

# ELLE DECORATION

JUNE 2023

## GOOD VIBES ONLY



MODERN  
DESIGN,  
BUT NOT AS  
WE KNOW IT

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THE FRESH  
NEW TAKES  
ON LAID-BACK  
SUMMER LIVING

# Commune

The LA studio that blends modern, retro and global influences in unique ways

**Who are they?** Los Angeles studio Commune is a multidisciplinary practice that embraces architecture, interior design, product design and graphics. Founded in 2004 by Roman Alonso and Steven Johanknecht, its core value is collaboration – not only with clients but with artists and craftspeople around the world. Its online homeware store, for example, features an extensive range of ceramics, textiles, lighting and accessories created both in-house and with like-minded designers and brands.

Based in a 1920s Spanish Revival building near LA's MacArthur Park, Alonso and Johanknecht met in 1990 while working at New York department store Barneys. 'We were both in the Creative Services department, where we oversaw everything related to the store's image,' explains Alonso. 'We learned to look at things holistically and consider all aspects of a project. There was no hierarchy: advertising, store design, event production – it was all the same. This philosophy was key to the creation of Commune and is still at its heart.' Both men studied art history (Johanknecht also mastering in graphic design and painting) and have an easy connection that underpins their partnership. 'We've worked together in one way or another since we met, and share similar influences,' says Johanknecht. 'We're usually on the same page, so making



**Clockwise from top** Founders Steven Johanknecht (left) and Roman Alonso; a suite in the Ace Hotel in Kyoto; built in 1915, this Berkeley Hills Craftsman project was an ideal fit for Commune's aesthetic



## Expert advice

*How to create an interior that successfully blends retro and modern influences with timeless materials*

**Blend different eras and styles.** The key to achieving harmony is in maintaining the right proportions. It helps when all of your seat heights are the same, and the scale of everything in a room works well together. **Bring together different cultural references.** It shows that someone has an interest in the world, but it must be real: you have to be truly fascinated by those influences for it to work. It's about choosing things that make sense for you and your life; as designers, it's our job to figure out what clients might like and introduce them to those things.

**It's important to bring a sense of place to a project,** especially when several different design influences are on display. To accomplish this, we love to commission textiles and furnishings from local artisans to add as much personality as possible.

**Commission unique bespoke pieces,** whether furniture, textiles or tiles. It guarantees they will be in your life longer. We work with several woodworkers, and believe in using native timbers, if possible salvaged and from old growth, to ensure they will age beautifully.

**'Kengo is a hero of ours, and we also collaborated with many Japanese artisans. Our concept brought East and West together through craft – something that has always been in our wheelhouse'**

decisions is simple – that's the secret to our success as partners.' **What are their recent projects?** Describing their style as 'handcrafted, comfortable, collected and laid-back', the pair excel in their use of materials (especially timber and textiles) and in their fusion of retro and modern influences. One of the studio's bigger projects was its design of the Ace Hotel in Kyoto, Japan, with architect Kengo Kuma. 'It took six years to complete,' recalls Johanknecht. 'Kengo is a hero of ours, and we also collaborated with many Japanese artisans. Our concept brought East and West together through craft – something that has always been in our wheelhouse, but it was a dream come true to do it in Japan, which is a great inspiration for us.'

As well as Kuma's trademark timber detailing, you'll spot many Commune signatures here: a love of materials (in this case bamboo, stucco and tatami); craft elements such as stained glass, reminiscent of Arts & Crafts interiors; and intricate patterns and textiles that recall the work of the Wiener Werkstätte, a favourite influence. ▶

**From top** The lobby of the Ace Hotel in Kyoto is a fine example of Commune's blend of retro and modern styles; the colour palette in this Santa Monica apartment was inspired by Le Corbusier – as well as by the fantastic ocean views



PICTURES: STEPHEN KENT/JOHNSON; SPENCER LOWELL; YOSHIMAKINO

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**What are they currently working on?** There's a historic home in Montecito, originally designed by Bernard Maybeck, a hero of California's early 20th-century Craftsman movement. Known for his eclectic style, Maybeck is entirely in tune with Commune's philosophy. 'The home's interiors had sadly been obliterated by the previous owner, so we have been able to reimagine the space and channel Maybeck in totally new ways,' says Alonso. Also in progress are The Japanese Record Bar in Nashville, which will reference Alonso and Johanknecht's recent experience in Japan 'with a fun twist'; a tennis club in Dallas, 'which will celebrate an American sensibility rooted in mid-century club life'; plus a Spanish Revival estate in Los Feliz for a record producer, a beach house in Santa Cruz and a new-build brutalist residence in Bangkok.

**They say** 'We are followers of the Japanese concept of wabi-sabi. We believe that if finishes are of quality, they will naturally age well and give a space the sense of a well-lived life.' [communedesign.com](http://communedesign.com)



**Clockwise from top** Natural wood sets a beachy tone in Commune's Santa Monica project; Japanese and shaker styles combine in a Santa Anita cabin; a 'professor who surfs' was the inspiration for this beach house



## The little black book

*Every successful project requires access to the contacts that make magic possible*

**Vintage furniture** Morentz is a gallery in Waalwijk in The Netherlands. The number and breadth of 20th-century styles in its collection is exceptional. In the unlikely event that it doesn't have what you're looking for, the owners will work with you to find the perfect piece through their amazing network in Europe. [morentz.com](http://morentz.com)

**Hardware** Van Cronenburg in Ghent, Belgium, makes hardware of unparalleled quality. One of the oldest foundries in Europe, it has the most beautiful finishes and a huge archive of designs. [vancronenburg.be](http://vancronenburg.be)

**Textiles** Christopher Farr not only offers textiles by some of the 20th century's best designers – among them Anni Albers and Gunta Stözl – but is also an excellent collaborator for us. We have released a range of rugs and fabrics with them. Plus, the brand will customise any piece to suit your space. [christopherfarr.com](http://christopherfarr.com)

**Lighting** We are big fans of the Wiener Werkstätte, a design workshop in turn-of-the-century Austria. Woka Lamps Vienna still makes all the era's original designs by Josef Hoffmann, Adolf Loos and Dagobert Peche, among others. The quality is amazing and it will customise pieces on request, too. [woka.com](http://woka.com) **ED**

PICTURES: STEPHEN KENT/JOHNSON