, complimentary wireless internet access, power and data points throughout the lounge and two private work suites with conference facilities and plasma display screens.

The Sydney lounge also features a vertical garden designed by international botanist Patrick Blanc featuring 8400 individual plants. Qantas says Patrick Blanc developed the self-sustaining vertical garden wall while he worked for France's equivalent of the CSIRO, Le Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (or CNRS). It is a soft, hanging nutrient-rich support system for plants: water and nutrients flow at the back of the wall, and all 8000-plus plants will need to be pruned and maintained so they don't run amok.

The lounges will be managed by hotel group Sofitel with staff undergoing training through its Academie Accor hotel school. The minimum time spent in a first-class lounge is 45 minutes, but hell, I'd give this one at least six hours! Given that a first-class return ticket to London costs over \$15,000 (plus taxes and charges) it's not surprising that all services are free. What with the spa treatments, a la carte restaurant, and complimentary champers — it's a mini-holiday in itself!

The First Class Lounge will never be seen again by this particular journalist and I've done my best to expunge the lush mental images... cattle class will be too painful otherwise. <<

- » Woods Bagot: www.woodsbagot.com
- » Marc Newson: www.marc-newson.com
- » Qantas: www.qantas.com

» Green Hy: The day spa allows patrons to enjoy a quick facial or a full-blown massage. The self-sustaining vertical garden packs 8000-plus plants.