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May 2013

MAKING A SPLASH
Commune partner Ramin Shamshiri's son Paolo and nephews Basel and Reza Hall enjoy a dip in the pool behind Shamshiri and his wife, Donna Langley's, 1908 bungalow—once the winter home of Ojai Valley pioneer Edward Drummond Libbey.
Sittings Editor: Miranda Brooks.

CALIFORNIA DREAMING

Founded by four friends, Los Angeles's design firm of the moment, Commune, combines West Coast sophistication with an air of boho cool. By Hamish Bowles. Photographed by François Halard.

It started over an epic dinner a decade ago when four friends, each ready for a significant life change, realized that they shared a common viewpoint about the way they wanted to work. By the end of the meal they had decided to join forces and create "a collective focusing on enhancing life through design"—a laboratory of ideas that they named Commune.

Roman Alonso and Steven Johanknecht had met in the late eighties, when they both worked at Barneys during the exhilarating Pressman-family years under the Creative Services umbrella—a department whose members collaborated on "advertising, publicity, in-store design, a special event, or windows," as Alonso recalls. "Hermès one day, Comme des Garçons the next," adds Johanknecht.

Siblings Pamela and Ramin Shamshiri, meanwhile, were esteemed production designers whose own chameleon skills carried them from movies to commercials to money-is-no-object party decor. The Shamshiris met Alonso when they worked together on one of philanthropist Lilly Tartikoff's legendary Fire and Ice Balls. Charged with transforming a ballroom of the Beverly Hilton hotel, they worked 48 hours straight to turn it into a mirrored white wonderland. When they were finished, remembers Alonso, Burt Bacharach interrupted his sound check to announce over the microphone, " 'Whoever did this room, if you're out there, it's the most beautiful room I've ever played in.' Pam and I looked at each other and literally started crying." It was the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

But that party also seemed like a last hurrah; damn-the-expense galas were melting away, film productions were moving to Vancouver, and the Shamshiris were tiring of their relentlessly peripatetic lives and wanted to settle down. Johanknecht, meanwhile, having departed a position at Gap's headquarters in San Francisco, yearned for a return to decorating (after working with the architect Peter Marino on store design at Barneys, he had joined the studio of decorator Bill Sofield, who was then developing the va-va-voom Gucci-store concepts for Tom Ford).

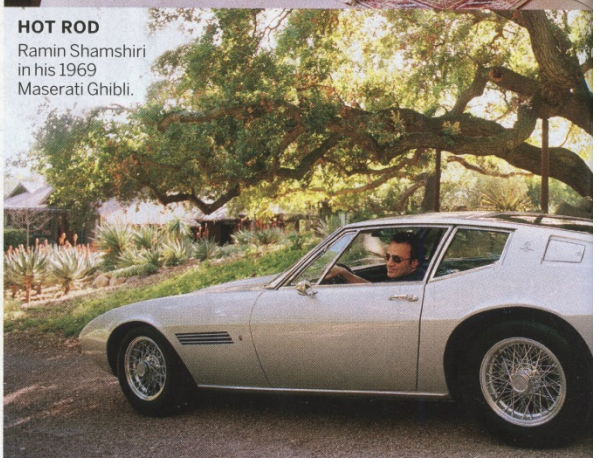
The group was inspired by the Bauhaus ideal. "We thought about Terence Conran and the way that he built his company," Alonso explains, "and we always wanted a studio that felt like the Eames studio, where there were all sorts of different things happening: film, photography, product, or an interior—this interdisciplinary thing." Although Commune is known primarily for its interiors and store design, its consultancy reach is now extensive. "Sometimes it's a carpet, sometimes it's stationery, sometimes it's chocolate," Alonso says. "But in the end, it's all design."

Commune reveres émigré Austrian architects and designers including Rudolph Schindler and Richard Neutra, who moved to Los Angeles "and injected their aesthetic into the openness of the West and the California lifestyle," says Alonso, who also cites influences as disparate as Vladimir Kagan, Donald Judd, the whimsical designer Tony Duquette, and the High Hollywood–style decorator Billy Haines. The four blithely mix old and new, and organic and ethnic touches (the Shamshiris are Iranian, Alonso Venezuelan).

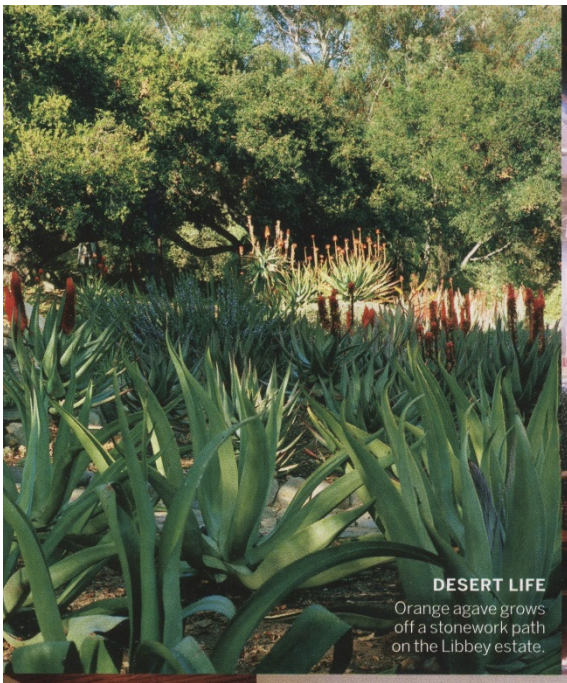
During that first dinner, the four realized that each partner had connections to craftspeople and artists and artisans through their varied lives, and they assembled a dream list of possible collaborators (whom they dubbed the "Communists") to provide "a completely holistic and unique approach to each job," says Pam Shamshiri. "People on that

BRINGING UP BABY
Pam Shamshiri, in a Marni top and a Thakoon skirt, with son Basel in her 1946 Rudolph Schindler house. Details, see In This Issue.

GOLDEN RULE
Commune re-created built-in mohair sofas based on archived drawings for the Great Room of the Schindler house.



HOT ROD
Ramin Shamshiri in his 1969 Maserati Ghibli.

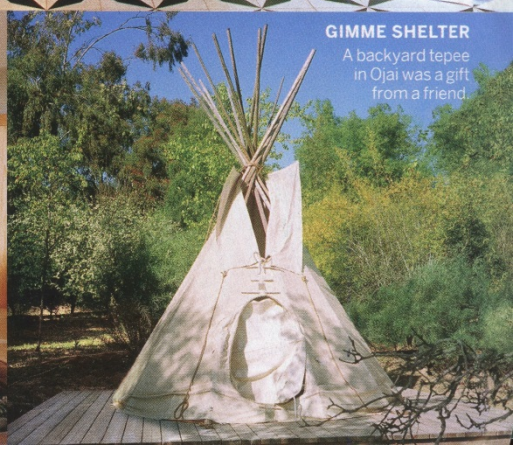


DESERT LIFE
Orange agave grows off a stonework path on the Libbey estate.

BEAMS OF LIGHT
The cushions atop Paul Frankl 1940s bamboo chairs and sofa in the sunroom of the Libbey house in Ojai are covered in Carolina Irving's "Amazon" linen.

GREEN LIVING
The kitchen of Ramin Shamshiri's Los Feliz house was custom-designed around the original arch windows from the 1920s.

MOD SQUAD
An Alma Allen walnut table, a Moroccan rug, and a 1958 Eames rosewood recliner in Pierre Frey's "Nairobi" linen create a cozy den in the Schindler house.



GIMME SHELTER
A backyard tepee in Ojai was a gift from a friend.

SOUTH BY SOUTHWEST
A 1919 oil painting by Charles Craig found at Early California Antiques hangs above a 1940s Japanese tansu from NK Shop in the old-growth redwood sunroom of the Libbey house.

TREES OF LIFE
Plantings on the turn-of-the-century Libbey estate: the California landscape the group reveres.

list are people that we still work with today," says Alonso, mentioning art director Doug Lloyd; Cathy Bailey and Robin Petravic, who revived the forties Sausalito company Heath Ceramics; Rhett Butler of the custom hardware company E. R. Butler; the landscape designer Matthew Brown; and the furniture artisan Alma Allen, whose pieces appear in nearly all their projects. Although each Commune partner has areas of specialty, the work is as collaborative as their name suggests: "The great thing is we respect each other's opinion so much that we watch each other's backs," says Johanknecht. "It's codependency," says Pam Shamshiri, laughing. When they are all together, the four have an endearing way of completing one another's sentences.

Commune's hotel work includes partnering with the Ace Hotel Group on its Palm Springs outpost, originally a Howard Johnson motel. "The mantra was 'hippie camping,'" says Alonso about the Ace, recalling how the firm spent a year sourcing more than 1,500 pieces of vintage furniture from vendors in the area. "The economy had tanked," Alonso says, "so this project became a focus for a lot of these dealers out there. It really worked out for the hotel, because they got great community support."

Commune is working with Ace again—this time transforming the United Artists building in downtown L.A. into a 180-room hotel. Built in 1927 by the winsome actress and savvy businesswoman Mary Pickford, the imposing structure, apparently inspired by the sixteenth-century cathedral in Segovia, was once the headquarters of the late television evangelist Reverend Gene Scott (the iconic neon JESUS SAVES sign that he installed is being preserved).

In its narrative, Commune imagined that Pickford and the California modernist architect Rudolph Schindler had had a child—a punk flapper. So the cement ceilings will be left as they are, the facade has been restored, and local collaborators include a fifth-generation art-glass company. "The best part of what we do is working with these kinds of people and learning how this happens," Alonso explains.

The Commune aesthetic is reflected in the inspiration boards in its studio—for projects as disparate as a Tuscan-style villa in Napa that was originally decorated by the distinguished Mark Hampton (typically, much of his original work will be preserved), to a shagadelic Beverly Hills estate filled with high-glamour seventies furnishings. "Every project is really different. We don't dictate; we just help them," explains Alonso. "A lot of decorators impose their style," Johanknecht adds, "but it's more fun to work this way. It keeps us agile."

But it is their respective home environments that act as their collective manifesto. Alonso lives in a dark-paneled 1908 Craftsman cottage in the now trendier-than-thou Echo Park neighborhood. It has the ironic-chic vibe of a sophisticated sixties counterculture student's lair—Bauhaus-style furniture, turned-wood stools, and bright Indian embroidered rugs. Che Guevara and sixties Pop Art Cuban film posters crowd the walls.

Johanknecht is cradled in a similarly eclectic mix nearby in a picturesque cottage set in an ersatz olde worlde village complex built in the 1920s by Disney, reportedly to inspire its writers' fevered imaginations. *(continued on page 315)*

FINE VINES
A travertine table and Brown Jordan chairs create an outdoor living room at Ramin Shamshiri's Los Feliz house. The glazed ceramic fireplace by Stan Bitters was added with the courtyard in 2007, while Commune designed the Mexican concrete tile floor.

CALIFORNIA DREAMING

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A garage in back has been converted to an art studio where Johanknecht creates his bright, geometric abstract works with motifs that inspire the group's signature fireplace screens, and their rug and tile designs.

Pam Shamshiri and her film-editor husband, Haines Hall, meanwhile, embarked on an epic hunt for an iconic architectural statement that could be lovingly brought back to life—and found it in a house clinging to the side of a hill in Studio City that proved to be the penultimate project of Schindler.

The house had been renovated in the eighties, but Shamshiri peeled away the seventeen layers of paint and the drywall to find the original pale plywood paneling, as well as Schindler's dramatic trapezoid fireplace. Its spiky angles are reflected in the dynamic lines of the room and the slivers of glass beneath the raked roofline. Together with the latticework ceiling detail—conceived as an indoor pergola for clinging vines—which Shamshiri has re-created from the original blueprints, the place seems like a light-flooded tree house.

The artist John Williams worked on the renovation for two years—in particular the dining area in the Great Room (added at the insistence of the original owner, as Schindler considered a dining room redundant and preferred to eat his meals from dining carts) and the den. The Dutch furniture artist Piet Hein Eek's salvaged pieces add a twenty-first-century spin.

Shamshiri's brother Ramin lives with his wife, Donna Langley (the dynamic cochair of Universal Pictures), and their sons, Paolo and Adello, in a 1920s Hispano-Mauresque house in the Los Feliz neighborhood and a storied 1908 bungalow in Ojai.

The couple had just returned from their honeymoon in the Yucatán, and Ramin and Pam had recently visited the Alhambra, when Commune began work on their Los Feliz house, and these references were channeled into the design. The Langley-Shamshiri family's frequent entertaining also dictated its flow, through a living room and a spacious kitchen into a balmy courtyard, where the ceramic artist Stan Bitters created panels for the chimneypiece (with the flavor of an eroded Mayan temple mural), and Moorish mosaic tiles fill the Hispano-Gothic arch of the fountain.

The Ojai house was built by Edward Drummond Libbey, the glassware magnate and cultural philanthropist, who commissioned Myron Hunt (distinguished creator of the Rose Bowl and, with Elmer Grey, the Huntington Library) to build him a house with stirring views across plantings of California oak, spindly palms, and orange-flamed agave. The westward-running valleys bathe the house in singing pink sunsets.

The original paintwork of the Libbey house's Great Room has been preserved—a ground of baked-earth color with the fretwork of beams picked out in ivory and charcoal motifs thought to be by Native American artists. Its interior is a play of textures—a stone chimneypiece with a massive log mantel, Navajo textiles layered with Anatolian or Moroccan rugs, Calder string murals, and contemporary and 1970s furniture. The original deck had been enclosed as a sunroom; now it's filled with Paul Frankl 1940s bamboo-framed sofa and chairs, along with Andrée Putman stools set around a 1930s bar found in a Paris *puce*.

"It's the detail and the big picture," says Johanknecht. "You're telling a story," adds Alonso.

"The thing about being in California is that it's the Wild West!" says Johanknecht. "There is more freedom. . . ." In classic Commune fashion, Pam Shamshiri finishes his sentence: "You see the horizon every day." □

A NEW LEAF

(continued from page 292)

Purslane's crunchy leaves have a pleasantly lemony taste, but the more mature plants have spindly stems that call for a little denaturing. Usually I'll dress the plant separately and drizzle it with vincotto (sweet, syrupy, and made with grape must), then add the leafy greens on top. Since purslane stands up to strong flavors, I'll sometimes add slices of nectarines or plums, a pinch of sea salt, some toasted hazelnuts, a little blue cheese if there's any around.

It's a good salad to have in the arsenal. Because almost any kind of fruit, nut, and strong cheese will do, it adapts to what you have on hand. One summer, my wife and I were spending the weekend with friends in Brookhaven, New York, and I noticed some purslane growing between the flagstones by their pool. "Want me to make a salad?" I asked.

Kostow uses richer flavors with red and green orache, which have arrow-shaped leaves that taste like seasoned spinach. At Meadowood, he serves them with lardo and caviar warmed over a fire as a part of the 20-course tasting menu. Carlo Mirarchi, the chef at Roberta's (the ascendant Brooklyn restaurant that was one of the pioneers of urban gardening) and Blanca (which earned its first Michelin star shortly after its opening, in 2012), also plays with stronger dressings. "A lot of people consider leafy vegetables to be a light flavor, but you can get some deep flavors that make them as satisfying as anything else out there," Mirarchi told me. "There are a lot of ways to think about vinaigrettes. Like, I love nut milk. Nut milks can take on a good amount of acid. Use whatever you want—Banyuls vinegar, lemon juice—and some olive oil. It thickens almost like a buttermilk." Mirarchi makes his own nut milks for his dressing, but then he would; you can use a shortcut and buy them fresh. (Try Organic Avenue in New York City.)

Sometimes Mirarchi will dress a salad, then dot it with a quick salsa verde made out of shiso, garlic, white balsamic, and olive oil, so that the tiny, explosive touches of flavor play off the strong flavors of dogtooth violet or chrysanthemum or celery-like lovage. Or he'll sneak in fruit: green strawberries, ripe strawberries, huckleberries, blueberries, ground cherries, persimmon. Roberta's has a fig tree that Mirarchi drags indoors during the winter, and in the late summer he will freeze ripe figs for an hour, then shave them over the salad with a microplane rasp. "It gets fig flavor everywhere," he said.

These are strange combinations, bright and herbaceous flavors you find on the other side of the spectrum from pork belly, 21-day aged burgers, and the other meaty, chest-thumping dishes that are understandably popular right now. Anise hyssop, purslane, orache, lovage? Not macho. But they're original—at least they are at this moment in food—and they will dazzle even the most seasoned palate: They remind you that there are still flavors out there you have yet to experience.

"When you have a salad like that, it's like you're some woodland creature jumping around eating all this weird stuff," Mirarchi told me. "It's really fun, and it gets you excited to have your next course."

If the ideal shelter-magazine kitchen garden is as crisp and stylized as a new haircut, the garden outside the house that Madeleine Fitzpatrick shares with Evan Shively north of Point Reyes Station, California, is *(continued on page 316)*