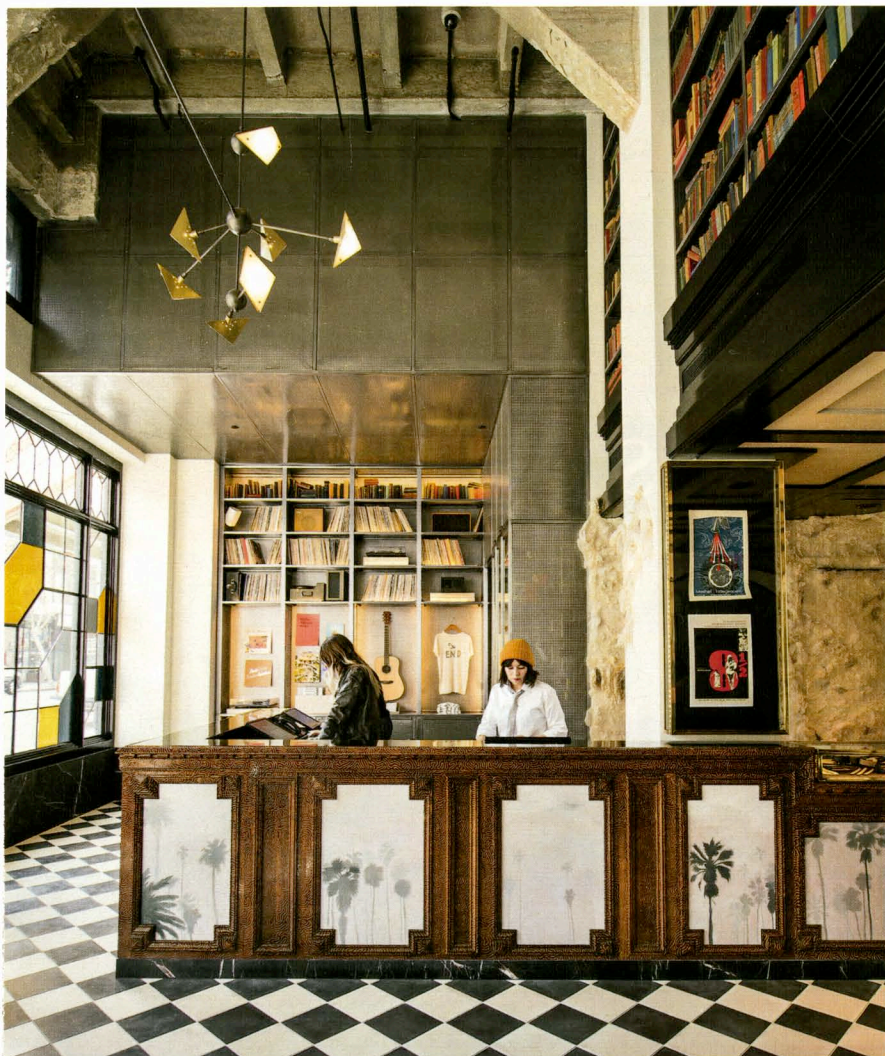


# Hotel California

With their latest outpost, the owners of Ace Hotel and the design firm Commune are bringing their hipster formula to one of the most fabled buildings in downtown Los Angeles.

BY MATT TYRNAUER PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVE LAURIDSEN



BEFORE STARTING A NEW PROJECT, Alex Calderwood, co-founder and creative director of Ace Hotel, always told himself a story. “That story was about the building, its heritage, the location, and, most important, who would inhabit it,” says designer Roman Alonso, who, when Calderwood died unexpectedly in London last November at the age of 47, lost not only an important client, but a close friend. At the time of his death, Calderwood was working with Alonso and his L.A.-based firm, Commune, to put the finishing touches on the plans for the latest Ace, which opened last month in a resurgent downtown Los Angeles. In typical Ace fashion, the new hotel is slightly outside the zone of the city’s historic core that has been experiencing a renaissance in recent years.

Calderwood had been looking in other parts of the city for his sixth Ace Hotel (there are also Ace properties in Seattle, Portland, Palm Springs, New York and London), when he and his business partners were approached about an all-but-abandoned building in Downtown’s perennially down-at-the-heels theater district, whose main drag, South Broadway, is lined with historic but faded movie palaces, long considered beyond resurrection. The building Calderwood bought had been the United Artists Theatre, with an adjoining 13-story office tower, the onetime headquarters of Texaco, which, when it was completed in 1927, was the tallest building in L.A.

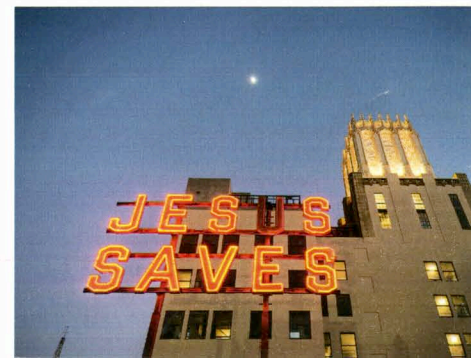
“When Alex saw the building, and especially the theater, his mind began to reel,” Calderwood’s business partner Kelly Sawdon says. “He said, ‘You feel the soul in the place. I never walked into a building and was this overwhelmed.’”

The United Artists Theatre’s most recent owner/occupant had been the televangelist Rev. Gene Scott, who embellished the building’s facade with two massive neon signs proclaiming JESUS SAVES. He used to broadcast from the auditorium, which was designed by the architect C. Howard Crane in the dripping, gilded Spanish Gothic style. To either side of the proscenium are murals depicting the United Artists Theatre’s founders, Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks and Charlie Chaplin, in heroic poses. Pickford is said to have instructed the architect to mimic the style of her favorite building: the cathedral in Segovia, Spain. This pastiche of architectural and social history dazzled Calderwood, who set out to preserve it, build on it and transform it into another one of his thrumming hives of hipsterdom.

Last summer I stood with Calderwood in a design studio as he looked through thick binders of research on the history of United Artists, and examined pin-up boards lined with imagery that would inform the design of the hotel: stills from Pickford’s silent movie oeuvre juxtaposed with shots from L.A.’s 1980s punk scene; photos of the avant-garde Modernist architect Rudolph Schindler’s 1922 house in West Hollywood next to images from Fritz Lang’s “Metropolis”; Le Corbusier in his Mediterranean cabin next to rocker Richard Hell in a hotel room; Gloria Swanson next to singer Joan Jett.

“The narrative around the hotel goes like this,” Calderwood explained. “Mary Pickford and Rudolph Schindler have an affair, and their love child turns out to be Exene Cervenka,” one of the lead singers of the quintessential L.A. punk band, X. “The DNA of the place is very much the flapper era, when Mary

**THE SECOND COMING** Left: local furniture designer Tanya Aguiñya created the felted walls behind the lobby’s front desk using raw sheep’s wool. Below: the pious neon sign is a relic of the building’s previous owner, the late Reverend Gene Scott.





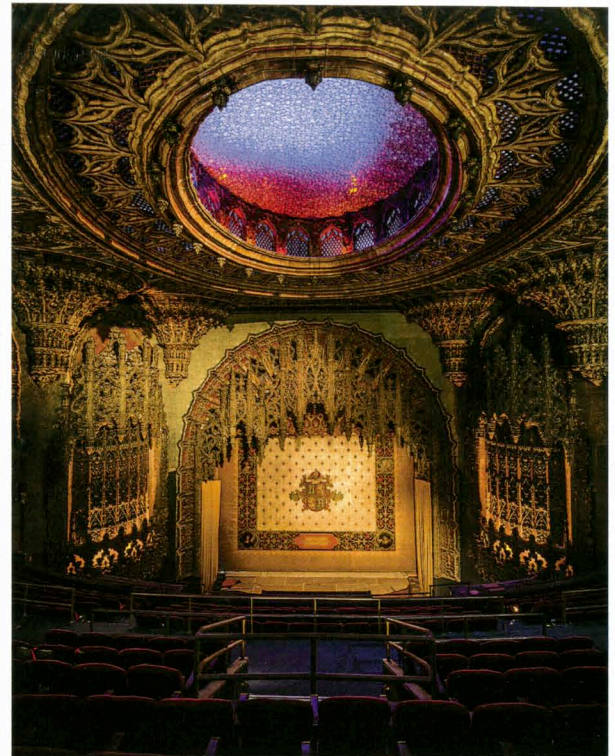
Pickford was the It Girl, and it seemed to us when we were pouring over the 1920s L.A. images and the early 1980s L.A. images, that there was a parallel. Both great, wild moments of revolutionary creativity, not to mention some experimentation and dangerous excess.”

While the interior of the movie palace has been lovingly restored (Ace is programming it with live concerts, movie premieres and special screenings), the old office building had to be gutted in order to create 182 hotel rooms and public spaces. “When we stripped the old masonry away,” Alonso says, “we realized that it was actually a Brutalist cement frame structure — very modern — in Gothic disguise. This brought to mind Schindler’s house, with its sharp angles and poured concrete slab construction, and that became the inspiration for the rooms, where we left as much textured concrete exposed as possible.”

The furnishing in the rooms is a fusion of spare, high modernity and hipsteresque functionality: Platform beds covered in Pendleton blankets with Mondrian-inspired designs float over ironic “grandma gold” wall-to-wall carpeting. The Noguchi lanterns and vintage Prouvé desk chairs add to the sleek aesthetic. The Ace color palette is dominated by muted earth tones — beige walls, blond wood, gunmetal gray and brass fixtures — for a good reason, Alonso says:

**RESTORED GRANDEUR**

Clockwise from left: stripped of decades of paint, the building’s terra cotta and iron facade has returned to its original glory; the Spanish Gothic theater houses regular performances by Benjamin Millepied’s L.A. Dance Project; Jud Mongell and Ken Addington, from Brooklyn’s Five Leaves, run the ground-floor bistro, L.A. Chapter; and guest rooms are decorated in homage to the Modernist architect Rudolph Schindler’s West Hollywood home.



“Alex was red-green colorblind. You would show him a red tile and he’d say, ‘I love that shade of brown!’”

“What Alex was really interested in was people. Much more so than he was interested in design and architecture,” says Alonso, who thinks that Calderwood would have been most pleased with the hotel’s public spaces. Besides the 1,600-seat theater, there is a rooftop cafe and pool inspired by Donald Judd’s swimming pool at his compound in Marfa, Texas, and a lobby designed to house the legions of Ace heads equipped with MacBook Airs who require ample “third place” hangouts to do their work and sip their Stumptown coffee.

“One of the most important things in terms of Alex’s vision for this Ace is that he wanted to represent the spirit of L.A. from the time the original building was built until now,” Alonso says. “It was really important for him to localize the project, to the point where almost everything in this building, from the lamps to art on the walls,” — works by Mike Mills alluding to the L.A. news events of 1927, and murals by brothers Nikolai and Simon Haas depicting iconic L.A. imagery like palm trees shrouded in mist — “to the stained glass windows over the front door are made in L.A. Anyone who knows the town will walk through this place and be able to feel the spirit of L.A. in the building.”

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