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A gigantic black foot, five feet long and three feet high, made of coated foam rubber, stands in the middle of the white-tiled bathroom. The work of Italian furniture designer Gaetano Pesce, it may be the strangest piece of furniture ever placed in a hotel room. "I can only imagine what interesting places we are going to find the foot when guests check out," says André Balazs, the hotelier known for such stylish establishments as the Mercer in New York City, the Chateau Marmont in Hollywood, and the Standard in West Hollywood. Standing in an oversized bathroom in his latest venture, a second Standard, in Downtown Los Angeles, Balazs contemplates the foot. "I think they might bring it in the bath with them," he says, gesturing toward a tub large enough to accommodate an N.B.A. player and the foot.

"That is a good example of how we are trying to be playful and twist conventions here," continues Balazs, who two years ago made waves in the boutique-hotel world with his first Standard, on the Sunset Strip—a cheap-chic hotel that captured imaginations with its mid-century décor (Arco lamps and Andy Warhol flower-print curtains), its D.J. booth next to the front desk, and a lobby vitrine in which scantily clad models were sleeping. "We are toying with the idea of what you expect in a hotel, what is 'standard' anyway. When you expect a straight line, at this hotel sometimes you get a curve."

The new Standard—or *στανδάρνις ἀηλ*, as its logo reads—is housed in the elegant former headquarters of the Superior Oil Co., a 1952 Carrara-marble-clad office block built by Superior's owners, the Keck family, a pillar of Waspish old-money L.A. Superior was bought by Mobil for \$5.7 billion in 1984, and the vacated 12-story monument to the modern industrial age inspired Balazs. Upon seeing it two years ago, he fell in love and bought it virtually on impulse, probably saving it from the wrecking ball. "I was on my way to the airport, and someone called me and said, 'You've got to see this building.' It was stunning. There was an attention to detail that reminded me of Rockefeller Center, and it had been vacant for 10 years, so it felt frozen in time." Balazs was especially impressed by the 50s-era architectural details, including a 15-time-zone lobby clock encased in stainless steel, a frieze above the front doors depicting the drilling and refining of oil, and bronze door handles in the shape of the letter S—once a reminder of Superior's superiority, now a symbol of the Standard brand. (Balazs is planning branches in New York, Miami, and London.)

With his design collaborators, Shawn Hausman, a film production designer who worked on the first Standard, and Hank Koenig, of the L.A.-based Koenig-Eizenberg Architects, Balazs decided to allow the corporate modernism of the Superior building, designed by L.A. architect Claude Beelman, to dictate the theme for this hotel. "I never intended to create cookie-cutter versions of the original Standard," says Balazs.

"If you look back at corporate design of the 60s, even 70s—very much a part of the era of Downtown L.A. itself—there was a golden age, a time when big companies would embrace these very daring modern programs. If you have seen pictures of Spiegel, the German publishing house, its headquarters were done by Verner Pantone with wild geometric patterns and colors. Time-Life hired Charles and Ray Eames for their building. CBS

hired Eero Saarinen. Even when you look at the IBM headquarters, by Gordon Bunshaft with sculptures by Isamu Noguchi, there was a feeling that design could inspire greatness in people. "Guys like Malcolm Forbes and John DeLorean, who were sort of rogue businessmen in their time, are the heroes of this hotel," says Balazs. "The bachelor businessman—that theme is carried throughout the hotel. That's the kind of aesthetic businessmen like Russell Simmons have taken on—they've inherited the mantle of the cool businessman."

For inspiration, Balazs and his team studied monographs of such design greats as Pierre Paulin and Joe Colombo, as well as old airline ads "from the era when you would see girls dressed like Braniff stewardesses draped over a UNIVAC computer. That's the era and the image we are going for," he says. They also pored over renderings of the original *Playboy* bachelor pad—particularly for the look of the guest rooms. (Small rooms will go for \$95 a night, the penthouse for \$550.)

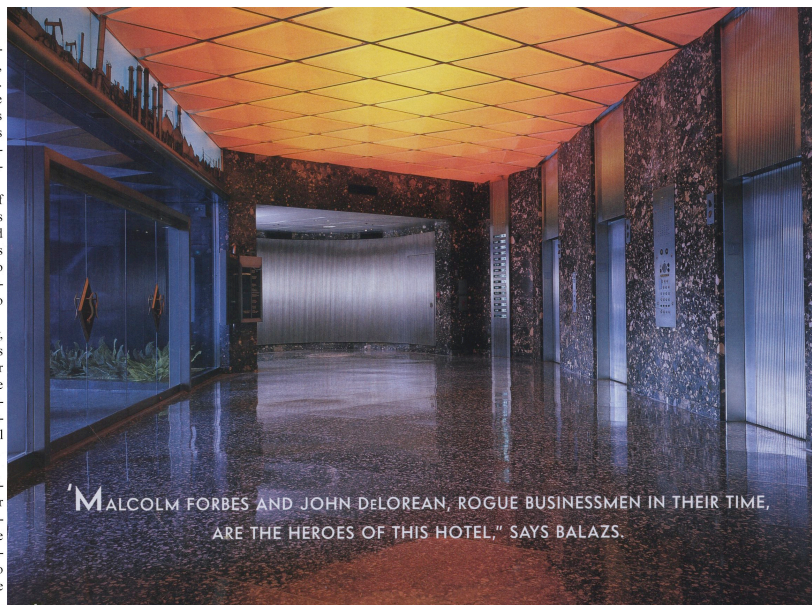
The public areas of the hotel, including the two-story lobby, have a cool, rich corporate look. A Calder-inspired mobile hangs near the reception desk. The escalators in the lobby are a leftover from the Union Bank of California, which formerly occupied the space. Where the bank's loan officers once sat, Balazs has installed a 125-foot pink "Omnibus" sofa by Vladimir Kagan. Waitresses in brown A-line uniforms that are a salute to Courrèges will weave in and out of the Kagan sofa to deliver drinks.

The idea is to create moments which inspire different emotions," says Balazs. "When you first arrive, the outdoor entrance is meant as an homage to Paley Park in Manhattan—complete with Bertoia chairs and evenly spaced shade trees. "The grandeur and elegance of the lobby is like the corporate headquarters of a fantastic global conglomerate. It's meant to be, and make you feel, confident, worldly, a little mysterious—like you might feel if you had just walked into the Istanbul Hilton."

In the 200 guest rooms, things get a bit more shagadelic: platform beds, tubs with room for two, or more, and very little furniture. In some rooms, the shower is a glass cube which allows an unobscured view of the bather from the sleeping area. "It's sort of a performance space as well as a shower," says Balazs. "We know where to get extra shower curtains if people are modest. But everyone always wants to crawl into the vitrine at the West Hollywood Standard, so you can't overestimate the exhibitionist urges of the public." It remains to be seen if Downtown L.A.'s business travelers will be able to get groovy enough for these amenities, including the pictographs Balazs commissioned for telephones, denoting what button guests should push to call a "fluffer" or a "motivational speaker."

On the hotel roof, which affords a spectacular view of L.A.'s skyscrapers, things get slightly kinky as well, with vibrating water beds at poolside and waitresses dressed as cheerleaders, with an S emblazoned on the back of their panties. "The idea up here is to have an ongoing roof party—especially on weekends, when Downtown is not populated. We're even planning to project movies on the side of the building across the street. It is also meant to be whimsical, to contrast with the seriousness of all the buildings around here," says Balazs.

"I don't think there has ever been anything like this before," he says, looking down on the starchy old California Club, directly next door, and the Egyptian-moderne Los Angeles Library in the distance. "There is a sense that we are pioneering something here. This will be a sign of stirring life." □



"MALCOLM FORBES AND JOHN DELOREAN, ROGUE BUSINESSMEN IN THEIR TIME, ARE THE HEROES OF THIS HOTEL," SAYS BALAZS.

THE CORPORATE LOOK

(1) The elevator lobby, with, above the doors, a frieze depicting oil drilling and refining. (2) A suite with a platform bed. (3) One of the service-elevator doors. (4) A foot made of coated foam rubber designed by Gaetano Pesce stands in the middle of a bathroom. (5) The roof restaurant, with seating designed by Verner Pantone and a view of Downtown L.A.



This page: One of the hotel's two suites. Facing page, clockwise from top left: Togo sectional seating by Ligne Roset and Baleri egg seats in the lobby. The check-in desk features a performance artist in a vitrine. Cacti and a woven-wall backdrop. See Resources.

