

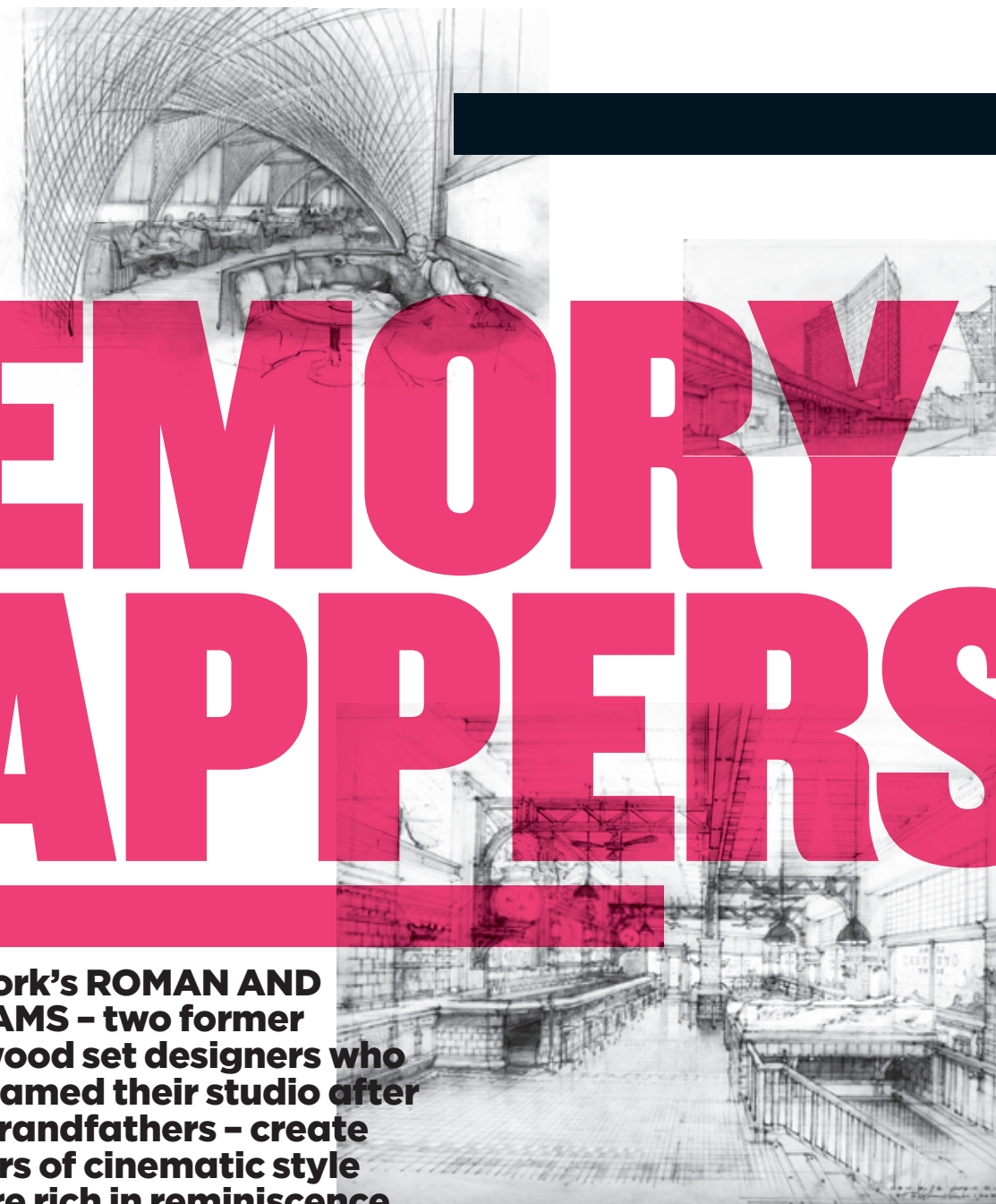


ROBIN STANDEFER (LEFT) AND STEPHEN ALESCH, A.K.A. ROMAN AND WILLIAMS, IN THEIR NEW YORK STUDIO. PHOTO DOUGLAS FRIEDMAN

MEMORY MAPPERS

New York's ROMAN AND WILLIAMS - two former Hollywood set designers who have named their studio after their grandfathers - create interiors of cinematic style that are rich in reminiscence.

WORDS SHONQUIS MORENO
PHOTOS COURTESY OF ROMAN AND WILLIAMS



MATERIALS ARE THE CHARACTER ACTORS OF PROJECTS BY ROMAN AND WILLIAMS



Scene One: Point of View

P.O.V. a journalist

A frigid January day, just north of Chinatown. The door of a dingy steel lift opens onto a wall that reads 'Roman and Williams' in plain type. Beside it, a heavy, weathered wooden door leads into another time and place. Where and when – it's difficult to say.

Picture the austere white workstations and tinny task lamps of the typical Manhattan architecture office. Then picture the office of designers Stephen Alesch and Robin Standefer, a.k.a. Roman and Williams Buildings & Interiors, which could be the set of a classic film noir. A study in lush materials, it consists of walnut surfaces, original oak floors, reclaimed factory glass and myriad artefacts of better-looking days gone by. Product catalogues and spec books spill from floor-to-ceiling shelves in the rear, and the lived-in textures of vintage furnishings found at flea markets like Clignancourt and Brimfield warm every room. Looming over cans of Plasti-Dip and scribbled-on scraps of trace paper in his office, a Louvre-like profusion of Alesch's paintings – moody horizons beside the ominous, tangled silhouettes of power lines – crowds one wall. The dark, fogged canvases are akin to his architectural drawings and, indeed, to the office itself, both of which recall the monumental soft focus of Hugh Ferriss's book *The Metropolis of Tomorrow*. It is a space filled with things that are well loved, well used or both. At first, it appears to be a rich confusion of places, historical periods and objects, but actually it's a curatorial exercise of great clarity and discipline. Although it's tough to put your finger on precisely which places or periods it recalls, they are all soothingly familiar and coolly glamorous, forming a studied combination that projects visitors into a reassuringly soft-focus future.

Before working on films, where they met in the 1990s as production designers, Alesch trained as an architect and Standefer studied fine arts and art history. Today their work conjures as much James Joyce, Ayn Rand or Raymond Chandler as it does *Zoolander*. Founded in 2002, Roman and Williams hit its stride quickly with such blockbusters as the only renovation of the Royalton Hotel lobby since Philippe Starck designed it in 1988; the industrial-chic Ace Hotel; the rooms, restaurants and nightclubs of the Standard Hotel; a line of plumbing fixtures and fittings for Waterworks; a line of furniture for Design Within Reach; and

a handful of celebrity residences. By now, they're dug into their second ground-up architectural commission: a 30-storey hotel in midtown Manhattan.

Scene Two: Drawing by Hand

Although they do use CAD, Alesch still draws everything by hand. Their practice is geared towards the user and the experience instead of the object and the design. To describe their practice and their approach, they use the words 'banal', 'mundane', 'modest' and 'grounded' – in the best possible way. They're not interested in creating spaces and objects that people have never seen before.

'We are decidedly not focused on being theoretical,' says Standefer, who doesn't mind talking when it's called for.

'We're not always thinking about reinvention. We're not trying to make a building look as if it's a dynamic flying machine that doesn't fly,' agrees Alesch, who is articulate but would probably rather be drawing. 'That's romantic and naive.'

Often, their stories have to do with memory. Romantic in its own way perhaps, but not a fetishization of the past and certainly not

nostalgic, Standefer insists. 'We're interested in how to evolve what already exists.'

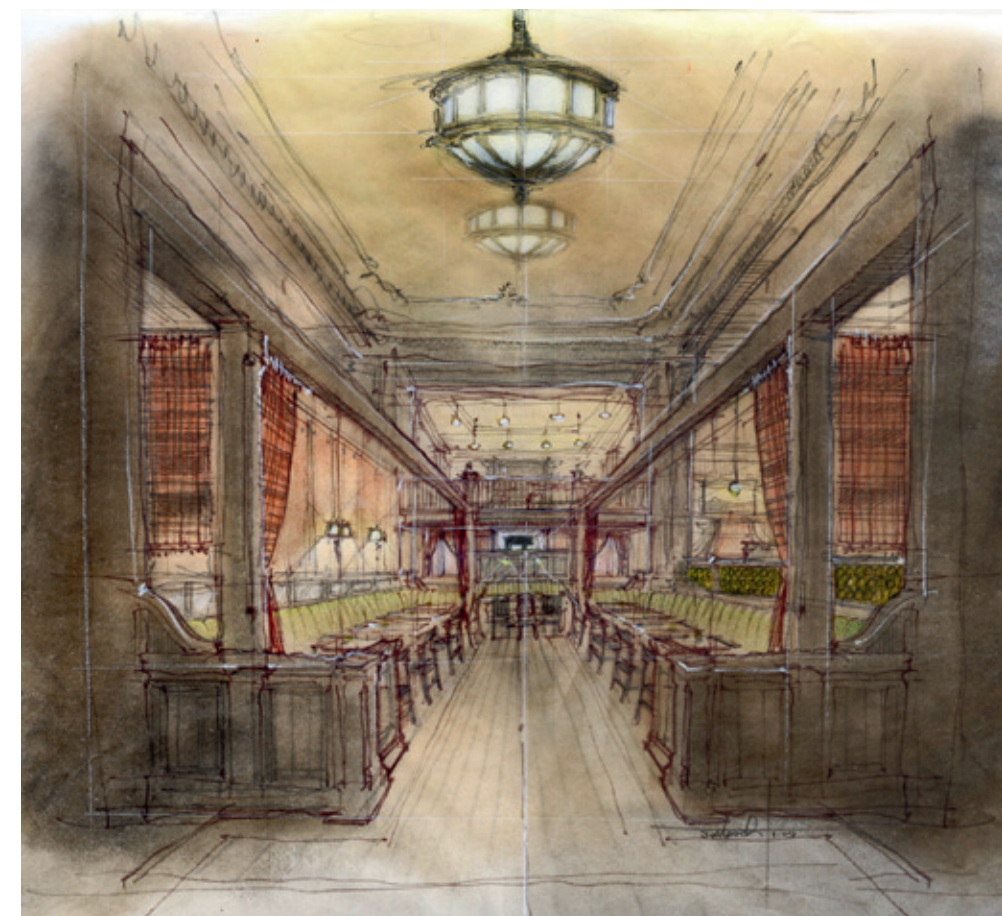
Scene Three: Sightlines

Materials are the character actors of Roman and Williams' projects. The designers recruit a ranging crew of specialists – in ornamental metalsmithing, millwork, casting, carving – to achieve the degree of detail and tactility they want. Look at a paint schedule for one of their projects and you may find 30 shades of white along with a litany of other finishes. They use everything from porcelainized steel, vintage brass and glass to leather panelling, travertine, moulded plywood and, above all, timber. Recently they used brick to generate rhythm and texture inside and out of chef Andrew Carmellini's The Dutch in SoHo, as well as in their first from-scratch building at 211 Elizabeth Street. Irish masons laid handcrafted bricks on the façade, along with custom cornices, soldier courses and bevelled corners. For the Standard, the brick they used was glazed. 'We love the challenge of using an earnest, mundane material,' Standefer says, 'and then constantly changing it, using it in unique ways.' >>>

ROMAN AND WILLIAMS' ATMOSPHERIC STUDIO COULD BE A FILM NOIR SET. PHOTO MICHAEL MUNDY



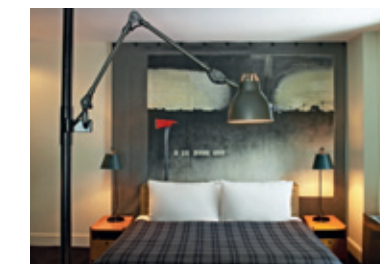
IN THE ACE HOTEL, ORIGINAL ELEMENTS MERGE WITH INTERIOR STYLES FROM SEVERAL DECADES. PHOTOS ERIC LAIGNEL



ACE HOTEL

Set in a 1904 building (once the Breslin Hotel), the Ace Hotel exemplifies Roman and Williams' layered, referential approach to design. In the lobby, the architects played up original features (such as a coffered ceiling and a mosaic floor), using them as a backdrop for furnishings, including 1970s-style sofas, that evoke several eras. The lobby bar uses an entire room (reclaimed from a Park Avenue apartment) as a found object. Hotel rooms resemble 'funky apartments', complete with Smeg fridges, vintage record players and a selection of vinyl.

LOCATION New York City
COMPLETED 2009





The materiality is always compelling, but set design taught Standefer and Alesch to let the object give way to the idea. 'It trains you away from intensive narcissism, because the story is the most important thing,' Alesch says. But to compose the story they study the interior through a cinematic lens. 'We're not totally a form-follows-function firm. We're probably a beauty-first firm,' confesses Standefer. But they still privilege the experience over any individual element. 'Sometimes I say: let's look at how the person is going to enter that room and what they're going to see from each position. Like a film frame, let's draw a box. We like the sensual experience, but sightlines – a big conversation in film – are still a big deal for us.'

Scene Four: Va Va Boom Room

The designers cherry-pick their inspirations from multiple sources before layering them meticulously. They describe the voluptuous Boom Boom Room on the 18th floor of the Standard, which straddles the elevated High Line Park, as a tree house crossed with the interior of a Bentley: all hot light and soft focus. That said, they don't 'get eclectic' in an unfocused way; every choice – from materials to fixtures, forms and finishes – serves the initial concept. When they see a cool lighting fixture, they don't say: that's a cool lighting fixture, so let's bring it in here. 'When you set boundaries, you can get very layered within them,' says Standefer. 'We're kind of conservative in that way.' The resulting coherence comes, in part, from this rigorous, though not rigid, redaction.

It also comes from balancing restraint with abandon. 'We have two layers in our office,' Stephen muses. 'We have a fundamental layer that's strict and disciplinarian. It's anti-creative. It's not playful. It's not nihilistic. It's very conservative. And then we have a mischievous, reckless side that's playful, immature – and that doesn't really affect the fundamental architecture.'

The bespoke, sometimes handcrafted materials, disciplined editing and filmic framing serve to evoke loose memories – 1940s nightclubs, mid-century Milanese industrial design, 20th-century Nairobi, the pub architecture of the British Isles, sacred geometry – that they carefully splice together. 'It's useless to ignore what someone else has created,' Standefer says with some impatience. 'It's a game you're going to lose, because you can't just keep repeating things: yesterday's over, yesterday's over...'



In the Breslin, a restaurant at the Ace Hotel, Roman and Williams made three private booths starring leather-panelled walls and vintage plaid blankets in the role of curtains. The booths resemble an old-school 'snug', a niche for women who wanted to drink without the stigma of doing so in public. Most guests won't recognize such vague allusions to history, but that's not the intention. The subtle hints have served their purpose like the images of a dream, understood only while we're sleeping. Instead of simply recovering our past, the interiors they produce suggest a fresh life – untapped, pulsing through the surfaces and waiting to be lived.

Scene Five: Wednesday Nights

So, these are not Hollywood stylists with a retro shtick. At their best, interiors by Roman and Williams are immersive and transportive – far too detailed, meticulous, imaginative and precise to be formulaic. Many of these spaces could be experiential Rorschach tests: in a single interior, one person may discern the geometry of a Gee's Bend quilt from Alabama, while another sees a ship's rigging glowing beneath multiple full moons.

The lobby of the Ace Hotel resembles the duo's residential work, and no wonder: they applied themselves as rigorously as ever 'to making a big living room where people can hang out'. As Standefer puts it: 'There are fewer theoretical and conceptual ramblings in there than when I brushed my teeth this morning.' Most likely it is this relative simplicity that keeps the space almost continuously animated and still surprises them over a year later.

'The bar is tiny. There was no DJ booth... ' Standefer pauses, bemused. 'No one imagined a line of 300 people down the sidewalk trying to get in on a Wednesday night to sit around in the lobby. We had thought it would be a great, quiet place. But when you make something that doesn't feel overwrought, people notice.' Alesch nods. 'We'll make something perfect and then knock it over. You take the joy out of the design when you start to get fussy.'

'People may say, oh, you must be fussy because you're so detailed,' his partner concludes. 'But no matter how fussy a space is, we like to fuck it up.'

romanandwilliams.com



THE INTERIORS OF 211 ELIZABETH STREET FEATURE CLASSIC DETAILING, SUCH AS PARQUET FLOORS AND BLACK-PAINTED WOODWORK. PHOTO MICHAEL MUNDY

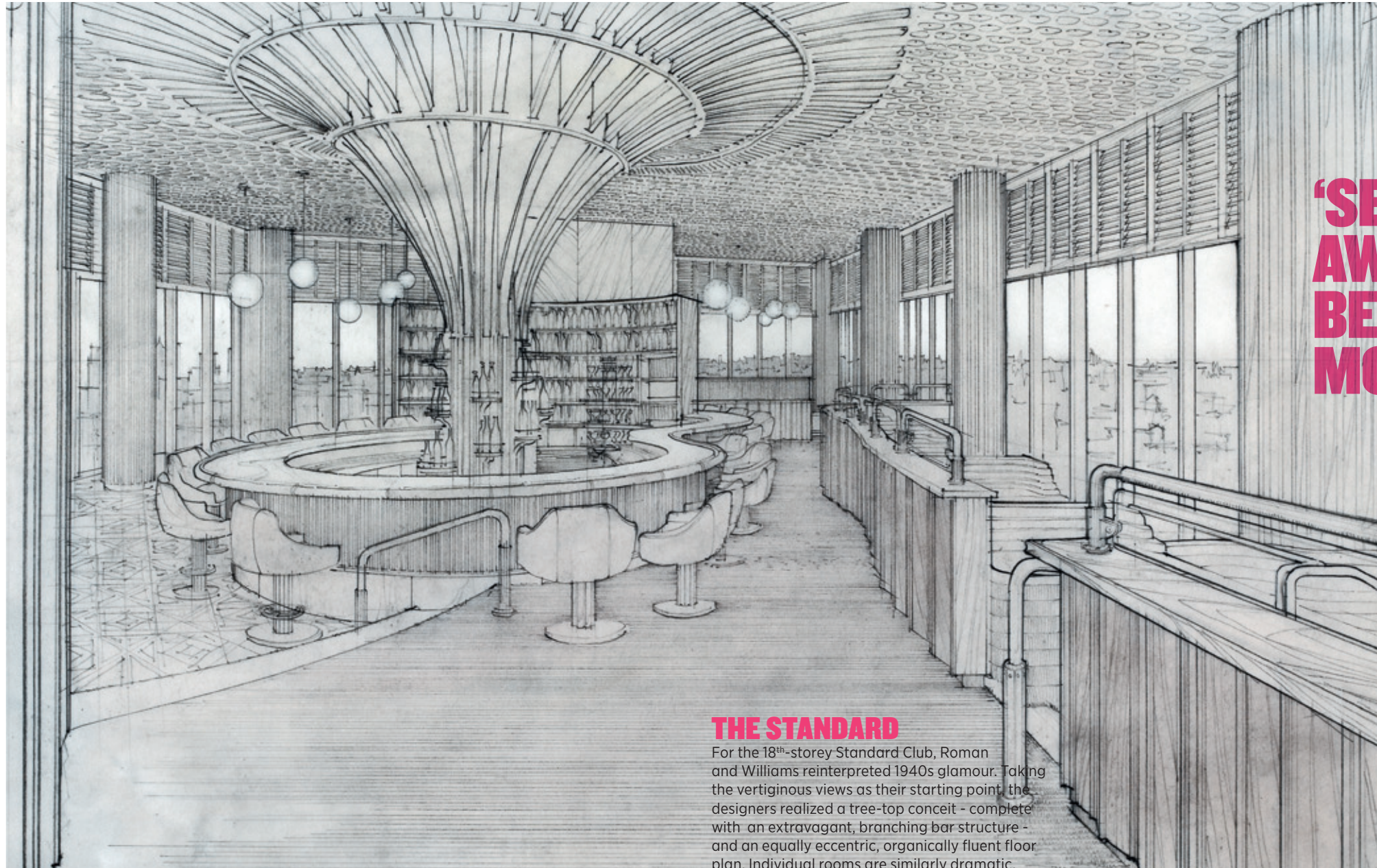
211 ELIZABETH STREET

The first entire building designed by Roman and Williams, 211 Elizabeth Street is a vernacular brick landmark constructed in the traditional way – brick by brick, by a family of Irish masons – and thus barely distinguishable from its period neighbours. The seven-storey building contains three commercial units at ground level and 15 apartments above, each with a prewar floor plan incorporating hallways and portals and tailored wooden details emphasized in glossy black paint.

LOCATION New York City
COMPLETED 2010



THE PAST IS REVIVED QUITE LITERALLY AT 211 ELIZABETH STREET, A PROJECT THAT ROMAN AND WILLIAMS BUILT USING PREWAR AESTHETICS, TECHNIQUES AND FLOOR PLANS. PHOTO IAN FREELY



‘SET DESIGN TRAINS YOU AWAY FROM NARCISSISM, BECAUSE THE STORY IS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING’



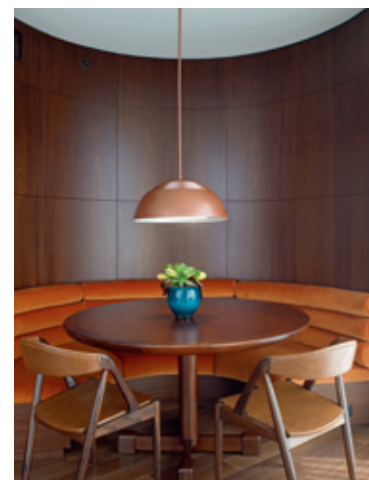
THE STANDARD

For the 18th-storey Standard Club, Roman and Williams reinterpreted 1940s glamour. Taking the vertiginous views as their starting point, the designers realized a tree-top conceit - complete with an extravagant, branching bar structure - and an equally eccentric, organically fluent floor plan. Individual rooms are similarly dramatic, with bathtubs positioned to offer unimpeded prospects through floor-to-ceiling fire-glass walls.

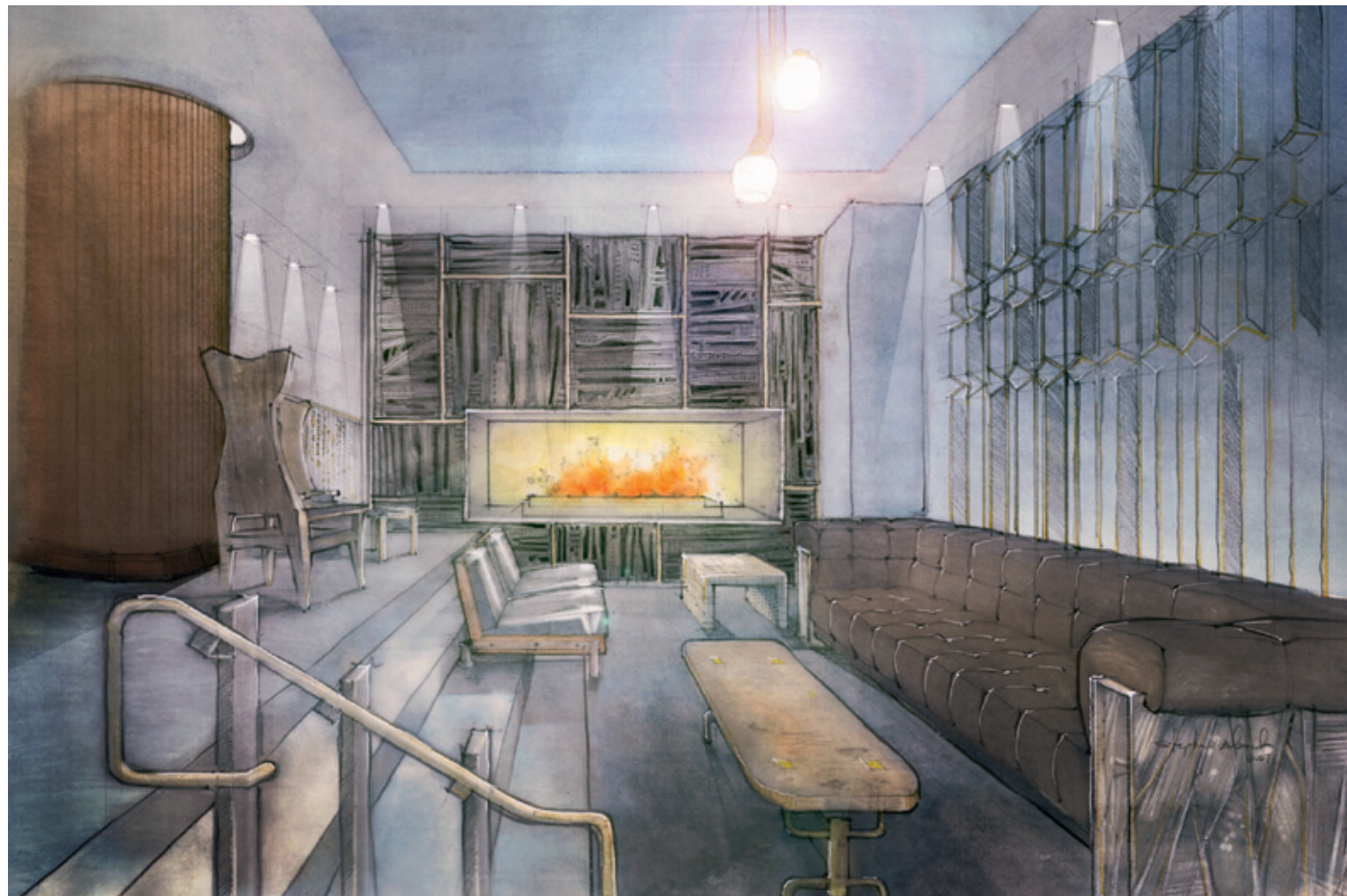
LOCATION New York City
COMPLETED 2009



WARM WOODEN TONES CONTINUE THE ORGANIC THEME IN THE BEDROOMS AND THE RESTAURANT (RIGHT).



ROMAN AND WILLIAMS GAVE THE GLAMOUR OF THE 1940S A DEEPLY DRAMATIC TWIST IN THE DESIGN OF THE STANDARD CLUB (LEFT) AND HOTEL ROOMS (ABOVE). PHOTOS ERIC LAIGNEL



IN THE RESTAURANT, ROPE STRETCHED BETWEEN TEAK FRAMES ADDS STRUCTURE, WITHOUT ADDING WEIGHT.



'WE'RE NOT A FORM-FOLLOWS-FUNCTION FIRM; WE'RE A BEAUTY-FIRST FIRM'



THE ROYALTON

In 1988, Philippe Starck's Royalton Hotel defined the genre of the boutique hotel. Eighteen years later, Roman and Williams kept aspects of his signature style, including the use of 'Royalton blue', while introducing the theme of '20th-century Nairobi'. Heavy metal furniture, thick leather, solid wood, bronze and glass give the hotel interiors a massive materiality and dark sensuality. The restaurant, open to the lobby, uses rope on teak frames to create geometric patterns that lend structure without adding weight.

LOCATION New York City
COMPLETED 2007

EXPANSES OF LEATHER, WOOD, BRONZE AND GLASS GIVE THE ROYALTON A MONUMENTAL ATMOSPHERE.
PHOTOS NIKOLAS KOENIG

