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Urban cool hits desert



Photographs by DAVID A. KEEPS Los Angeles Times

EARTHY: Industrial hooks as curtain tie-backs, pipes as towel holders and vintage furniture give the Ace Hotel its vibe.

When Alex Calderwood decided to transform a 1966 Palm Springs Howard Johnson motor lodge into the Ace Hotel & Swim Club, he had a vision: "If the production crew for 'Easy Rider' came out to the desert, this would be the kind of place they'd be looking for." Roman Alonso, a creative director for Commune, described the look that his West Hollywood design firm devised another way: "Throw 'MASH,' 'Billy Jack' and 'Jesus Christ Superstar' into a blender in your mind."

The new lodging is a stark departure from the usual midcentury Palm Springs style. Rooms have a back-to-the-land hippie sensibility, with walls and windows covered in tent canvas. Floors are concrete or dark cork tile. Canvas bedspreads were screen-printed by the Malibu fashion house Free City, and headboards are giant denim bolsters. "Minimal can be modern," Calderwood says, pointing to unpainted bentwood cafe chairs and tree stump bedside tables.

For Commune, which designs Juicy Couture stores as well as L.A. residences, honest materials and handcrafted design were key, Alonso says. Earthy flat-weave wastebaskets and meditation cushions woven from recycled gum wrappers are in each room; much of the furniture is a thrift-shop find. "The idea behind the Ace Palm Springs," Alonso says, "is to take its urban attitude to the desert and bring an individual artisan hand to the guest rooms and public spaces." For more photos, go to latimes.com/thescout.

— DAVID A. KEEPS