

# hometown hero

Rottet Studio's founder reimagines the historic Colombe d'Or hotel complex in Houston to honor her city's past—and its glorious renaissance

*text: edie cohen photography: eric laignel*



**Although born in Waco, Texas,** Lauren Rottet considers herself a Houstonian—that's where she grew up. From an early age, the *Interior Design* Hall of Fame member knew all about the Montrose neighborhood's Fondren Mansion, a Prairie School-style private home designed in 1923 by architect Alfred C. Finn for Walter Fondren, founder of Humble Oil, which later became Exxon. Some five decades later, local real estate magnate Steve Zimmerman purchased the residence and transformed it into La Colombe d'Or, a five-suite hotel and restaurant, ambitiously named after the French Riviera property of the same name, legendary for attracting such guests as James Baldwin, Henri Matisse, Yves Montand, and Pablo Picasso. Operating since 1979, the Houston hotel was due for a refresh, and that's where Rottet Studio comes in.

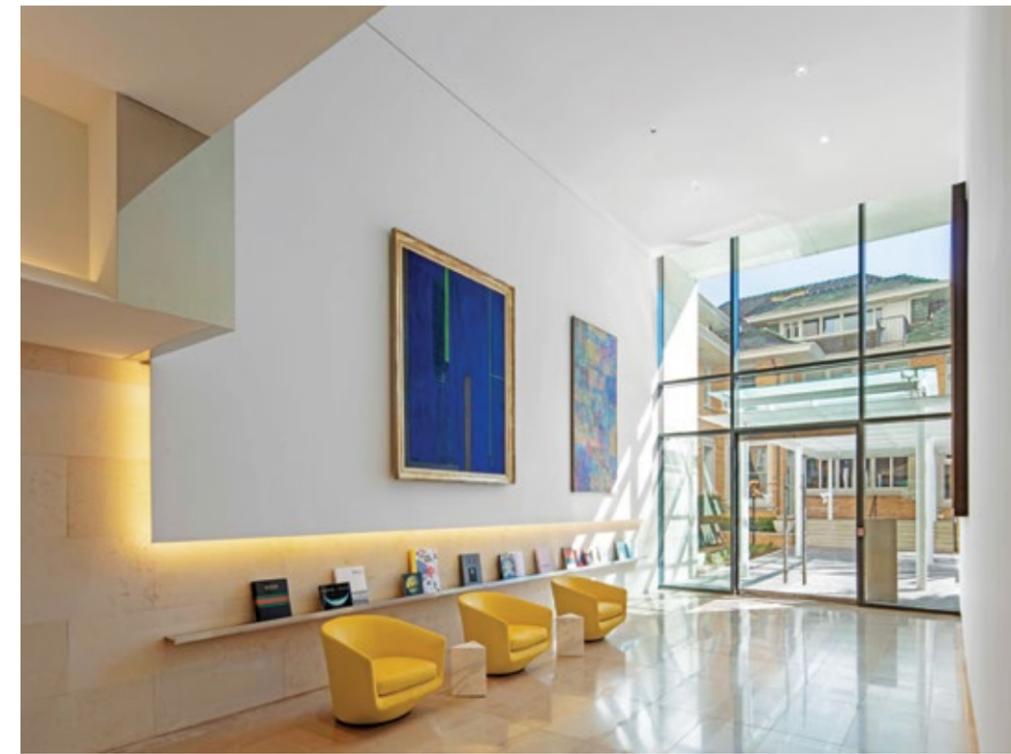
But that's just one part of the story. The other is the development of 1 ¼ adjoining acres to expand the historic site and bring it into the 21st century. (Nine bungalows were added to the property in 1996 and recently renovated by Gin Design Group.) Gleaming behind the landmarked former residence is a ground-up 34-floor residential tower, developed by the Zimmerman family and Hines, a real estate investment and management firm, and designed by Munoz Albin. The 690,000-square-foot building's 283 luxury rental units are anchored by 18 ground-floor hotel suites. Enter Rottet Studio again. In addition to renovating the original hotel, dubbed the mansion, Rottet, associate principal and design director Chris Evans, senior associate Amber Lewis, and team were charged with conceiving the new construction's public areas, guest rooms, and 10th-floor swath of amenities, plus the connector to the mansion, a landscaped courtyard with a fountain and large-scale sculpture. Yes, everything in Texas is big, even the commissions.

Leaving the mansion, perhaps after dinner at the restored restaurant now named Tonight + Tomorrow and helmed by Houston chef Jonathan Wicks, guests and residents enter the new building, where a long, wide, marble-floored entry

**Previous spread:** In the new tower at La Colombe d'Or, a hotel and residential rental complex in Houston, with interiors by Rottet Studio, the entry corridor is gallerylike, hung with such historic artwork as the 19th-century *Napoléon in Exile* by Benjamin Robert Haydon as well as contemporary paintings by locals, like Earl Staley's pointillist oil on canvas.

**Opposite top:** Arik Levy's weathering-steel sculpture and the new tower flank the mansion, the landmarked former residence turned boutique hotel that dates to 1923, its brick recently restored. **Opposite bottom:** Overlooking the lobby's custom resident concierge desk in the new tower is a Troy Stanley stencil.

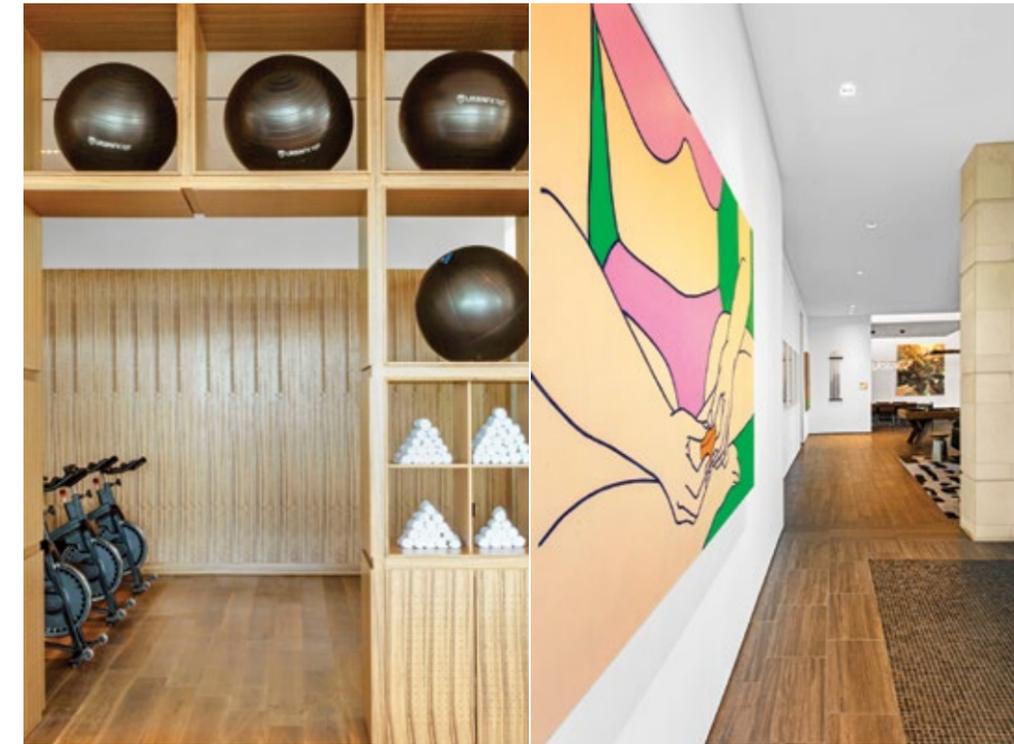
**Top:** With the Prairie School-style mansion in the background, the tower entry is aglow from LEDs, marble flooring, and Niels Bendtsen leather chairs. **Bottom:** Its lobby lounge is backdropped by a Rolf Westphal outdoor sculpture.





**Opposite top:** A quartet of custom velvet-upholstered chairs stands before the double-sided limestone fireplace. **Opposite bottom:** Panels of mirrored metal mesh by Sophie Mallebranche are staggered in depth, creating a wavelike effect.

**Top, from left:** On the tower's amenities level, the fitness center has paldao millwork and a woven vinyl floor. Nearby is California Oranges, a 1977 painting sourced from Reeves Antiques in Houston. **Bottom:** The Aqua lounge is so named for its quartzite bench, powder-coated iron chairs, mirror and chromed metal tables, and glass mosaic tile, all waterproof.



corridor is fashioned as an art gallery. "It's new and bold, gold and glow-y—all contemporary," Rottet begins. Part of the project's draw for Rottet was her access to some 350 works from Zimmerman's collection, which features blue-chip pieces by the likes of Raoul Dufy, Dorothy Hood, Arik Levy, and Man Ray. Better still was the go-ahead to purchase more, granting Rottet further means to support the Houston art scene she knows so well. What astonishes, though, is the pervasive ethereal quality. Credit Rottet Studio's prowess with lighting and dexterity in manipulating walls. As Evans explains: "The folded planes shape the environment to engage both lighting and art."

At the entry is a backlit wall with a niche carved out for art books. Farther along the passageway frames of LEDs make more backlit wall sectors appear to float, the effect enhanced by slanted cove illumination from above. The procession ends at the resident concierge desk, a stunning composition in polished or brushed stainless steel topped by a slab of quartzite. Equally splendid is its backdrop: *Nom de Plume*, a commissioned work by local artist Troy Stanley, is a shadowy stencil applied directly to the drywall. Meanwhile, the adjacent wall stands burnished and jewel-like with alternating panels of bronze mirror and woven metal mesh sandwiched between glass.

"It's a reflective space," is Rottet's figurative take on the double-height resident lobby, an area in which she's decidedly a pro given her hospitality bona fides. The comfy lounge chairs she designed and set around a double-sided limestone fireplace make the point and contribute to an overall contemporary, of-the-moment vibe. Meanwhile, a gridded glass wall allows views to a quiet residential street lined with apartments dating to the 1940's, connecting the site to its past.

Which ties into what Rottet is most proud of about the project, its overriding approach to conservation. "Houston hasn't had a history of preserving, well, its own history," she explains. "This area used to be filled with mansions. Instead ➤





of scrapping and selling the land, the developers decided to keep the little old house and build behind it. It's a gift back to the city." (See the ETC. on page 110 for more on the mansion restoration.)

Rottet Studio clearly participated in the giving, too. In the tower's hotel rooms, the firm did it all, designing layouts, millwork, upholstered beds, settees, and nightstands. The scheme even includes what Rottet calls an "on-off" kitchen, meaning a refrigerator and sink concealed behind paneling.

"The amenity floor is what it's all about for luxury seekers," Rottet says of the primary leasing draw. "There are enough spaces with enough different attitudes that they become very social. You can work or have a cocktail. It's where you go to meet people." Indeed, there's a game room, a fully equipped fitness center, a private events area, and the Aqua lounge, named for the fact that it is completely waterproof—glass mosaic tile envelope, iron chairs, chromed-metal tables—and adjoins a 66-foot outdoor lap pool with breathtaking vistas of Houston's thriving skyline. ➤

**PROJECT TEAM**

**TAYLOR MOCK; MARIAH BURAS; MAKSIM KOLOSKOV:** ROTTET STUDIO. **HOUSE PARTNERS:** ARCHITECT OF RECORD. **ROBINSON COMPANY:** LANDSCAPING CONSULTANT. **POWER DESIGN:** LIGHTING CONSULTANT. **WALTER P. MOORE:** STRUCTURAL ENGINEER. **JORDAN AND SKALA:** MEP. **BGE:** CIVIL ENGINEER. **ENVIRONMENTAL ARCHITECTURAL MILLWORK:** WOODWORK. **URBAN OAKS BUILDERS:** GENERAL CONTRACTOR.

**PRODUCT SOURCES**

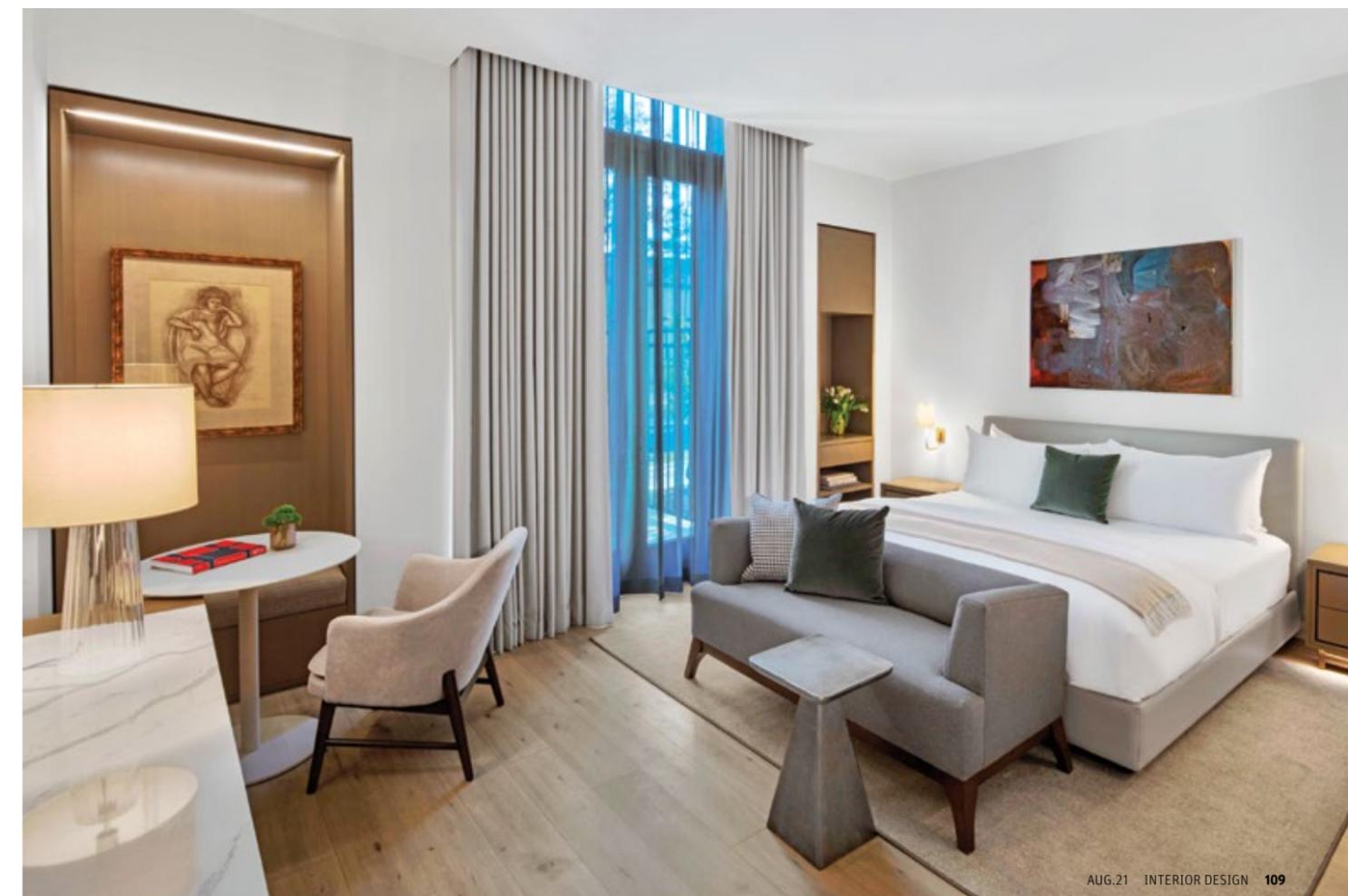
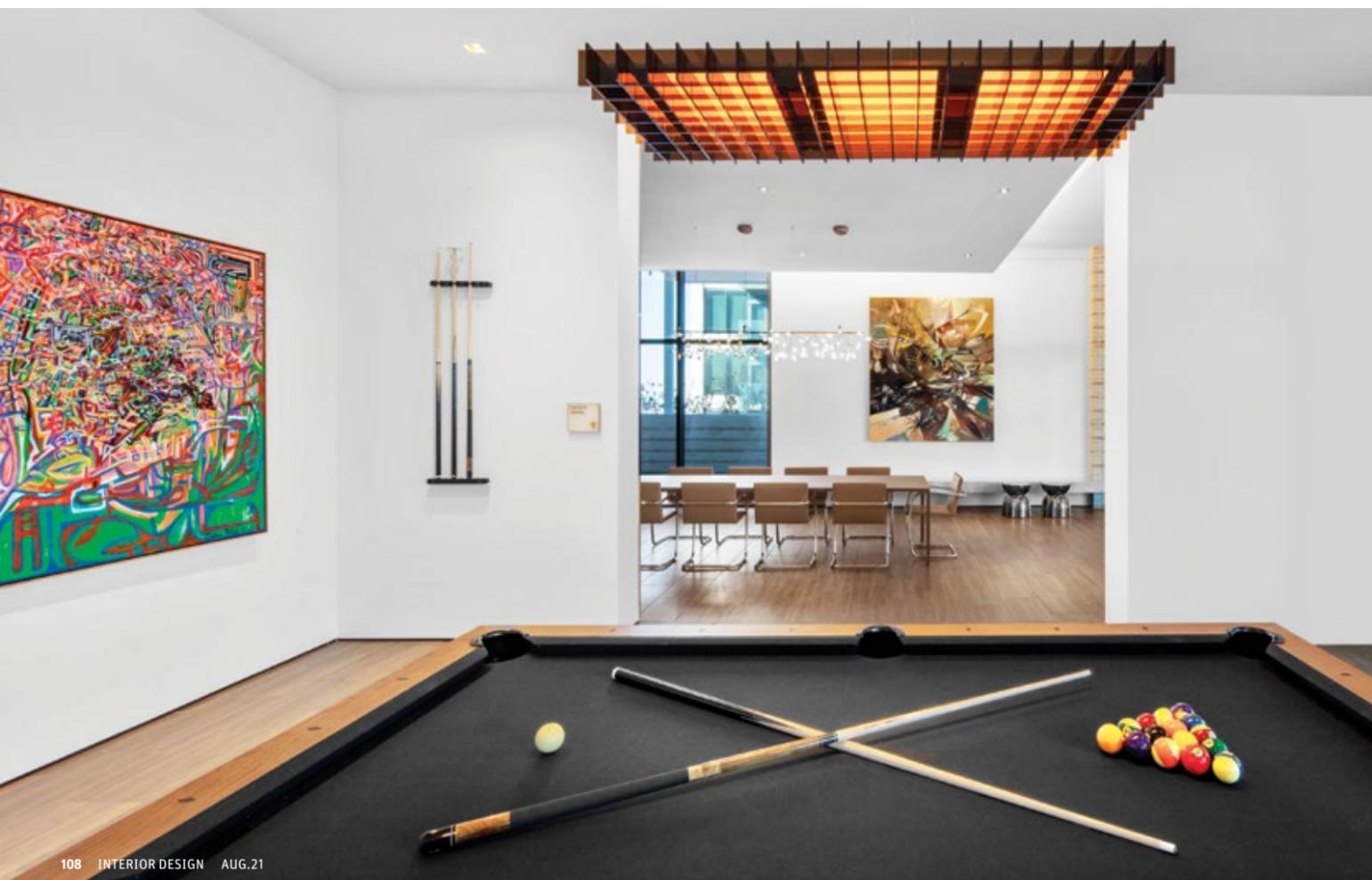
**FROM FRONT BENSON:** CHAIRS (HALL), COFFEE TABLE (RESIDENT LOUNGE). **CB2:** TABLES (HALL, RESIDENT LOUNGE). **SANDLER SEATING:** CHAIRS (RESIDENT LOBBY). **ROTTET COLLECTION:** SWIVEL CHAIRS, COCKTAIL TABLE (LOUNGE). **CHARTER FURNITURE:** LOUNGE CHAIRS (LOUNGE), CHAIR (SUITE). **AMTREND:** CUSTOM SOFA (LOUNGE), BED, LOVESEAT (SUITE). **ARCHETYPE GLASS:** CUSTOM WALL PANELS (HALL). **KOROSEAL INTERIOR PRODUCTS:** WALL COVERING (GYM). **EXQUISITE MANOR:** FLOORING. **SICIS:** TILES (AQUA LOUNGE). **ARIA STONE GALLERY:** BENCH MATERIAL. **BEND GOODS:** CHAIRS, TABLES. **VICTORIA AND ALBERT:** TUB

(SUITE). **WATERWORKS:** SINK FITTINGS. **ANN SACKS:** BACKSPLASH TILE. **ROCA:** FLOOR TILE. **BERNHARDT HOSPITALITY:** TABLE (BATHROOM), SIDE TABLE (SUITE). **BILLIARD FACTORY:** TABLE (GAME ROOM). **PABLO:** CHANDELIER. **MDF ITALIA:** TABLE (EVENTS ROOM). **KNOLL:** CHAIRS. **RESTORATION HARDWARE:** CHAIRS, TABLES (POOL). **GAR:** TABLE (SUITE). **BRAND STANDARD FURNISHING:** BEDSIDE TABLES. **VISUAL COMFORT:** LAMP, SCONCES. **MASLAND CARPETS:** RUG. **P KAUFMANN CONTRACT:** DRAPES. **LARK FONTAINE:** SHEERS. **THROUGHOUT STONE SOURCE:** FLOORING. **SHAW CONTRACT:** CARPET. **BENHEIM ARCHITECTURAL GLASS:** WINDOWS. **CANGELOSI:** LIMESTONE CLADDING.



*Opposite top: Bathrooms in the 18 guest suites on the tower's ground floor have custom vanities in solid-surfacing and oak. Opposite bottom: On the amenities level, the game room, with a Michael Abramowitz painting, adjoins the events room, with vintage Brno chairs by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe.*

*Top: The Aqua lounge opens to the 66-foot lap pool. Bottom: In a suite, the sofa, bed, and nightstands are custom and flooring is oak laminate.*





ETC.



**Opposite, from top:** In *Tonight + Tomorrow*, the restaurant inside the original *La Colombe d'Or* boutique hotel, the carved ceiling, which dates to 1923, when the site was a private mansion, was unearthed and restored. The renovated oak stairway and corridor leading to the five guest suites feature artwork by Helen Frankenthaler, Jorge Pardo, Lucio Ranucci, and Christian Rosa under a vintage chandelier.

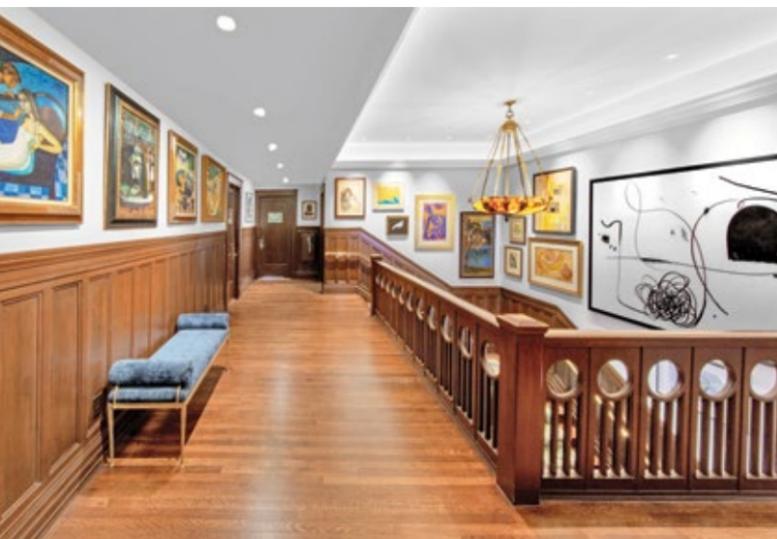
**Clockwise from top left:** In the lobby, an original carved pilaster meets Lauren Rottet's LED *Fascio* sconce in antique brass. A Tom Dixon chandelier and custom wall covering patterned with Lyubov Popova artwork outfit Bar No. 3. The *Renoir* suite's hammered and polished stainless-steel canopy bed keeps company with an Andrew Neyer pendant fixture, vintage seating, and original clay tile flooring.

## welcome to the mansion

The original *La Colombe d'Or* is a 1923 private residence that was converted into a boutique hotel in 1979. It encompassed 4,000 square feet across two floors, offering a bar, a restaurant, and five guest suites. Then, the restaurant was “the chichi place to go for late-night dining,” Lauren Rottet remarks. The tradition continues, thanks to Rottet Studio.

Guests can start an evening with cocktails in the newly expanded Bar No. 3, made glamorous with its carved-wood entry archway painted dark green, wall covering patterned with a 1920's Russian design, a vintage back bar sourced in the South of France, and luminescent back-painted glass for the bar itself. The details even extend to Baccarat whiskey glasses, etched with the hotel's dove logo. Dining follows in what's now called *Tonight + Tomorrow*, a serene gray-green setting. One long black glass-and-brass table for communal dining and cane chairs are overlooked by an elaborately carved ceiling, discovered after the paint covering it up was removed and restored.

Progression from the public to private quarters proceeds via an elaborate oak stairway. Newly refreshed, it encourages lingering, since the surrounding walls are a treasure trove of art, among which works by Helen Frankenthaler, Jorge Pardo, and Christian Rosa stand out. Senior associate Amber Lewis took charge of the guest accommodations. Most challenging she says was the *Renoir* suite, labeled the *boy's room* in the hotel's original plans. “That was due to its red-clay floor tile in what had been a sleeping porch.” She retained them, and even made them modern, with such chic additions as a solar system-esque pendant fixture by Andrew Neyer and a canopy bed in hammered stainless steel. 🍷



### PROJECT TEAM

PARADIGM: ARCHITECT OF RECORD.

FROM FRONT GAR PRODUCTS: CHAIRS (RESTAURANT). ISA INTERNATIONAL: STOOLS (BAR). TOM DIXON: CHANDELIER. CHARTER FURNITURE: CHAIRS. VISUAL COMFORT: LAMPS. BERNHARDT HOSPITALITY: OTTOMAN (BAR), BED, TABLES, BENCH (SUITE). F. SCHUMACHER & CO.: BENCH FABRIC (SUITE). STUFF: PENDANT FIXTURE. THROUGHOUT SHERWIN-WILLIAMS COMPANY: PAINT.

