



American Trade Hotel

PANAMA CITY

Ace Hotel Group makes its luxury debut in the former American Trade Building, the cornerstone of a neighbourhood revitalisation project by local real estate developer Conservatorio.

Words: Catherine Martin | Photography: Courtesy of American Trade Hotel, by Spencer Lowell

Occupying a neo-classical landmark in the heart of Casco Viejo, American Trade Hotel is a property steeped in heritage and culture. Built in 1917, it made headlines as the country's first 'skyscraper', and it was the first building to be constructed from reinforced concrete, a technique perfected in the construction of the Panama Canal.

Having undergone various incarnations over the years, from its origins as luxury apartments with a bank and department store, to its more recent use as the stronghold of a local gang, the American Trade Building has now been restored to its former glory.

The new venture is the result of a joint undertaking between Ace Hotel Group and Conservatorio, and marks a move into the luxury segment for the operator. It also marks the culmination of a six-year project for Conservatorio, the locally-based development company that is dedicated to revitalising this small corner of Panama City.

Designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Casco Viejo is the old quarter of the city. Many of the architectural gems that lie within its walls are crumbling, having fallen into disrepair and left to ruin. But it is a neighbourhood in transition. It has spirit, a palpable energy, and an immersive cultural experience unlike any in the Americas. Perhaps it was this spirit then that inspired New York lawyer K.C. Hardin to give up the day job and relocate. Over the past decade, Hardin and his partner, whose great-grandfather actually built the American Trade Building, have restored historic houses, apartment buildings, stores and hotels with a vision to see Casco Viejo become the region's most aesthetically, economically and culturally exciting historic district, while maintaining its architectural heritage and social diversity.

The building was originally designed by Leonardo Villanueva Mayer, a leading Panamanian architect known for founding the Bellavistina style, many elements of which are still intact. Conservatorio bought the building in 2007 and set about transforming it to bring life back to the area around Plaza Herrera. "It is a building that was iconic in its design, but notorious in its reputation," explains Hardin. "It had a big impact on everything around it and so the neighbourhood was never going to go far until that building was restored."

Panama-based architectural practice Hache Uve was brought in to restore the property in accordance with Panamanian historical preservation laws and UNESCO World Heritage protection and conservation guidelines. Having transformed a number of historic buildings in the old town, including the studio of Carlos Endara, whose photographic works can be seen in the hotel's guestrooms, Hache Uve's co-founder Hildegard Vasquez was a natural choice.

The building had to be completely gutted with little of the interiors salvaged other than graffiti-covered walls which tell some of the storied history. "There was a gang living in the building it just before we bought it," tells Hardin. "Their life was there on the walls, that's how they lived." These works were photographed and turned into wallpaper to line the hotel's central stairwell. In addition to it being a novel way of bringing the local essence of the area into the hotel, the concept is part of a larger programme to reintegrate the former gang members back into the neighbourhood. "We brought the guys back to see the building recently and it was very emotional," explains Hardin. "They felt like the building represented their trajectory, it used to be the worst and now it's the best. They can do the same with their lives."





Above: In the lobby, tropical plant life and an eclectic mix of armchairs and recliners sit atop a striking tiled floor

It wasn't until 2012 that Ace came on board after discussions with a number of hotel groups. "We manage a couple of other hotels in the neighbourhood but felt that this was a big step," states Hardin. "We started looking for a company to manage it for us and we kept running into groups that were very competent, but very formulaic, and we could never get far into the discussion of how to bring the neighbourhood in."

Enter Alex Calderwood, the late founder and self-styled Cultural Engineer of Ace Hotel Group. "When we met Alex, he just got it," confirms Hardin, and it's easy to see why. Ace's objective to 're-envision the traditional hotel model, enhancing the value of properties through an innovative and locally-inspired approach to design and development' was perfectly aligned with Conservatorio's belief that that 'successful urban revitalisation stories are about creating synergies between social, cultural and commercial interests through passion, thoughtfulness and entrepreneurship'.

It was also a mantra that struck a chord with Ace President Brad Wilson. "Casco Viejo has such a colourful history, and developing with that culture as a touchstone seemed like an interesting and important opportunity for us," he explains. "Panama City is

synonymous with transit, trade and people throughout the Americas, something that always interests us."

Despite not actively looking to develop in Panama City, it seemed American Trade Hotel was too good an opportunity to miss. "There was a real connection that we were ultimately able to explore," continues Wilson. However the offering is not your typical Ace Hotel. "American Trade Hotel is more elevated, more quiet than your typical Ace Hotel, so its target is a leading-edge, luxury clientele – people who value unique, authentic experience alongside extraordinary comfort and service," he continues.

Although Ace came in in the latter stages of the project, when many elements were already in place, Calderwood had a significant involvement in the design of the property. "Alex was a very design-oriented person, he really loved that part of the project and he was really good at it," continues Hardin. "And I think that's why Alex and I got along. We always said it's got to be tropical, it's got to be elegant, it's got to have a sense of nostalgia that is this place, and that's exactly what came out."

"I think part of the reason Alex was attracted to it was because he always wanted to do this collection of upmarket hotels, so this was

an opportunity to do it," adds Hardin.

Calderwood also brought in Los Angeles-based collective Commune Design, having worked with them on a number of its properties, including Ace Hotel Palm Springs and Ace Hotel Downtown LA. Working alongside Atelier Ace, the in-house creative services firm providing interior, graphic and product design, as well as cultural engineering, Commune were well versed on Ace's style.

"Alex wanted it to be like one of those old hotels in a Humphrey Bogart movie where expats and correspondents and spies mingle—a place full of mystery and intrigue," explains Roman Alonso, co-founder of Commune Design. As such, the firm has borrowed from a number of styles. "It is a sophisticated mix of Spanish colonial, hacienda-style and Sixties Mexico... with a touch of the tropical mixed in," he continues. "Our inspiration came from the building itself and the idea that all different cultures mixed not only in the building at one point or another, but also in Panama."

The interior design is rooted in the history of Casco Viejo, reflecting its diverse mix of cultural and design influences. In the lobby, a panelled check in desk, tropical plant life, armchairs and recliners sit atop a striking tiled floor. As inspiration, Alonso and his team looked to the work of Cuban designer Clara





Above: In the guestrooms, panelled walls combine with classic ceiling fans and retro light fittings against an intensely cream backdrop

Porset, whose influence is evident in the eclectic mix of furniture found throughout the property. “90% of the furniture was custom designed for the hotel,” explains Alonso. “Most was handcrafted from local hard woods in Nicaragua, the metal pieces and lighting were fabricated in Los Angeles, colonial antiques were sourced in Mexico and all the concrete pots were manufactured locally from mid-century designs.”

Sustainable practices were also incorporated throughout the development and design process, from guestroom furniture manufactured with hardwood reclaimed from Hurricane Felix in Nicaragua, to flooring made from certified local hardwoods reclaimed by underwater logging in the Panama Canal basin.

The 50 guestrooms evoke their tropical colonial roots, with the warmth, character and high ceilings found only in properties of this era. Panelled walls combine with classic ceiling fans and retro light fittings against an intensely cream backdrop. A proportion of rooms have private balconies and all offer noteworthy views of Casco’s plazas and churches.

The tropical theme is also prevalent in The Dining Room,

where wood dominates alongside palm-like upholstery, as well as in the hotel’s interior courtyard and pool. Here, a mix of French modern industrial, colonial and ranch-style furniture is set in a lush tropical environment, complemented by a graphic cement tile design.

The hotel’s private event spaces are housed in the adjacent American Trade Hall, a distinctive Art Deco building designed by New York architecture firm Walker & Gillette and completed in 1928. It was originally built as a branch of the National City Bank of New York, financier of the Panama Canal. The design was modeled after the Manhattan branch and maintains a wealth of architectural details including its ornate columns, bronze gates, marble clock and even the bank’s signature crest above the entrance. Inside, the Grand Ballroom, used for various events in Ace’s calendar, features 30-foot ceilings, windows of epic proportions, and a herringbone floor laid with reclaimed timber acquired through underwater logging in the Panama Canal. Four flexible conference rooms, a beautifully appointed boardroom and a rooftop terrace – the largest in the city – complete the offer.

Much like Ace’s other properties, American Trade Hotel has forged



Above: The hotel's interior courtyard and pool features a mix of French modern industrial, colonial and ranch-style furniture complemented by a graphic cement tile design

partnerships with local names to support the community in which it sits. The Coffee Shop, a sociable meeting point for guests and locals, offers coffee from Panama's Café de Eleta, while Danilo's Jazz Club aims to support young talent and promote music education. The 50-seat club is the realisation of a life-long dream for Grammy-winning Panamanian jazz pianist, Danilo Perez, whose legacy is to bring jazz back to Panama. The club provides a platform to connect artists from around the world with the artists and audiences of Casco Viejo – fostering innovation, encouraging creative conversation and supporting the talent of aspiring and established musicians.

Inhabiting what was once part of the Espinoza House, the club incorporates many of the structure's original elements. Exposed brick walls and a floating staircase in the patio were kept intact in an effort to maintain the heritage of the club's surroundings, while industrial elements have been added to provide an authentic and intimate atmosphere.

"Our hotels have always been a platform for community and

creative engagement and we find ourselves perfectly aligned with Danilo's vision to do this with his jazz club on an ongoing basis," explains Kelly Sawdon, Chief Cultural Engineer of Ace Hotel Group. "Through this special cultural exchange amongst travellers, musicians and students alike, we believe we can positively impact both the community in Casco Viejo and the world at large."

Speaking of the success of the property as a whole, Wilson adds: "American Trade Hotel has already exceeded our expectations year-to-date and we're leading the luxury market. The building finds a harmony between the historical complexity of the Casco and its elegant present, and we're lucky enough to have already carved out a special place for ourselves here in Panama City."

Looking to the future, Ace has a number of new ventures up its sleeve: "First on the menu is our upcoming Ace Hotel Pittsburgh project, which is planned to open in 2015," tells Wilson. "Beyond that, we're keeping ourselves open to new opportunities, including other unique luxury properties in the vein of American Trade Hotel."

EXPRESS CHECKOUT: 50 guestrooms | 1 restaurant | 2 bars | Event spaces: 5 | www.acehotel.com

Owner/Investor: Conservatorio | Operator: Ace Hotel Group | Architecture: Hache Uve S.A. | Interior Design: Commune Design

For full photography of this project and details of the companies involved visit www.innspec.com