

A wood paneled reception desk occupies the narrow elevator lobby, and introduces the idiosyncratic mix of raw and refined surfaces and details that characterizes the hotel.



Ace Hotel

Downtown Los Angeles

Commune reimagines the interior of a historic building as a cool downtown hotel

By Michael Webb
Photography by
Spencer Lowell

Downtown Los Angeles is regaining the appeal it had a century ago as a place to live and play as well as to work. Broadway was almost as glamorous a theater district in the 1920s as its namesake in New York, and aging facades conceal several former movie palaces. Ace Hotel has brought one of these sleeping beauties back to life, restoring the 1,600-seat United Artists auditorium as an events space, and repurposing the 13-story office tower as guestrooms.

This is the seventh Ace Hotel for the idiosyncratic brand that infuses an understated bohemian, hipster-cool vibe within old, existing buildings. The brand began in Seattle and has now extended its reach to Manhattan, London, Palm Springs, Panama City, and Portland, Oregon. "We approach all our projects the same way," says Ace Hotel Executive Vice President Kelly Sawdon, "looking for a narrative that will give each of our properties a feeling for place and authenticity."

For the Los Angeles hotel, that sense of place goes back to 1919, when actors Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, and Charlie Chaplin, and director D. W. Griffith founded United Artists to make films independently of the big studios. It was an era of extravagance in Hollywood, and United Artists built its own showcase for gala premieres and to give fans a taste of the exotic. Within a reinforced concrete structure, a Spanish Gothic fantasy was created that was echoed in the stone carvings and spiky lantern of the tower. Its glory days, though, were short-lived: the Great Depression hastened its decline, and the building was last owned by evangelical preacher Gene Scott for his ministry. An iconic "Jesus Saves" neon sign, a remnant from the Scott era, remains on the roof. Real estate investment company Greenfield Partners purchased the building in 2011 and developed it for Ace Hotel.

Design team collaborates with artisans

Commune, a Los Angeles-based firm that also designed the Ace Hotel that opened in Palm Springs in 2009, was brought on board to complete the Ace Hotel Los Angeles interiors. GREC Architects of Chicago served as design architects and Killefer Flammang Architects of Santa Monica were the executive architects. The firms collaborated with specialists and artisans to restore the street facade to its original appearance and create a new interior within the shell of the tower.

For the interior, Roman Alonso, the partner in charge of the project at Commune, drew inspiration from the modernist cafes that Josef Hoffmann and Adolf Loos designed in Vienna, and the house-studio that Viennese émigré R.M. Schindler built for himself in West Hollywood in 1922. To this fusion of progressive and historicist design, Alonso added a dash of 1980s punk, which he interprets as a reincarnation of the flapper era. "It would have been easy to replicate period ornament, but that didn't feel right for Ace, which likes to twist things and turn them on their ear," Alonso says. "We wanted the interiors to be surprising and radically different from the facade."

The narrow elevator lobby for the tower serves as a reception area that leads to a restaurant with a bar and mezzanine lounge that can open onto the street. The color palette is black and white, with a checkerboard floor echoed in the tiled dado. Mirrors dematerialize the massive columns that were added as part of a seismic upgrade, giving the room a sparkle and making it feel more spacious. Glass-topped wood screens, modernist light fittings, and a mix of new and traditional seating intensify the atmosphere. The concrete floor and partially exposed structure are complemented by white plaster on which two local artists, brothers Nikolai and Simon Haas, have made delicate graphite sketches of Hollywood stars and Southern California hills and flora—a subtle way of adding local flavor.

Locally sourced materials and finishes

Three meeting rooms occupy the second floor, and here Commune has enlivened the space with wall collages and art glass from the venerable Judson Studios. The tower's typical floor plate is barely 5,000 square feet, which created a challenge for the designers to exploit every inch to fit the 182 compact guestrooms and suites. Taking cues from Schindler's house, the designers used Homasote panels to give the walls a warm, tactile feel, and gray-stained MDF cabinets provide versatile storage. Custom beds have a side pocket for the tuner that controls a wall-mounted screen. Bathrooms are a model of space planning with a partially enclosed shower and toilet flanking a steel-and-marble vanity. "Eighty percent of the furnishings were made in California or Mexico," Alonso says.

The opulent theater has been carefully restored and is now an event space for the hotel and home to the artist collective L.A. Dance Project. A rooftop lounge and pool extend from a loft-like bar beneath the tower lantern. Here, and throughout the hotel, local artists have been given a free hand to create site-specific work. "We rely more on instinct than calculation," explains Alonso. "Sometimes you hit the mark at once, and other times you have to make adjustments. Every space needs to provide an experience and Ace allows us to do what we want." ■

**Ace Hotel Downtown
Los Angeles**

Design Architect **GREC
Architects**

Executive Architect **Killefer
Flammang Architects**

Interior Designer **Commune**

Client **Ace Hotels**

Where **Los Angeles**

What **146,000 total square feet
on 13 floors**

Cost/sf **Withheld at client's
request**

For a full project source
list, see page 100 or
visit contractdesign.com.



A screen-mounted collage of 1920s flappers and 1970s and 1980s punk artists frames one of two second-floor meeting rooms (above, right). The room beneath the spiky crown of the tower was stripped and turned into a bar (right) that serves the terraces to either side. In the compact guestrooms (bottom), exposed concrete is softened by Homasote wall panels and stained MDF cabinetry. Task lighting was created by Commune and Atelier de Troupe in the spirit of 1950s French modernism.



The first two levels of the street frontage have been opened up as a lofty restaurant and mezzanine lounge, with black and white decor that recalls vintage Viennese cafes.



The 1,600-seat auditorium, which began life as a movie palace and was later used for evangelical services, has been restored to its Spanish Gothic splendor and is used as an event space.





A shallow pool allows guests to cool off while gazing out at a panoramic view of Downtown Los Angeles. Built in 1927, the building (opposite, top) originally housed the United Artists film studio. Evangelical preacher Gene Scott later owned the building and installed a "Jesus Saves" neon sign (opposite, bottom), which still remains.





Key Design Highlights

Spanish Gothic features, including the building's historic exterior and an ornate auditorium, were restored to their original splendor.

The design of the interior draws from several historic periods but incorporates modern twists.

Local artists were engaged to create site-specific work throughout the hotel.

Public spaces were inspired by the work of Josef Hoffmann, Adolf Loos, and R.M. Schindler.

Compact guestrooms feature exposed concrete surfaces softened by Homasote wall panels and stained MDF cabinetry.

