

**RENZO ROSSO**

**SURFACE**

ISSUE 107  
APRIL 2014

THE ENDORSEMENTS



## HOSPITALITY

# The Dean

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PORTRAIT BY ROB KULISEK

Providence has long had an image problem: It may be home to Brown University and the Rhode Island School of Design, but its name has been tarnished by corruption and urban blight. The opening of the new Dean hotel in the Downcity district suggests how even a single development could help improve not just the physical fabric of the city but also its public reputation.

The story of the building's history provides, in some ways, a microcosmic crash course on the past century in Providence: Built by the Episcopal Church in 1912 to provide a social-services center, a chapel, and housing for the poor, it devolved into what in recent years was essentially a flophouse and strip club. In 2012, Ari Heckman, a Providence native and co-founder of the New York-based development and design firm ASH NYC, bought

the property with three partners and a small group of investors. Their intention: to turn it into an affordable, tastefully designed hotel using creative know-how from the city and the Northeast region.

The idea for the Dean started when Heckman, after graduating from architecture school at Cornell University in 2005, returned home to work for the investor and urban planner Arnold "Buff" Chace. He stayed for two years. "When I was living here, I realized that there wasn't any hotel that was remotely reflective of Providence," says Heckman, 30. "All of the hotels here were super corporate, which is strange because Providence isn't really corporate. It's a college town, there are a lot of artists; it's really quirky. So why was there this mismatch?"

The 52-room hotel, which was restored by local firm Kite Architects, puts an end to that discord. ASH's interior design gives the space what Heckman describes as "an updated, classic aesthetic." It combines original 20th-century furniture sourced from markets in Belgium, the Netherlands, and Paris with custom pieces by ASH and various local designers, as well as fixtures from American-made brands. The lobby includes a Jean Prouvé bench and Jindrich Halabala lounge chairs; Friso Kramer desk chairs adorn each of the rooms. Providence artist Nate Nadeau built the bed frames, desks, and bathroom mirrors. RISD metal-shop technician Will Reeves fabricated the side tables from a vintage mold. On each bed is a custom-woven, Dean-branded blanket from Brahm's Mount of Maine.

"The main goal of the Dean is to highlight the best local stuff for visitors, but also bring the best of the outside to Providence," Heckman says. "We wanted to create a fun, interactive space that's a little schizophrenic and has all of these crazy things happening in it, but that ultimately feels really peaceful."

Interactivity comes in the form of a lobby coffee shop, as well as a beer hall, Moroccan-inspired lounge, and karaoke bar. Heckman credits the late Ace Hotel co-founder Alex Calderwood, whom he met in 2008 and who became a sort of mentor to him, for initiating this approach. "He was truly the first to connect real, local experiences to a hotel experience," Heckman says of Calderwood, adding, "I consider the Ace a pioneer for creating the type of hotel that I think a lot of hotels now aspire to be, which are these social, local places where the lobby is not a lobby; it's a place where the community can come in." The Dean lives up to this idea and expands upon it, establishing both a welcome hub for the gritty city's creative culture and a tribute to its vibrant, eccentric history.

ASH NYC co-founder Ari Heckman at the Dean. (OPPOSITE) A guest room at the Dean. A Dean-branded painting on the exterior of the hotel's facade.





PHOTOS: TOP, CHRISTIAN HARDER. BOTTOM, COURTESY THE DEAN.