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Architecture

ROOMS WITH A MOD VIEW

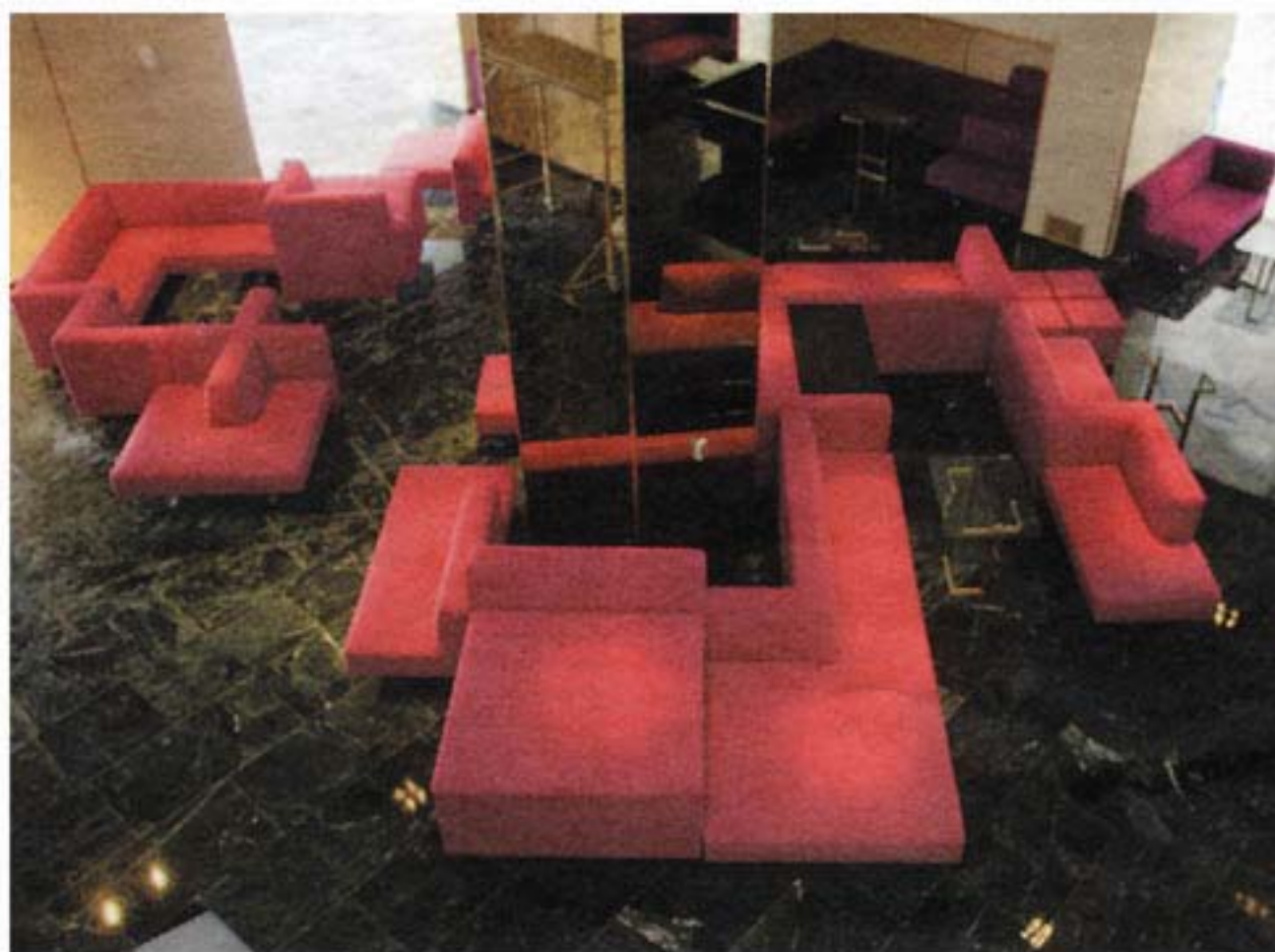
By HUGH HART

The view of downtown Los Angeles from the vibrating waterbed perched on the roof of Andre Balazs' new hotel is stunning. Arco Plaza, the Citicorp Building, the Los Angeles Central Library's ceramic tile roof and Flower Street pedways all jostle for attention, as does the twisted tower atop the phone company building that looks like something straight out of a 1950s sci-fi B movie.

"The whole thing is so Jetsons," says Balazs, marveling at the vista from the Astro Turfed outdoor bar area. "When you're up here, you see a helicopter fly past, it's just all ... it's so much more optimistic than the way New York feels right now, you know? This perspective is just remarkable."

But will people show up to enjoy the view? Balazs will find out soon enough. Working with the Santa Monica firm Koning Eizenberg Architecture, Balazs has spent the past 26 months renovating a 1955 office building at Flower and 6th streets. The 207-room Standard Downtown opens this month. Balazs is gambling that downtown Los Angeles is ready for a medium-priced hotel (rooms start at \$95) geared to hip young business travelers.

From the moment Balazs laid eyes on the 12-story building, he knew there was a hotel in the making. "I was on my way to the airport one day going back to New York, and someone told me I had to stop here, so I swung by and immediately thought it was the most stun-



In the lobby, a pink sofa has raised segments that offer perches for exhibitionists.



The room plays with "that notion of bachelor chic," owner Andre Balazs says.

A dormant 1955 building in downtown L.A. is transformed into a hotel Austin Powers would love



The hotel dresses up the 1955 building's conservative bones.

ning work," Balazs says. "What I think is so unusual about it is there's a pride of authorship, a distinguished character that you find in a lot of owner-developed buildings. It has details that I've only seen in places like Rockefeller Center."

The proud owner, Balazs soon learned, had been California oil baron and philanthropist W.M. Keck, who commissioned Claud Beelman—designer of the nearby Art Deco Garfield Building—to create the Modernist headquarters for his Superior Oil Co. The building was occupied by a bank, then lay dormant for nine years.

"Walking through the building was kind of fascinating" Balazs recalls. "Some of the offices still had desks and paper. It was like a ghost building." By the time he bought the property early in 2000, Balazs, 45, had successfully transformed several other old buildings into chic, celebrity-friendly lodgings. In 1990, he took over the legendary but decrepit Chateau Marmont on Sunset Boulevard, gradually restoring it to pristine condition.

He spent eight years overhauling a 19th century SoHo warehouse before wowing New York fashionistas with the sleek Mercer Hotel in 1998. A year later, Miami-based Architectonica gave a playfully minimalist make-over to a nondescript 1964 building Balazs had purchased on the Sunset Strip.

Rechristened the Standard, the hotel—with its upside-down sign, Andy Warhol-patterned curtains, orange bathroom fixtures and shag-carpeted lobby ceiling—has become destination lodging for fashion-forward, budget-conscious travelers.

For his new venture, Balazs wanted to apply the Standard's sly aesthetic to the new setting by dressing the building's essentially conservative bones in blasts of color, cheeky pop culture references and irreverent riffs on corporate culture. Strolling across the lobby's dark-green marble floor, preserved from the original structure, Balazs says, "I always approach the starting point of a hotel as this sort of archaeology, where you start digging around to figure out: Where are we?"

"What is 'downtown'? Who are the denizens, and what's going on

in the area? Then, coupled with the building itself, you develop a kind of vocabulary for what you want to do," he says. "I always approach a hotel first and foremost with where it's located. And if it's a rehab like this, you take a look at what you have to work with, and where do you take it? So we asked ourselves: What is fun about this?"

Among the inspirational details, which Balazs left intact: a row of glass-tubed clocks that provide times in London, Tehran, Calcutta and other cities. "What a picture of optimism about worldwide enterprise that is, right?" Balazs says. "So this then starts to inform the spirit of the lobby." Around the corner near the check-in desk, Balazs points toward a semi-abstract stainless steel map of the world. It's dotted with pulsing pink lights supposedly representing the vast global reach of his company, Standard Holdings.

"That's a fantasy," Balazs says with a laugh. "But this is what corporations really do. [By creating this] world map of far-flung holdings sort of inspired by [Italian Modernist designer] Gio Ponti, we asked ourselves, 'If you're really going to play in this corporate world, how do you stylize it?' You can do it a little bit tongue in cheek."

To crank up the impact of the new hotel's lobby, furniture designer Vladimir Kagan was commissioned to create an extremely pink 150-foot-long sofa punctuated by segments 4 feet off the ground to facilitate exhibitionists interested, as Balazs says, in "striking a pose." The building's original load-bearing columns have been sheathed in glass to enhance the sense of spectacle Balazs likes to create. "It's for the people watching, the views, the angles, the voyeuristic aspect, which is part of why people enjoy hotel lobbies: You live there, but at the same time it is public space."

Suspended from the ceiling, in homage to the era of corporate-sponsored abstract art, hangs a mobile that Balazs says is "obviously in the spirit of Calder." Other nontraditional lobby amenities include a pool table, a photo booth, a 1970s-era funky white organ intended to be a kitschy riff on the standard piano bar, and a barber-