

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

## Married to the Job

For Stephen Alesch and Robin Standefer, the husband-and-wife team behind the architecture and design firm Roman and Williams—New York's ultra-stylish Ace and Standard hotels among their many credits—working together is as easy as finishing each other's sentences

PARTNERSHIP | January 18, 2013, 10:51 a.m. ET  
By DARRELL HARTMAN



Photography by Adam Friedberg

BUILT TO LAST | Standefer and Alesch are designing the 30-story Viceroy Hotel in New York from the ground up.

**THEY SAY OPPOSITES ATTRACT.** That rule certainly applies to Robin Standefer and Stephen Alesch, the dark-haired New Yorker and blond Californian behind the in-demand architecture-and-design firm Roman and Williams. In the case of these two former Hollywood-set maestros—she a production designer; he an art director—their magnetic connection and cinematic sensibility have infused everything from the urban-chic cafeteria at Facebook's Menlo Park headquarters to some of New York's handsomest hospitality spaces, like the weighty and weathered-looking Ace Hotel and The Standard hotel's glamorous, honey-toned Boom Boom Room. Their latest project is a 30-story hotel that's currently under construction in midtown Manhattan.

Standefer and Alesch like to say that their artisanal approach is more an ethos than a style. Their spaces are atmospheric but not alienating and come with a built-in sense of history. Perfection is an aesthetic no-no, and if their firm, Roman and Williams (named after their respective grandfathers), takes extra time on a job, it's to eliminate, not add, hints of a designer touch.

Many years before their "slow design," with its emphasis on craft and substance, came into the post-recession zeitgeist, Standefer and Alesch recognized it in each other's work. Standefer, who trained as a painter, often takes the lead on the big picture, while Alesch, who has an architectural background, tends to articulate the finer points as he sketches them—but their roles vary depending on the situation. Both have a redoubtable eye for detail and love hunting for artifacts at old warehouses and flea markets. (This past fall Rizzoli published *Things We Made*, an impressive catalog of their work to date.)

Standefer and Alesch seem to have calibrated their professional and domestic lives, and readily admit this puts them at an advantage. They've developed an efficient form of shorthand—a system that includes minimal shoptalk over breakfast and lengthy disquisitions in the car to and from their house in Montauk, where Alesch surfs and Standefer gardens. "That three-hour drive has become huge for us in terms of planning and financial decisions," says Alesch. Few business partners do face time quite like this.

The pair, who have been married since 2005, aren't just being cute when they call their burgeoning outfit a mom-and-pop shop: "In a lot of ways it's a very conservative, reliable, safe way to start a business," Alesch says. And when a contemporary sense of warmth and livability is your calling card, it helps to have your cohabitant as your co-designer. "There's a certain amount of tedium in doing something and making it really great, and we like to embrace it," Standefer says. "That's a personal thing we share."



Courtesy of Roman & Williams  
A celebrity-owned residence in Los Angeles

#### *Standefer on Alesch*

"I'd always been totally turned on by surfers—these blond boys that we never had here in New York. I was like, How do I find one of those California guys? It took me a long time. I love New York, but boys here don't know how to fix anything. Stephen can fix a car and make anything.

He's a great surfer, sure, but if you bowl or play tennis or baseball with him he'll win at those, too.

Early on in our courtship, when we were working on an indie movie, *The New Age*, we'd sit together at night and I'd watch him draw for hours. When you're around Stephen, you just bask in his ability to express details in design and architecture. I had big ideas working in production design but had a limitation, which was that I couldn't draw. His drawings expressed a part of his aesthetic that I found so in line with my own. We started to really, truly collaborate, and we've been working together ever since.

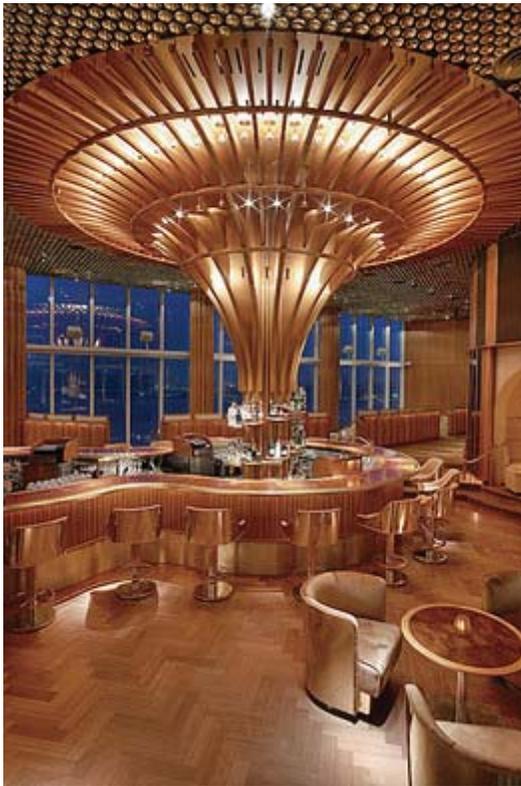
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We were playing with the idea of making a bar inspired by a giant bird, and I had an idea that it would be like you're inside a bird's mouth. Stephen was like, 'Do you really want to walk into a bar and be inside the bird's throat?' We got it to happen, even though it's not what I first saw or what he first saw.

When we met we had both read *A History of Private Life*, this incredible series of books that's about day-to-day life through the ages—not the aspirational warrior history but the history of the mundane, of the home. We talked about those books a lot. We realized we both embrace difficulty. Stephen will sit and spend 10 hours on a hand drawing, when we could just send some sketches to China and have them do the rendering for \$1,500 and probably get an approval from the client. We aren't interested in plastics, or in how fast you can do it. We don't own a microwave. We don't fight about what color a room should be, or which objects to buy or where to put them—that's where our sentences finish each other's. We just track the same way, like with this '77 Dodge Power Wagon we just bought so we can drive on the beach: It's big, green and so cute.



Courtesy of Roman & Williams  
The Boom Boom room at New York's Standard hotel

There's definitely an old-world quality to our setup. We trust each other to make certain decisions. We're partners. Just try to be in a meeting and disagree with us when we're together, agreeing. It's impossible. It will not happen."

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*Alesch on Standefer*

"We met working on a small film in Los Angeles. I remember walking into one of these dilapidated, abandoned offices that movie productions always rent and being led to this back room, which was kind of a little fabric tent. It was beautifully decorated—lamps and books everywhere—and I was like, Holy Moly, this is so beautiful! And then Robin came in and we hit it off right away.

At the Ace, there's a stunning steel window between The Breslin and the hotel. To the side there are two bookcases, and in them is a collection of books, lamp fixtures and artwork—all very delicate—and the lighting's done very carefully. That's Robin. She has this strange ability to take six rocks and a branch and arrange them in a composition that breaks your heart.

Robin loves what I call a 'poor-boy' aesthetic—this primitive, army-meets-camp aesthetic—very traditional and very Grapes of Wrath, but a higher level of it. The more sophisticated touches at the Ace, like the brass, are hers. She's got more of a gentleman, high-officer thing. She prevents it from being too heavy or cliché, whereas I keep it from getting too beautiful or gushy.

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Robin is ridiculously good at dealing with a roomful of 15 suits—she's like a football coach. I think I've gotten better at it just from being around her. I'm blessed to have her as a partner. I often imagine some guy I could be partnered up with who'd only be 50 percent of those things.

I grew up on the West Coast, and for me blondes have always had zero sexual energy—they remind me of my cousins. I love, like, Wednesday from *The Addams Family*. Of course, Robin and I get stereotyped the same way by every new client and person we meet, which is that I'm the mellow surfer dude and she's the tough New Yorker. But then suddenly I'll be the most persnickety bitch they've ever run into and she'll be Bob Marley.

We have this private life together and the key to our success, I think, has been bringing that into reality. Sometimes we compare it to cooking. We cook 'private food' that has strong flavor: It's hot, fishy and strong. We serve it publicly, but I wouldn't show people everything because it would scare them. But with our designs, it's different: We do serve our private reality. We don't temper our philosophies for clients. It's kind of an amazing feeling, that what I thought was private I can share, and I think Robin feels the same way—life is meant to be woven together.

Also, we're not competitive in any way. There's no ego. It's just a natural collaboration, this fluidity and editing each other without feelings getting hurt. Sometimes when we argue it's for effect. You don't want to be too easy and agreeable all the time. That would be a boring shtick."

—Edited from Darrell Hartman's interviews with Stephen Alesch and Robin Standefer.



Courtesy of Roman & Williams  
The Ace Hotel's John Dory Oyster Bar in Manhattan.