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Gray

PACIFIC NORTHWEST DESIGN

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The GRAY Awards

DESIGN CHAMPIONS

International design icons honor the most
outstanding designs in the Pacific Northwest

ALL-STAR JUDGING PANEL

★ Deborah Berke ★ Commune ★ James Corner ★
Olivia Kim ★ Ingo Maurer ★ Karim Rashid
★ Philippe Starck ★ Vicente Wolf ★

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COMMUNE

Written by **AMANDA ZURITA**

JUDGING THE 2017 GRAY AWARDS WAS A NEW EXPERIENCE FOR ROMAN ALONSO AND STEVEN JOHANKNECHT,

founders and principals of the Los Angeles design firm Commune. Previously, they'd evaluated student projects and served in mentorship roles, but for the GRAY Awards, the duo were called upon to review the work of their peers—a role with added pressure. "I count Kengo Kuma as one of my heroes," Alonso says, referencing the Japanese architect who designed a luxurious Portland-area spec home, one of the projects submitted for awards consideration (see pg. 68). "It was interesting to see the different levels of experience competing against each other," he says.

Alonso and Johanknecht established Commune in 2004, fusing their backgrounds in art history, retail design, and communications into

a multidisciplinary firm that works across architecture, interior design, graphic design, and brand management. The firm's thoughtful projects include the award-winning American Trade Hotel in Panama City, Opening Ceremony's conceptual Tokyo retail space, and the Ace Hotel locations in LA, Palm Springs, and Chicago. "We look at things in a very holistic way," says Alonso. "We answer a lot of programming and practical issues through design." This ethos is most apparent in the kaleidoscopic Ace in downtown LA, carved out of the 1927 Union Arts building and featuring both a 1,600-seat Spanish Gothic-style theater and a rooftop bar. Commune revamped the old building in a way that honors its history and existing infrastructure and nods to its new life with of-the-moment details. "For us, things date well when they strike a good balance of old and new, classic

and unexpected, and when there's a good mix of styles," Alonso notes. "A project shouldn't say too much of one thing."

The duo tend to look well past design trends, figuring that once a style has established a solid media presence, it's time to move on. Commune's residential spaces in particular are both contemporary and timeless in their use of vintage furniture alongside more modern textiles. More than anything, the homes feel lived in and individualized—a theme that Alonso and Johanknecht see on the rise. "People are becoming less interested in creating overly decorated environments and more interested in making collected environments," says Alonso. "As clients grow more informed and have a greater hand in the design process, we're going to see more personality infused into spaces." ✱

The reception desk and
guestroom (below) at
the Ace Hotel Chicago.
OPPOSITE FROM LEFT:
A residence in Paris;
designers Roman Alonso
and Steven Johanknecht,
founders of Commune.

