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June 12, 2013

Style Compass: Commune

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INTROspective magazine

STYLE COMPASS

COMMUNE

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Meet the exciting, interdisciplinary Los Angeles-based design firm behind such buzzed-about spaces as Palm Spring's Ace Hotel and the Hollywood restaurant Ammo.

http://www.1stdibs.com/introspective/style_compass/commune/

FORMED DURING WHAT DESIGNER AND COFOUNDER ROMAN ALONSO CALLS A "LONG, SAKE-INFUSED DINNER," THE LOS ANGELES–BASED

COMMUNE

takes as egalitarian an approach to design as its name suggests. Four partners — Alonso, Steven Johanknecht, and sister and brother Pamela and Ramin Shamshiri — begin each project with a clean slate and a level hierarchy. "The way we function is slightly different from other firms," says Alonso. "Whether you're a Commune architect, interior designer or graphic designer, we consider you a lead or support, so your role constantly changes from project to project."

In the living room of a 1930s Los Angeles residence, the L.A.-based design firm Commune — headed by Steven Johanknecht, Pamela Shamshiri, Roman Alonso and Ramin Shamshiri (previous page, left to right) — introduced a custom sofa, a coffee table from Ten 10 Design and a vintage Moroccan rug. Photo by Amy Neusinger

As an interdisciplinary firm that offers residential and commercial design, graphics, branding services, furniture and products, this can be a lot to juggle. But for Commune, it's the only way, one that reflects the distinctly holistic principles upon which the partners founded their company in 2004. "We're really a family business, with diverse backgrounds and experience," says the Venezuelan-born Alonso, who met Johanknecht, a New Yorker, in 1988 when they worked together at Barneys — Alonso in publicity and Johanknecht in store design and display. The Shamshiri siblings, meanwhile, spent their youth in their native Tehran, whiling away the hours at their parents' Italian furniture showroom (their mother was born in Italy). "That's where we would play after school," says Pamela Shamshiri. After heading to L.A., the siblings worked in production design before opening their own firm.

At a residence in Beverly Hills, formerly the home of actress Jean Howard, the Los Angeles scenic painter Nicolas Pasquale Valle did the walls and ceiling and Waldo Fernandez designed the La Quinta light fixture. The 1940s Swedish desk lamp is from JF Chen. Photo by Richard Powers

The Shamshiris met Alonso while collaborating on philanthropist Lilly Tartikoff's Fire and Ice Ball in 2000, for which they transformed the Beverly Hilton ballroom, "one of the ugliest ballrooms in the world," says Alonso with a laugh. The evening's entertainer, Burt Bacharach, stopped singing during sound check to admire their work. "We hadn't slept in four days — we almost passed out when he did that," says Pamela Shamshiri. "We learned how to do events completely," says Alonso, "from the matchbooks to the outfit for the cigarette girl, and even how she fit with the chandelier."

Commune outfitted Mattison, a menswear boutique on Melrose Place, in custom-made American black-walnut furniture and fixtures by Joshua Tree-based sculptor Alma Allen. Photo by Spencer Lowell

In a 1920s Spanish Colonial residence in Los Feliz, a Commune for Environment coffee table joins a custom sofa, Sergio Rodrigues leather chairs and a daybed from Espasso. The floor lamp is by David Weeks and the cowhide rug is by Grand Splendid. Photo by Corey Walter

The firm's first project together was the redefinition of the popular local L.A. lunch spot Ammo. Here, says Alonso, "The owner needed a new identity grounded in her old identity. She needed to expand a little, and grow up." High-backed booths, a backlit wine wall and touches of bright red helped catapult this favorite from daytime dive to crowded nightspot. And, to further hone the restaurant's individuality, Commune completed the design of its graphic identity, too, from the menus to the style of the staff uniforms.

It was that project that helped spread the word about the firm, which now has an extensive roster of high-profile clients and projects. These include the Ace Hotel & Swim Club in Palm Springs, whose distinctive retro-chic look — comprised in large part from some 1,500 pieces of vintage furniture and objects the group sourced from local vendors — received plaudits from just about every design publication when it opened in 2009. Currently the team is putting the finishing touches on the Ace's newest outpost, set to open at the end of this year in the former United Artists building in white-hot downtown Los Angeles.

The dining room of a Los Feliz house features a custom table from Dan Zelen, chairs from 1stdibs dealer Lief, a custom chandelier by Paul Ferrante and a cowhide rug from Grand Splendid. Photo by Corey Walter

The team at their office in Los Angeles. Photo by Amy Neusinger

Initially, Commune set up shop in a tiny office across the street from the Capitol Records building in Hollywood. The windows were blacked out, save for one high opening that framed the iconic building. "We could only look up," says Johanknecht. They spent a year there building their clientele and their base of "Communists," as the team called the growing collective of artisans and craftspeople who added their signature touches to every project — and still do so. "It's a good way of keeping things fresh," says Pamela Shamshiri.

Five years ago, Commune moved to a space tucked between retail showrooms amid the robust design enclave on North Robertson Boulevard in West Hollywood. The office is accessed via a somewhat incongruous wood-and-iron Spanish-style door just past a window filled with impossibly high Christian Louboutin stilettos. The entrance evokes a modern speakeasy, and inside, a staff of 30 buzzes away at open workstations, sharing resources and balancing roles on their myriad projects. "We're influenced by the Bauhaus school — in the way they did furniture, interiors, weavings — it's what we wanted to be able to do as a company," says Johanknecht.

The team reimagined the San Francisco store of Heath Ceramics, a company with which, in true Commune fashion, they've collaborated on other projects. Photo by Leslie Williamson

This sense of unity extends to the firm's clients, many of whom have embraced Commune's comprehensive design approach. For example, the team has created custom work and showrooms for Heath Ceramics, which has in turn designed Do Not Disturb signs for the Ace in Palm Springs. For Oliver Peoples, Commune not only created several store concepts, it became the eyewear company's ad agency, too, producing promotional online videos through its small, in-house photo agency. "All of our clients become part of a network," says Alonso. "They are our clients *and* our collaborators."

As evidenced by their varied body of work, impressive for a firm that will mark only its first decade next year, Commune does not have a set style or genre. "We focus on what's best for the client, the architecture or the space," says Ramin Shamshiri, the most taciturn of the quartet and the in-house triple threat: designer, project and construction manager, finance guru. "It's not about pushing our style or design."

In this room at the Ace Hotel in Palm Springs, the coffee table is from Cleveland Arts, which creates furniture from recycled industrial parts, and the vintage furniture sourced from local dealers. Photo by Paul Costello

Billy Haines originally designed this home in Beverly Hills and Commune paid homage by combining his custom-made couch, wall color and one of his table lamps with a coffee table from Formations and a rug of their own design. Photo by Richard Powers

And those projects continue to flourish. In addition to developing new lines for Exquisite Surfaces, E.R. Butler & Co. and Environment Furniture, the team is reimagining a 1907 building as a hotel in the burgeoning Casco Viejo district of Panama City, which Alonso describes as something "bigger than itself — it's not only the revitalization of a building, but the revitalization of a neighborhood," he says. There's also the new Farmshop restaurant in Marin County, California (the original is in Santa Monica), two major multiuse residential developments — one in Hollywood and one in downtown L.A. — and, says Alonso, "a million residential projects." For all of these, Commune insists on maintaining its homegrown feel. "We hate waste, and we feel that a project is truly successful if it lasts for a long time," says Alonso. "We want to design spaces that look as fresh five or ten years down the line as when they were just finished, that grow old gracefully. Though we try to impose little on our clients, you could say we impose that."

A custom-designed ceramic fireplace by Stan Bitters anchors the courtyard of a 1920s Spanish Colonial residence in Los Feliz. The coffee table is by Ten 10 gallery; the French iron furniture is 1950s. Photo by Corey Walter

Style Compass

COLOR:

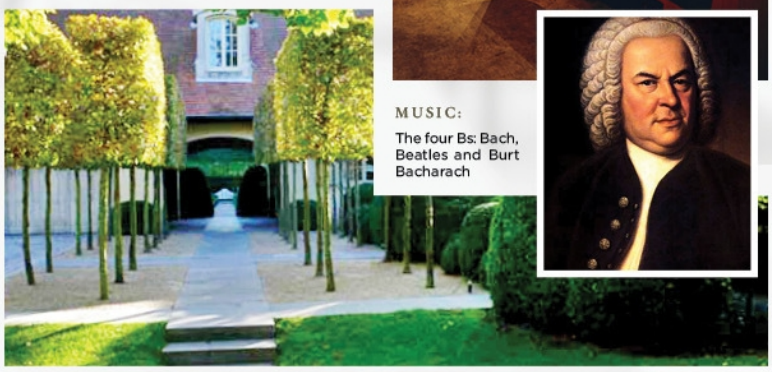
We love vintage or "old lady" color combinations. The colors of the buildings in Havana; a Le Corbusier palette.

RESTAURANT:

AXE, Farmshop, Cortez, **Ammo** and Farmshop, in L.A., and Chez Panisse, in Berkeley

GARDENING & FLORAL:

We like extremes. A crazy overgrown garden or one by **Jacques Wirtz**. Lots of something wild thrown in a vase or ikebana. Lotus Land in Santa Barbara and Lisa Eisner's garden in Bel Air are a constant source of inspiration.



MUSIC:

The four Bs: Bach, Beatles and Burt Bacharach

MUSEUM:

The **MAK** in Vienna; Fondation Maeght in the South of France; Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Copenhagen; Centre Pompidou in Paris.

GIFT:

An Alma Allen sculpture, **table linens by Commune**

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TRAVEL:

A road trip up the coast on Highway 1 to **Big Sur** or San Francisco is always a favorite. But as they say, "You gotta leave L.A. to love L.A.," so once a year we try to see ancient things: Rome, Paris, Mexico City, Vienna.

ART & DESIGN:

Donald Judd's interiors: his great sense of space and the way he integrated his collections. The world of **Charles and Ray Eames** because of their limitless creativity in a multitude of disciplines. Tony Duquette's fantastic assemblages. Noguchi's shapes. De Kooning's sense of color. Mongiardino's excess. Everything Austrian Secessionist that is at the heart of modernism.

HOTEL:

The Ace Hotel, in Portland; the Chateau Marmont, in L.A.; and the Park Hyatt Tokyo

HOW GREEN ARE YOU?

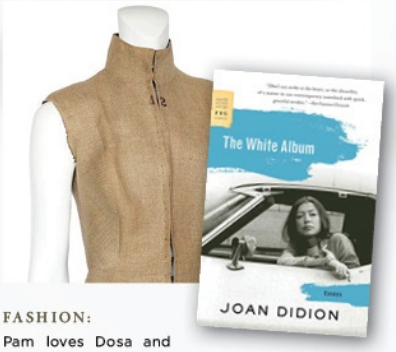
We hate waste of any kind. We believe in investing in antiques and that one should buy things one wants to grow old with. Keeping things local as much as possible is a must. In our projects we keep and enhance as much of the original architecture as possible. We love natural finishes and embrace a patina.

FABRICS:

We love to hunt for vintage textiles and then mix them with ethnic prints for a layered look. We have a weakness for mohairs, horsehair and Belgian linens. We use a lot of "work wear" fabrics like denim, twill and army drab for upholstery. Burlap as a window treatment is kind of a signature at this point.

APPS:

Uber, Yelp, Flashlight



FASHION:

Pam loves Dosa and Maria Cornejo. Ramin is a **Maison Martin Margiela** and Acne guy. Steven likes a uniform of A.P.C. jeans, Gitman Brothers shirt and Red Wing boots. Roman is into vintage denim and custom-made suits.

BOOK:

The White Album by Joan Didion, any biography written by Stefan Zweig.

ENTERTAINING:

We live in Los Angeles, so entertaining is casual and mostly outdoors. Keys are great food, lots of tequila and a good mix of people.

SHOPS:

Merci, in Paris; March, in San Francisco; RTH and Free City, in Los Angeles; Totokaelo, in Seattle.

COMMUNE'S
Quick Picks FROM 1stdibs
Harry Bertoia bronze Bush sculpture, offered by Galerie XX
Poul Henningsen hanging fixture, offered by J.F. Chen
Mario Bellini Le Bambole three-seater, offered by Galerie Half
Salvador Teran stone-and-metal modernist mosaic coffee table, offered by The Window
David Cressey 5050 ribbed planter for Architectural Pottery, offered by Reform
Michael Boyd Wedge series Arrowhead corded lounge chair, offered by Edward Cella