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ollaboration is key for Commune, the LA design brand whose golden rules of creativity

put respect for the maker at the pinnacle. 'A lot of people want something from an artist,' they say. 'It's only successful when both parties are proud of the result...'

Words Sam Walton | Photographs Christopher Sturman

The Los Angeles-based creative studio Commune was founded in 2004 with the spirit of collaboration very much at its heart. 'The name is based on community,' points out co-founder Roman Alonso. 'It was about creating a community of people, of course all playing different roles, but the most important role is that of maker.'

This collaborative approach is intrinsic to Commune's ethos: elevating the work of artisans and artists. For Alonso, his creative collaborations began in the late Eighties, working in the PR department of Barney's in New York. 'My favorite part of the job was working with the artists, that's what I loved to do - so I took that with me,' he says. Alonso eventually departed New York in the late Nineties for the West Coast, founding cult art book publishing business Greybull Press.

Commune has been championing the craft and artisan scene since its inception. For the four founding partners (Alonso, Steven Johanknecht, Pamela Shamshiri and her brother Ramin), this approach was certainly a visionary

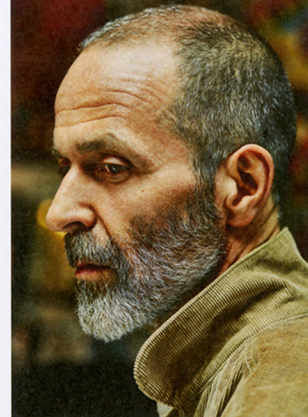


Commune
co-founders Steven
Johanknecht, left,
and Roman Alonso



Left: Commune HQ is located in the former Hollywood Foreign Press building in West Hollywood. For Roman Alonso, opposite, creative collaborations began when he worked for Barney's PR department in the Eighties: 'My favorite part of the job was working with the artists,' he says

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move - the growing emphasis on the provenance of goods and a focus on the handmade means that interest in the unique creations they have been commissioning for the past 14 years has snowballed. 'There's no question that there's more interest in it,' says Alonso. 'More and more we're living in front of a screen, and I think there is a primal need for things that have touch - that have soul.'

Examples of Commune's collaborative methodology can be found across America and further afield, from hotels to private residences. A longtime partner of Ace Hotels, their first project for them was the Ace in Palm Springs. Alonso picks out one of their other hotel projects, the American Trade Hotel in Panama, as a personal favorite.

'I'm Latin American,' he says, '[so] it was an opportunity to explore my own heritage. There could be so many awful ways of approaching it, but I'm very proud of the way we handled it, and the way we executed it. How refined and chic it is, it's gotten us a lot work - and a lot of unexpected work. Everything was custom made; all of the furniture was produced with a maker in Nicaragua out of local timber. We also commissioned artists and makers from California, briefed to evoke Latin America in designs for furniture, ceramics and lighting.'

For Steven Johanknecht, it's the diversity of their projects that he finds so successful and fulfilling. 'We can

be working on a hotel and then really get into someone's personal home, so that they end up being really grateful for that, finding the right mix that you know they will live with for a long time.'

Alonso picks up the theme as we're sitting in his office above the main design studio: 'The way we approach every project is about the close collaboration between designer and maker. There is no handing off a drawing to someone without actually working on the project or piece together: the maker has as much of a say on the outcome of the project. So there's the respect for how things are made, allowing for the maker to have their hand in it.'

The Commune HQ is accessed via a leafy entrance set back off North Robertson Avenue in West Hollywood, in an old stone building that was once home to the Hollywood Foreign Press. Once through the doors, your eyes are drawn to the walls, which are covered with visuals of planned projects, interiors, products and inspirations - yet all instilled with a sense of calm.

The quietly impressive, visually arresting display continues in Alonso's office, where creative inspirations, recent projects, visual moodboards and vintage design references abound. To prove that the surrounding walls aren't just for show, he gets up from his desk and points out a particular list on the wall. 'My dear friend Alex



For Steven Johanknecht, right, it's the diversity of the projects that Commune undertakes that he finds so fulfilling. Left: a materials moodboard for an interiors project

Calderwood (the late co-founder of Ace Hotels) asked me to do something for a magazine he was curating – it was called *The Golden Rules of Artist Collaboration*.¹ The full list reveals much about the Commune outlook:

1. Good intentions bring great results.
2. Allow the time and space for dreaming and exploration.
3. Define the parameters from the get go.
4. Make sure you say what you need clearly.
5. Accidents are not always a bad thing – go with it.
6. Process is king – and treat it as such.
7. Somebody has to do the dirty work and make things happen.
8. Allow a margin for error.
9. No one should ever work for free – ever.
10. It's always what's best for the project.
11. Bad timing is a killer.
12. No agents or lawyers in the studio.
13. Check your ego at the door.

'Those are basically the rules I feel you have to follow for a successful collaboration,' states Alonso, adding that the skills he has developed through his career are largely down to the experience of his early years at art school. 'I didn't consider myself to be good enough – so I guess I'm the frustrated artist. But I was always able to understand process, and what an artist requires and respecting it, because I didn't have it myself. I've been successful with collaboration because I'm always watching out for the artist, understanding what's needed in the room and when it isn't. So I think I've been successful at getting the best from the artists a lot of the time in commercial situations. I didn't have the skills myself, but I developed

an understanding. It's been 30 years since I started doing this – it's second nature and my favorite thing to do.'

It's this intuition and empathy that has brought Commune many plaudits. 'It can be a really rich experience if you have respect for the work,' says Alonso. 'A lot of people want something from an artist; their intentions aren't always the best. They want something for marketing or promotions – or want something for their own benefit or their own ego, because the association makes them feel better or stronger – and all those things add up to a scenario where someone is unhappy in the end. It's only successful when both parties are happy, excited and proud of the result.'

Having intended to visit previously but always finding their schedules wouldn't permit it, Alonso and Johanknecht finally attended their first IFAM in 2017. Primarily there to observe and understand how the market operates, they found it hard not to be sucked in by the enthusiasm and energy of the occasion – not to mention the creative talent. 'You always learn,' says Alonso. 'It's a great place to [be able to] geographically place things: you learn that the best beading is in South Africa, or the best embroidery is in India, for example. A lot of these things you already know, but it's really nice to see it all in one place – and a really good representation of it. And to see the different levels of what is represented there: some of it is more naive in nature and some of it is incredibly developed and refined. I like that span.'

There is a clear message that comes out of Commune: seek out the best makers and collaborate with them. 'There was no way to do our work without the involvement of others who have creative talent – and the result is nothing without a successful process.'

It could be their 14th golden rule...
communedesign.com

