

hospitality design

january/february 2016 hospitalitydesign.com

hidden treasures

HDexpo
hospitality design event

southern retro

A former Durham bank building transforms

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Photography by SPENCER LOWELL



Longtime friends Daniel Robinson and Brad Wiese first conceived of turning the circa-1969 midcentury landmark Home Savings Bank in their hometown of Durham, North Carolina into a hotel during the recession of the late aughts, when they took control of the building as it hung in limbo. It seemed like the perfect outlet for their shared business aspirations and enthusiasm for the Southern university town, currently in the middle of a growth spurt. “We both have deep professional and personal ties to the community and had been looking for a project of this scope to work on together,” explains Robinson, a longtime entrepreneur whose background is in finance, while Wiese has 17 years of real estate experience under his belt.

The duo formed development company the Gentian Group in early 2012, and by late 2013 was searching for designers to realize their vision for the appropriately named Durham Hotel—something that was at once contemporary and historic, globally aware and locally reflective. Los Angeles-based Commune sold them right away. At dinner the night before their meeting with the design studio, Robinson and Wiese “had been talking about Black Mountain College,” a school and design collaborative near Asheville, North Carolina that operated from 1933 to 1957 and was “instrumental to what happened creatively in the state as a whole,” recalls Robinson. “We show up for our meeting [with Commune] and front

1. The Durham Hotel occupies the former Home Savings Bank, a midcentury landmark.

2. The hotel’s striking entry and newsstand is wrapped in black and white tile and housed in a contemporary addition that plays off the existing architecture.



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3. An expansive, 3,000-square-foot rooftop bar offers panoramic views of the city and covered and open-air seating.

4. The dining room of Restaurant at the Durham Hotel—complete with 22-foot-tall windows and pendant light fixtures that nod to Tokyo’s Hotel Okura—opens off the lobby.

5. Hallways to the guestrooms feature bespoke geometric carpeting in a palette inspired by the work of Bauhaus artist Anni Albers.

6. At reception, midcentury-inspired furniture sits atop bold red and white carpeting that weaves its way throughout the public spaces.

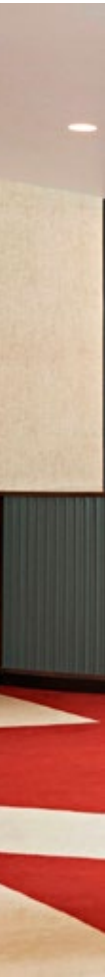
7. The red, gold, and blue color palette continues in guestrooms, which feature blankets by Raleigh Denim Workshop that mimic the hallway carpet.

and center were old course catalogue covers from Black Mountain College. It was a real and tangible connection with what we were trying to do.”

“We were only asked to respect the architecture of the building and to bring a local angle to the design,” says Commune’s founding partner Roman Alonso. “We looked at the period when the building was built and connected it with Black Mountain College and its influence in the prior decade, looking at people like [Bauhaus artists] Anni and Josef Albers for inspiration.” The blue, red, and gold color palette found in guestrooms, for example, is inspired by Anni’s textiles, as is the lobby’s geometric red and white carpet.

The designers had to adhere to strict preservation guidelines and also respect the community’s attachment to the property (locally and colloquially referred to as the Jetsons building). The space needed to offer sleek midcentury architecture and contemporary style, but also remain welcoming—representing Southern charm—rather than austere.

Commune continued this retro vibe in the casual 3,000-square-foot rooftop bar and a downstairs restaurant helmed by





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James Beard Award-winning chef Andrea Reusing, which is more upscale. Taking the modern American menu into consideration, “the space needed to feel like the American South—like a certain time period, which was closely tied to the architecture,” explains Alonso. Light floods the restaurant thanks to 22-foot-tall windows and pendant light fixtures that nod to those once found in the lobby of Tokyo’s landmark Hotel Okura, which was built around the same time and recently closed for extensive renovations.

Small details—like a curated newsstand with a shoeshine at the black and white-tiled entrance—make a big impact on the overall experience, which includes gems from North Carolina-based creators, including a beautiful mural in the restaurant by Antoine Williams, says Alonso. And in the 53 guestrooms, blankets by Raleigh Denim Workshop are inspired by the geometrics of the custom carpet in the hallways.

“This is a community-centered project,” adds Robinson. “The building, with the exception of the guestrooms, is open to and taken advantage of by the local public. To be able to offer those varying experiences and to hear stories of great evenings, is rewarding.” **hd**

communedesign.com; thedurham.com



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The Durham Hotel Durham, North Carolina

Owner

The Gentian Group

Management Company

Transcendent Hospitality

Architecture Firms

Maurer Architecture, Raleigh, North Carolina; and Commune, Los Angeles

Architecture Project Team

David Maurer and Rob Sarle, Maurer Architecture; and Loryn Napala, Commune

Interior Design Firm

Commune, LA

Interior Design Project Team

Roman Alonso and Steven Johanknecht

Contractor

Weaver Cooke Construction

Purchasing Firm

Canoe Hospitality

Consultant

PKF Hospitality Research

Lighting

Sean O’Connor Lighting

**Designers did not provide sourcing for furnishings shown.*