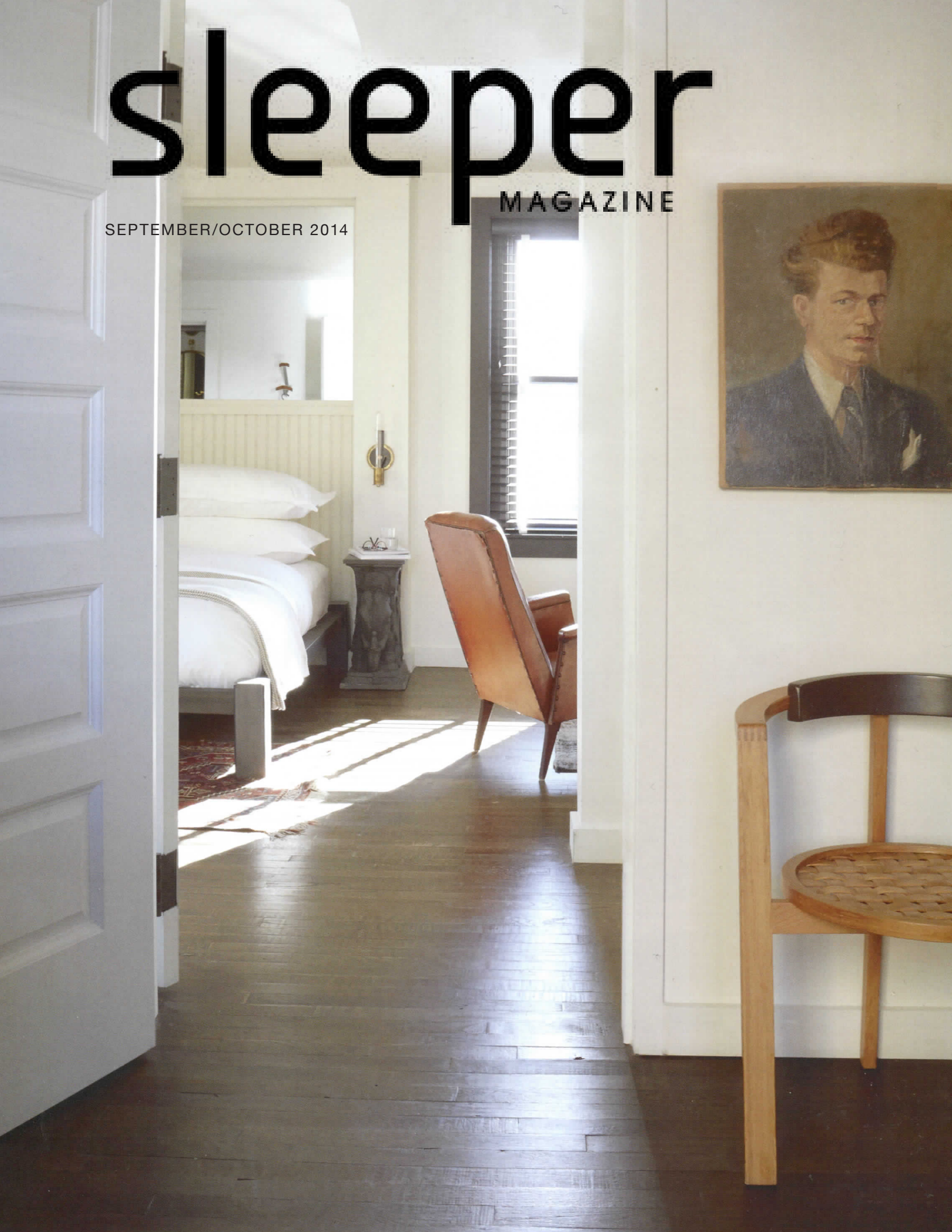


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The Dean

PROVIDENCE - RHODE ISLAND

Real estate development and design firm ASH NYC has enlisted local artisans to transform a dilapidated building into a boutique hotel.

Words: Alia Akkam | Photography: © Christian Harder

Newport's ornate mansions have long lured design buffs to Rhode Island, overshadowing the quirky creative scene brewing in grittier Providence. The artistic and academic allure of the tiny state's capital – the city is home to highly acclaimed Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) and Brown University – prompted Providence native, Ari Heckman, to develop the 52-key Dean hotel, an intimate and stylish property that truly reflects the city's vibrant culture.

Heckman, founder and Chief Executive Officer of New York-based real estate development and design firm, ASH NYC, admits: "The hotel stock just didn't measure up to the city's personality." There were plenty of accommodations flaunting familiar flags, but none with a highly distinct aura forging a community between guests and locals alike. Heckman envisioned something less corporate for the downcity neighbourhood, a conceptual boutique hotel that maximised communal spaces. So, along with several partners and investors, he bought a dilapidated circa-1912 building that once served as a social services hub for the Episcopalian church before it devolved into a brothel and strip club. Local firm Kite Architects was tasked with the ambitious architectural restoration, including the brick façade.

"In some ways it was a pretty building, but it had been destroyed over the years through a number of bastardised renovations,"

Heckman explains. "One of our main motivations was to strip away everything until we got back to an historical palate we could build off of."

The building's graceful old bones were most prominently revealed in the lobby, where original mosaic floor tiles were unearthed and preserved. Here, the café – essentially a counter modelled on Italian stand-up espresso bars – is warmed by the presence of mirrors. "When you first walk in and see the café you experience the livelihood of the lobby," points out Will Cooper, ASH NYC's Creative Director and a partner in the hotel. It's a nucleus for socialising, as are the adjacent karaoke lounge, cocktail bar and beer hall.

"Will and I travel constantly to different cities, and see interesting things happening culturally and from a design perspective," continues Heckman. "We wanted to create something that was historically sensitive, something with a lived-in feeling, but with clean, modern lines. It was also important to build visibility for locals, so they could come hang out in the coffee shop or get a cocktail whenever they felt like getting out of the city."

One especially eye-catching component of the lobby – along with the Jean Prouvé bench and Jindrich Halabala lounge chairs – is the wall bearing chunky letters that spell out FINE. "We wanted a piece that would be pretty impactful," says Cooper, and so they responded with a playful installation of matte red, ivory and pink channel-cut







Above: Furniture and artwork throughout the hotel was manufactured in Providence by people who are friends and colleagues of ASH NYC

letters inspired by artist Oliver Clegg’s outdoor billboard work in Miami’s Design District.

Despite the inconvenient drop ceilings in place from its more salacious days, the guestrooms have transformed into natural light-filled spaces aided by the building’s four sides of windows. Seven different styles, from a humble single bunk set up, to a commodious suite, appeal to a wide swath of demographics.

Oriental rugs in each room add a layer of softness to the sleek, dark wood floors and warm white walls, “everything from Persian to Kilim,” Cooper points out. “They are important because they bring elements of texture and colour to a room that is otherwise neutral.” Blackened, slightly industrial desks are fashioned from steel by local artist Nate Nadeau, as are the frames for the beds, which are outfitted with custom-woven blankets. Side tables shaped as elephants and cast in concrete are the handiwork of local craftsman Will Reeves, juxtaposed with vintage oil portraits bought in Paris. “We liked the idea of an apparition living in every room of the hotel,” says Cooper.

“A lot of what we see today are stark environments with finishes and furniture that look like they were ordered out of a catalogue. We wanted something that wasn’t stale.”

Marking the launch of ASH NYC’s furniture collection are the rooms’ warm light fixtures created by Cooper. With touches of brass and steel, they meld with all the antiques he and Heckman discovered on myriad sojourns throughout Europe and beyond.

The bathrooms further delineate a sparse but fresh aesthetic. Classic pedestal sinks are accentuated by black subway tiles and round mirrors designed by Heckman and Cooper. To reinforce the hotel’s art and travel inspirations, black and white images shot by RISD students or New York-based photographer pals grace the walls.

“We asked ourselves if we could use local artisans for everything, and it turns out it was actually more affordable to do so,” says Heckman. “All the furniture was manufactured in Providence by people who are friends and colleagues, or new friends and new colleagues. This is a hotel for the modern traveller.”

EXPRESS CHECKOUT: 52 guestrooms | 3 restaurants | 2 bars | www.thedeanhotel.com
 Owner / Operator: ASH NYC | Architecture: Kite Architects | Interior Design: ASH NYC
 For full photography of this project and details of the companies involved visit www.innspec.com