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Roman Alonso and Steven Johanknecht, principals at the AD100 firm Commune Design, were catalysts in the transformation of Los Angeles into a global cultural hub. Now living in a pair of midcentury residential towers in Los Feliz, the dynamic duo are pioneering a whole new frontier—quintessentially California-style apartment living.
the time designers Roman Alonso and Steven Johanknecht arrived in Los Angeles—in 1998 and 2002, respectively—the city was still a relatively sleepy industry town, however high-profile in industry. This was before a host of major New York and European art galleries rushed to open L.A. outlets; before elite fashion brands started cooking up reasons to head west for splashy parties in hip warehouses; and before a cavalcade of international star architects on the order of Renzo Piano, Peter Zumthor, and Herzog & de Meuron rolled into town.

In the past two decades, L.A. has emerged as a genuine hub of global culture, beckoning wave upon wave of fresh transplants from around the world. Alonso and Johanknecht, through their work at the multidisciplinary ADX00 firm Commune Design, have been prime agitators in this metamorphosis, ambassadors for the new Los Angeles, championing local talent and evangelizing a widely influential vision of California cool. From their groundbreaking work for Ace and other hotel groups to their wide-ranging forays into product and graphic design to their long-standing collaborations with established luminaries and young Turks of art and design—think Allan Allen,
Adria Silverman, Stina Bitters, and others—the Commune principals continue to spread the gospel of sophisticated, but unpretentious bohemia chic.

While their work evokes images of sharing beaches and bungalows, it may come as a surprise to learn that Alonso and Johndroeit have made their own L.A. homes in a matched pair of 1966 apartment towers in Los Feliz, hard by Griffith Park, a sprawling woodland of rugged mountain trails, wilderness areas, and famous attractions such as the Deco-era Griffith Observatory, the Greek Theatre, and the Hollywood sign. "Basically, I live in an apartment building with a doorman. It's a park," Alonso says of the appeal of his 830-square-foot, one-bedroom residence. "I look at nature every day, I'm in nature every day. It's just that I don't have to take care of it. I'm too lazy to maintain a whole house."

Johndroeit makes a similar case for the benefits of apartment life. "I lived in a cozy Tudor cottage for a dozen years, but I wanted a different experience. I like the efficiency of an apartment, and I like being up high—it gives you a different relationship to the landscape," he explains, describing the panoramic views of the San Gabriel Mountains and the downtown L.A. skyline that unfold from the balcony of his 1,200-square-foot, two-bedroom home.

It's tempting to imagine a Lucy-and-Ethel-style sitcom scenario, with the two designers screaming at each other across the courtyard from their high perches in the twin towers while hanging laundry on a clothesline. The reality, of course, is quite no farcical. The principals' personal and professional lives have entwined in intricate ways for decades, from the time the two initially met while working at Barneys New York, during the glory days of the luxury retail emporium in the late 1980s and early 90s. Their apartments tell the story of their remarkably fertile relationship through artifacts of their past and current projects, design details lifted from the Commune lexicon, and an array of artworks and curiosities with backstories specific to one designer or the other.

The scale's microscopic decor in Alonso's residence includes a mid-century-flavored dining set designed by POC (friend of Commune) Michael Boyd, tables and sculptures by Alan Allan, Indian carpets from the estate of the legendary decorative arts wizard Tony Duquette, a sofa from Commune's collection for George Smith as well as lighting from the firm's
“We always find a place for great things,” Alonso declares. “If we love it, it works.”

The world of Johanknecht strikes many of the same notes found in the home of his confidante—a color-saturated bedroom; a generous built-in daybed surrounded by books; and examples of work by Allen Silverman, Pogue, and other frequent Commune collaborators. The massive gilt-framed painting of a shipwreck on Long Island that commands the living room was a gift from Johanknecht’s grandmother. The painting throws everything off a little, which I like,” the designer says. “This place is my California spin on a midcentury apartment. Midcentury meets midcentury, both bathed in the light and colors of the L.A. landscape. I wanted the apartment to feel lived-in but not fussy or overly designed,” he adds.

Naturally, everything in Johanknecht’s and Alonso’s homes does indeed feel considered—the two have spent their entire careers engaged in the act of considering. Asked about the specific criteria for selecting the materials, colors, artworks, furnishings, and objects de vertu that inhabit their enchanting homes, Alonso breaks it down to one simple imperative: “We always find a place for great things. If we love it, it works.”
“This place is my California spin on a modernist apartment, Bauhaus meets midcentury,” says Johanknecht.