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Roman Alonso
Principal
Commune Design

The view from Roman Alonso’s Los Angeles apartment overlooking Griffith Park is reminiscent of the home where he was raised in Caracas, Venezuela. “We lived in the middle of nature, but it was also very urban,” recalls the principal of Commune Design. “It was a place where I felt very free as a child, but we had all kinds of crime and kidnapping threats.”

Buoyed by a summer camp stint in Massachusetts and the promise of infinite Big Macs, Alonso was thrilled when his Cuban family moved to Miami in 1978. “In retrospect, I realized how much I loved [Caracas] and how much I would’ve liked to have had a life there,” Alonso says.

Once settled in Florida, Alonso found the suburbs isolating, a contrast from his parents’ heady motorhome explorations across South America. His solace was the dazzling milieu of downtown New York depicted in magazines like *Interview* and *Details*—a world that became within reach at the age of 15, when he visited a friend in the city who took him to Fiorucci to buy a white cotton suit for a night out at Studio 54. “Doors open and you look in, and you decide whether you’re going to walk in or not. That’s how I led my whole adult life,” he says.

Alonso moved to New York after attending Boston University, embarking on a colorful career at *Connoisseur* and *Mirabella* magazines before opening outposts of the fashion



The stripped-back lobby at the Ace Hotel Downtown LA



Farmshop restaurant in Marin County, California features timber tables and painted concrete



San Francisco's Tartine Manufactory, inspired by Alpine lodges and Danish cafés

Photos by SPENCER LOWELL, YOSHI MAKINO, MARIKO REED, CHRISTOPHER STURMAN, and ANTHONY TAHLER

mecca Barneys as part of the brand’s publicity team (where he met future Commune partner Steven Johanknecht), and traveling to Asia for Isaac Mizrahi, handling advertising and licensing as vice president of image direction for the fashion icon. Then Los Angeles beckoned, and Alonso cofounded Greybull Press, a small, artsy book publishing enterprise. With more friends like Johanknecht desiring to branch into interior design, Commune, established in 2004, was hatched over dinner.

“The idea was to create specific teams to resolve design problems in different ways,” Alonso says. Early work, like a boutique and store for Stila Cosmetics, morphed into collaborations with the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), Heath Ceramics, Goop, and most notably, Ace Hotels, for which Commune crafted properties in Kyoto, Chicago, Downtown Los Angeles, and Palm Springs, California.

An ability to listen—to both clients and colleagues in their small, but open studio—is one of Commune’s greatest strengths. Consider the practice’s longterm relationship with Ace. “When we start a project with them, we figure it out together. There’s a back and forth, and that’s the key in creating Ace’s je ne sais quoi,” says Alonso.

It wasn’t until six years ago, when Alonso moved into his new apartment, that he felt comfortable being called a designer, realizing that “all these things I’m living with are things I designed.” His path to the field might have been unconventional, yet it was organic. Even during the ’80s clubbing era, the venues attracted him because of their sense of escapism. He “learned that you have to create a space for people to relax and be themselves,” he says, noting how as a child he was exposed to the joyful impact of hospitality watching his family gatherings unfold. “I remember people taking down a door in our apartment and putting it across their laps to play the drums.”

Still, Alonso wonders “how long I can do this before I have to get a job. That was always in my head,” he admits. “I feel so lucky to be where I am right now at my age, doing what I love—what I’ve grown to love, because I didn’t know I loved it.” **hd**

🔊 Hear more on *HD’s What I’ve Learned* podcast at hospitalitydesign.com



Concrete wraps the bar at the Ace Hotel Downtown LA



Located in the Academy Museum of Motion Pictures, Fanny’s restaurant evokes Old Hollywood glamour



Le Bon Nosh restaurant in Atlanta stars a pomegranate, saffron, and pale blue color palette



A copper DJ station mixes with wood and rattan chairs in Piopiko, the mezzanine lounge and taco restaurant in the Ace Hotel Kyoto