

Builder's Travel



[Paul McElroy](#) moved from Ireland to Hawaii on a whim at the age of 22. Now, his work is paving the way for hospitality innovation in The Aloha State.

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▲ Alohilani Resort Waikiki Beach's lobby will feature the hotel's signature oceanarium with more than 800 exotic fish.

By Randall Colburn

Paul McElroy was mere days out of college when he flew from Ireland to sunny Hawaii, where he would begin his career working with property and construction consulting firm Rider Levett Bucknall. And as fate would have it, he almost didn't make it.

"I always had this notion that I wanted to go to America," McElroy recalls. "I'd never been, but I had a curiosity about it. I randomly decided on San Francisco for no reason other than I'd seen it in movies, the weather looked good, and it was on the coast."

As a result, he sent out query e-mails to a few Bay Area employers, then nearly deleted a message asking for an interview. If not for an eagle-eyed friend, he might still be in Ireland. McElroy calls how events shook out both "fateful" and "fortunate."

There were no positions available in San Francisco. However, there was a position available across the Pacific. "I landed in Hawaii with a backpack and \$500 in my pocket," he says. Also in his pocket was a house key given to him by his parents back in Ireland. "I had a return flight. If it didn't work out, I would just fly home."

But it did work out. A student of quantity surveying—the practice of estimating and analyzing construction

costs and risks—McElroy eventually pivoted his position with Rider Levett Bucknall into project management, starting with smaller projects before eventually overseeing ones with budgets soaring into the hundreds of millions of dollars.

“I think project management was just a better fit for me,” he says. “Understanding schedule, cost, and risk were really fantastic skills to take into project management. As a project manager, everything you do has to have a schedule, budget, and risk written all over it.”

Now, 17 years later, he’s immersed in what may be his biggest, most exciting project to date. As the vice president of construction at Highgate Hotels, where he oversees hotel developments and renovations in Hawaii and on the West Coast, McElroy has been instrumental in the redevelopment of Waikiki’s Pacific Beach Hotel, a longtime staple of the city’s tourism industry.

“Highgate saw huge potential for repositioning the hotel in the marketplace, rebranding the asset, and trying to create something new, unique, and different for the Waikiki market,” he says. “We set upon the transformation with core objectives in mind for both the public spaces and guest rooms of the hotel. When it officially opens in fall of 2017, the hotel will be known as Alohilani Resort Waikiki Beach, its name being Hawaiian for ‘heavenly brightness.’”

In terms of public spaces, McElroy cites the pool, lobby, and food and beverage offerings as the core components of the repositioning.

“When a lot of Waikiki’s hotels were originally built, there was a really strong emphasis on the beach and less so on the hotel pool experience. Today, a lot of customers also really want an amazing pool experience,” he says.

That’s why the resort will have two pools—one for kids and an infinity pool with unobstructed ocean views for adults—and a massive deck measuring in at roughly 17,000 square feet.

Travelers can also experience the sea’s magnificence in the lobby, where the hotel’s signature oceanarium—a 280,000-gallon display featuring more than 800 exotic fish—will also get a full renovation. And it’s likely that fresh fish will also have a place inside some of the new culinary concepts, two of which will be operated by celebrity chef Masaharu Morimoto.

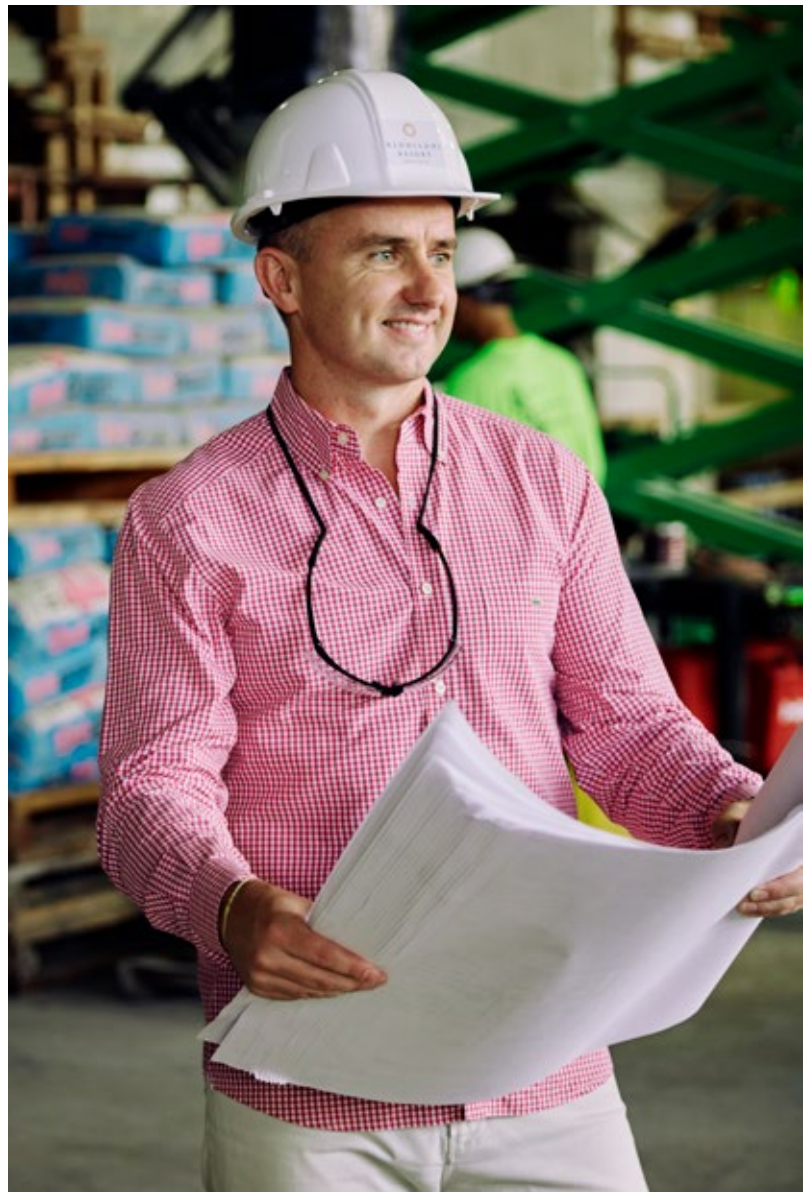
Technology is another factor to consider when catering to the modern traveler, and it presents a unique challenge. McElroy and his team “need to be thinking about what technology’s going to look like three to five years from now. If we think on today’s terms,” he says, “we’re going to be obsolete by the time we launch the hotel.”

Meanwhile, McElroy also cites a complete renovation of the hotel’s 839 guest rooms with an emphasis on creating “the most elevated bathroom experience we could.” Ambitious by any measure, the renovation faced the added challenge of having to occur with the hotel still in operation. Since contractors couldn’t operate in more than 20 percent of the rooms at any given time, McElroy said they had to be “very mindful” of efficiency when choosing a contractor.

“We really paid attention to the schedule the contractors proposed because there was several millions of dollars in value depending on who had the most creative schedule to get through the rooms as quickly as possible,” McElroy recalls.

Through careful, clever planning—no doubt assisted by McElroy’s past as a quantity surveyor—every guest room was fully renovated in a little more than eight months. “This was a fantastic achievement for us. We renovated over 100 rooms per month in a fully operational hotel,” he says.

McElroy’s pride in the project is highly evident. It was the Pacific Beach Hotel renovation that brought him to Highgate, and it was one with which he was intimately





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involved due to its magnitude and the risk. “I was really involved in getting the team built, getting the contracts in place, setting expectations, managing risk, and motivating people,” he says.

Now, with most of the project’s risk in the rearview mirror, he’s set his sights on upcoming initiatives, which include a large-scale development in London.

Still, whether it’s in London, San Francisco, or Waikiki, McElroy’s philosophy remains unchanged. With Highgate, he can help create an alternative to the traditional hotel experience.

“We pride ourselves in being able to conceive our own brands, to give guests unique experiences,” he says. Isn’t that what traveling is all about? ■

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“Rider Levett Bucknall has had the privilege of working with Paul McElroy on a number of outstanding projects. Paul’s passion is evident, and he has an acumen for clearly articulating the project vision. We are honored to have the opportunity to help bring imagination to life on these exceptional projects.”

—Paul Brusow
Executive Vice President
Rider Levett Bucknall
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