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The American Trade Hotel: Atelier Ace's latest venture gives new life to a Panama City landmark

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ADDRESS

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A cultural revolution is afoot in Panama City. No stranger to international visitors, the tropical metropolis has just welcomed a particularly special new arrival in the shape of the American Trade Hotel. Conceived and managed by Atelier Ace - the creative arm of the Ace Hotel Group, which has just scooped a Wallpaper* Design Award 2014 - in partnership with local property developers Conservatorio, the beautiful colonial hotel offers an inspired take on the city's rich heritage.

Located in the heart of Panama City's historical quarter Casco Viejo (also a UNESCO World Heritage site), the American Trade Hotel takes its name from the building it occupies. Built in 1917 and designed by Leonardo Villanueva Meyer, a leading local architect at the time, the four-storey, neo-classical building housed the American Trade Developing Company, a department store at ground level, as well as modern apartments on the upper floors.

Following a period of decline that started in the 1960s and left the neighbourhood in increasing disarray, the building became derelict and was eventually abandoned by 2000, when it was taken over by street gangs. In 2007, it was purchased by Conservatorio, who specialise in preserving and restoring historic buildings in the Casco Viejo district, with the vision of turning it into a hub for the myriad of international visitors, like it once was.

As the tallest building in the neighbourhood, opposite a green plaza, the American Trade Hotel cuts a strong figure. With floor-to-ceiling paned windows and a whitewashed exterior, the majestic building has been restored to its former glory, with lots of details thrown in for good measure. Atelier Ace enlisted its repeat design collaborators, *Commune Design*, to oversee the aesthetic aspects of the property. Inspired by the building's provenance at the crossroads of culture and trade, Commune brought together a pastiche of design influences, ranging from Vienna secessionist to Mexican modernist and Italian postmodernist.

'We found that a lot of the furnishings had to be brought in, but that was really in the spirit of the narrative; that these things were collected by the owners of the hotel, who were at one point in Austria, Italy, Mexico and Britain,' explains Commune Design partner Roman Alonso. 'The sconces [in the lobby] are more Italian, while the sofas are more English. There's custom-made furniture that evokes Mexico in the 1960s, a lot of which was inspired by the Cuban designer Clara Porset, who lived and worked in Mexico. There is also one salon, which is furnished entirely with colonial antiques that were all found.'

The same level of design attentiveness continues throughout the property. From a vintage Danish lamp paired with a palm-printed sofa in the library to Mathieu Mategot-inspired patio furniture on the terrace by the rooftop pool and the tiled, swimming hall-style fitness center, the hotel brims over with nostalgic touches. To cap things off, all 50 rooms are finished with reclaimed hardwood floors, stocked with Aesop amenities and showcase beautiful vistas of either Casco Viejo or the Panama Bay.