

Commune

Human Being
Feature

Los Angeles

Photography
Jake Michaels

Essay
Tag Christof



Commune is fresh off a well-deserved win at the Cooper Hewitt National Design Awards, receiving this year’s highest honor for interior design. Its recognition signals at least one important shift in the way we think about interiors: dogmatic, high-minded minimalism is no longer seen as the only pinnacle of good taste. Commune may be the first practice to succeed in combining the warmth of the tousel, improvised, lived-in interiors made so chic by the likes of *apartamento*, with a degree of measured formality suitable for more public spaces and fitting for these more self-conscious times.

Though its various practitioners come from around the world, Commune is bound tightly to Southern California and is today on the vanguard of what the region’s rich design tradition will mean for the future. From Neutra and the Eameses to the cheeky programmatic architecture of icons like Randy’s Donuts, it’s been a long time since L.A. style has meant anything particularly new. Commune is not only helping to change that, their highly collaborative practice is a decisive break with the starchitect model that is rampant even in interior design—especially in fame-obsessed Los Angeles.

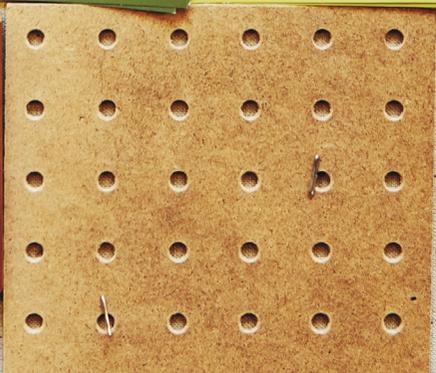
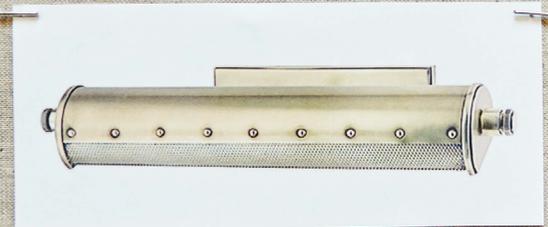
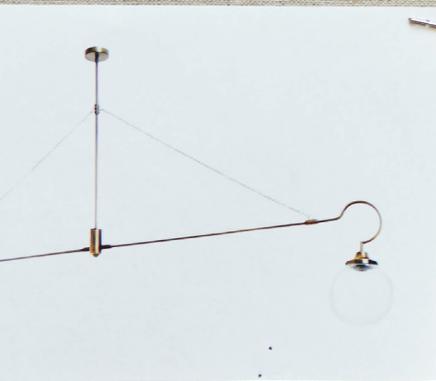
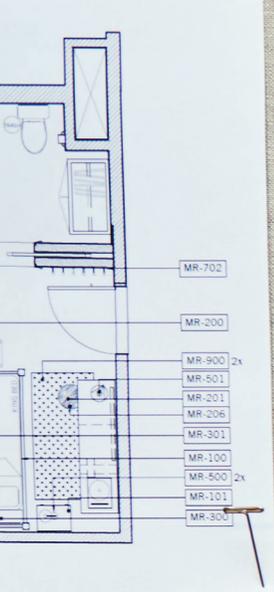
The National Design Awards’ jury says that “Commune is noted for its eclectic assemblages that work in harmony with their surroundings, while paying homage to historical, traditional, and international design.” And they do it holistically, going far beyond the scope of traditional interior design to create everything from ceramics, graphics, textiles, branding concepts, and furniture. Their collaborative spirit extends beyond their own studio when needed, too. For instance, they’ve recently teamed up with venerable English furniture maker George Smith, one of very few such companies still producing in Great Britain.

Commune Partners
 Roman Alonso
 Pamela Shamshiri
 Steven Johanknecht



The studio's most well-known works are probably Ace Hotel's two Southern California locations: the dazzling deco DTLA landmark and its Palm Springs outpost, The Ace Hotel & Swim Club. The former was a sweeping, whimsical renovation of a United Artists theatre originally built at the height of Hollywood's Golden Age and is now major standout in the crowded L.A. hotel scene. The latter has arguably done more than any other project to restore Palm Springs' former glory as the world's most stylish desert oasis—no small feat, considering its bones were once an anonymous old Howard Johnson motel.

Roman Alonso	Pamela Shamshiri	Steven Johanknecht
Hometown: Caracas, Venezuela	Hometown: Tehran, Iran	Hometown: Los Angeles, California
Current residence: Los Angeles, California	Current residence: Los Angeles, California	Current residence: A cottage in Silverlake
Drink of choice: Casa Dragones Tequila	Drink of choice: Casa Dragones Tequila	Drink of choice: A nice Médoc
Coffee style: No coffee. I'm a green tea guy.	Coffee style: Cappuccino	Coffee style: Half-caffiene with soy milk
Favorite meal: Steak frites with a side of avocado.	Favorite meal: Steak frites	Favorite meal: Filet mignon with a side of spinach
Favorite book: I've read Joan Didion's <i>Play it as it Lays</i> and <i>White Album</i> more times than any other books.	Favorite book: <i>Five California Architects</i> by Esther McCoy, an architecture critic also known as Mother Modern	Favorite book: <i>Just Kids</i> by Patti Smith or <i>The Warhol Diaries</i> by Pat Hackett
Favorite album: Joni Mitchell's <i>Blue</i> and David Bowie's <i>Young Americans</i> are right up there.	Favorite album: Django Reinhardt's <i>Djangology</i> or Radiohead's <i>OK Computer</i>	Favorite album: <i>Best of Dave Brubeck</i> or Marvin Gaye's <i>What's Going On</i>
Primary mode of transportation: Mini Cooper S	Primary mode of transportation: Black on black Land Rover LR4	Primary mode of transportation: BMW



Congratulations on the Cooper Hewitt National Design Award this year. How'd you celebrate?

Pamela Shamshiri: I left work, picked up my kids from school (this is an occasion!) and we screamed in the car and talked about the White House and Cooper Hewitt on the ride home.

Roman Alonso: We haven't had time to celebrate! We'll be together for the awards ceremony in NYC, so we'll see...

Steven Johanknecht: It's really exciting to be recognized for doing something we love and for work we're passionate about.

A major part of what makes Commune so contemporary is the way in which you work—the studio is multidisciplinary and highly collaborative. Does that ever make it hard to get work done?

RA: Not at all. Our process forces us to work in a highly collaborative way and to look at problems from all sides. It is the only way I've ever worked.

PS: It's the only way we know how to work! My background is in production design which is extremely collaborative and requires large teams of designers and craftsmen working holistically on one narrative. We work in the same way. I would say it is labor intensive, at times inefficient, and gets complicated with all the personalities. But in the end, the result is richer and has more depth.

SJ: Time is the only thing that stands in the way. We love the process of bringing a project to life.

You've been successful at designing a range of objects in-house, from ceramics to graphics. Do you think we generally tend to silo disciplines artificially?

PS: I think there are people who are meant to be specialists. I'm so grateful for those amazing minds. I also think there are people who edit, curate and put things together or create across many disciplines. There needs to be room for both kinds of minds.

Irene Neuwirth, Los Angeles, California 2014
This retail space on Melrose Place is a good example of one of the 'experiences' the practice aims to create—it's bright, convivial and feels nothing like a store. There's even a functioning kitchen, with a dining table Commune designed for Environment Furniture. Project photography: Spencer Lowell



Ace Downtown, Los Angeles, California 2014. The Ace's sun-drenched terrace is now a definitive L.A. hotspot. Its Spanish Gothic building was first opened in 1927 as the United Artists Theater.



SJ: Design is about seeing and studying. It is dangerous (and boring) to get locked into a particular look or category.

RA: I think people generally feel more comfortable with labels. We've never been those people.

PS: More recently, there was a swing towards the "silo-ing" of disciplines. I think we are entering a time where the Renaissance mind is being celebrated again. Technology and access to information must have everything to do with this recent shift.

What do each of you bring to the practice, not just in terms of specialization, but in terms of personality?

RA: Each of us grew up in a different culture. I grew up in Venezuela, the son of Cuban exiles—that comes with its own set of references. Pam immigrated with her family from Tehran in the 70s and Steven grew up in up-state New York and is of Scandinavian descent. We couldn't come from more distinctive backgrounds. Plus, we have such varied life experiences. Pam traveled the world as a successful production designer and Steven experienced the fashion demimonde in New York in the 70s and I in the 80s. All this stuff forms you. Our perspectives are very different but somehow we come together aesthetically and philosophically quite well.

SJ: We take on different roles at different times. There's one who takes action or initiates, one who reflects and gives feedback, one who disagrees or challenges, or one who agrees or compliments. It's great to have trusted business partners to turn to.

From Commune's excellent monograph: "In New York, you must look up that ladder and climb it to achieve success. In California, all you have to do is look out onto the horizon and anything is possible." Why is anything possible in California?

SJ: California is the Wild West. There is a freedom in its heritage, and you can create whatever you want.

PS: We have the horizon—that's pretty much a clean slate every day. It's the land of reinvention, people change quickly and have the most bizarre businesses and careers. It's true that anything goes here. You are not judged and there isn't just one path to where you want to go. Pop architecture, early deconstructivist Frank Gehry happened here. It could only have happened here really.

RA: Yes, it's still the Wild West around here. We don't have the same rules and people are not looking over one another's shoulders so much. Plus, there is an openness that is inherent in the landscape and weather that liberates you.

What are your big hopes for the future of Los Angeles?

RA: Public transportation!

SJ: L.A. is an inspiring place to live and work. Great things are happening here. I hope parks, arts, neighborhoods and transportation continue to evolve, improve and innovate.

PS: I recently read a love letter to Los Angeles written by Frank Gehry. He thanked the city for the freedoms it afforded him.

"There weren't a lot of rules. There weren't a lot of spotlights and there weren't a lot of people watching. There was a lot of freedom for a creative person to explore ideas, make things. Anywhere else in the world, I would have had difficulty taking the route you afforded me."

My wish for L.A., in this time of growth and change is the same as Gehry's: keep that sense of freedom, uniqueness, and Wild West, anything goes attitude protected and alive—the collective experience must somehow be continually addressed. On a more brief note, I really want the Los Angeles River project to happen.

Interiors are the one element of spatial design that seem to date the most quickly. What's Commune's philosophy on the tem-



The Elder Statesman, West Hollywood, California 2015.
The store's airy interior is complete with alder wood floors.



The Elder Statesman, West Hollywood, California 2015. Like every good L.A. business should, its exterior comes complete with a neon sign.



porality of its designs? Do you intend these spaces to be somewhat static or are you comfortable with them being purely of-their-time?

RA: We don't consider our interiors temporary and want our work to have a long life. Many of our first projects still feel great.

PS: I hate waste and I'm trying to be more and more conscious of what we put out there in the world. For example, I avoid plastic as much as possible. If it's not vintage, I won't do it.

RA: We try not to do work that feels stuck in a particular time. Spaces evolve over time and sometimes need to be freshened up. Good work usually stands the test of time—a new layer or evolution is usually welcome and exciting.

SJ: We don't really have a style we impose on our clients. We like to help them develop one of their own and so we don't fall into trends because we are working from a more internal place.

PS: On that note, the residences have to be as timeless as possible. We strive for that and try to make the houses look like they are all in their original states—as if they were never touched but somehow have all the comforts of today. With our furniture, it is a collection that's meant to grow and stay with you throughout time—they're heirlooms. Our hope is that people buy design icons that will last forever and limit new purchases that will not age well with time or hold value. On the commercial front, we strive for timeless as well and plan for patina but really, the life expectancy of commercial projects are just not as long. So, occasionally and selectively, it's ok to tap into a small trend here and there. We always talk about iconic restaurants of our time—like Le Deux was for L.A.. I like the idea of a restaurant or hotel being an important moment in time.

Every project is different, but how do you generally go from zero to choosing a direction for a space?

SJ: We spend a lot of effort on research—and on other considerations. Clients, existing

The Durham Hotel, Durham,
North Carolina 2015
New midcentury swish in a
1968 building that was once
a savings and loan bank.



architecture, budget, overall experience. It usually comes together and the right answers just reveal themselves.

RA: Before we start we go through a process of getting into the client's head. We ask a lot of questions and do a bit of therapy. We also try to take into account the existing architecture and do a lot of research—we are book fiends. We come to a direction together with the client. We make them do a bit of work. We feel it's the only way to maintain integrity and infuse the project with personality.

PS: The answers always come from the city, neighborhood, building and of course the DNA of our clients. All of those elements dictate a narrative and an experience that we want to create. Then we just design into that experience.

How do you prototype?

PS: Its always different and very dependent on the artist or craftsman's process.

SJ: Sometimes a full scale model or mock up, sometimes just some tape on the wall!

How do you resolve creative conflict amongst one another or on your teams?

PS: Lots of looking, talking and compromise. We pin up on walls to discuss and usually in the pin up—its very clear what is right for the project.

RA: We talk things out. We are very transparent and clear in our communication. Ultimately we care about each other as people and take care of one another.

SJ: We usually agree on outcomes. It is important to back up your position with thought and reason. We respect the final vote.

What's the hardest thing you've had to agree on?

RA: I honestly can't think of anything!

SJ: Office seating charts and what to throw out in an office cleanup.

PS: Staffing and scheduling.

Has technology changed your practice much since Commune first started?

PS: Absolutely. It continues to change it every day. The world is smaller in a lot of ways. We can work more remotely and find talented people making things all over the world. Most recently, GoToMeeting has changed the way we do meetings and has reduced travel. It is extremely freeing.

SJ: We are more efficient and the computer programs need to be upgraded more often. But we still start with books, research and gut instinct.

RA: The iPhone has changed the world. That includes Commune.

Do you regularly turn down projects? Are there types of projects Commune categorically wouldn't work on?

SJ: We turn down many things. Some clients aren't the right fit for one reason or another.

RA: We turn down projects because of timing or because we either don't feel a connection to it on some level or feel we can't make a substantial contribution.

PS: We very regularly have to turn work down due to our schedule and limited office size. It can be very stressful. There isn't anything we categorically wouldn't work on.

Is there any one project that you're particularly proud of?

RA: I'm very proud of our creative partnership with Ace Hotels, which is of a very personal nature and is now almost 10 years strong. The projects keep getting better as we continue to learn and grow up together.

SJ: I'm proud of our new furniture collection with George Smith. They have amazing craftsmanship and we made a collection infused with our own attitude. Our product collaborations are opportunities to work with interesting companies and craftspeople—and to reach a different audience from our other projects.

PS: Two projects come to mind, for me. First, The Ace Hotel Palm Springs because it was such a specific experience and demographic we went after and truly, I think our renegade attitude changed things for Palm Springs, for hotel design, for organic elements, for camping, for California. It was so early on and very timely. Also, there was a sense of freedom and "we can do anything attitude" both at Ace and at Commune. We were both such young companies. We were all willing to take risks and no one thought inside the box. None of us knew fire codes, or cared about how other people did hotels. If we wanted to tent the room, we would just plow ahead and figure it out. It wasn't ever 'no one has ever done that,' 'its not fire retardant,' 'what about the plugs?' We just did it. Second, the restoration of our own house—Rudolph Schindler's Lechner House, built between 1946 and 1948, has been such an eye opening learning experience for me. I feel like I got to undo and reconstruct with a masterful architect, right beside me, at home. The "high design" with "low materials" thing that Schindler does so well is a lesson in not only geometry but also puts budget in its place. Its rarely about budget for me: the client and the project are much more important.

Commune wins its dream commission: an existing space anywhere in the world, to redesign with unlimited resources. What would it be and what would you do?

RA: A fully sustainable, truly creative, retirement community on the central California coast for my friends and I. I'm 50—there isn't that much time left.

SJ: Yes, more generally, to redefine community for diverse, intellectual, creative, and health-minded people.

PS: I would love to design a community that exists in a more permanent and conscious way on the earth, by using permaculture principles, water harvesting, growing food, etc. All of this with good, nurturing design, respect for its location and history and with a strong sense of community at the core of it. "We are all in this together." That's an Ace sticker quote.

