

whitewall

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Right: Hotel Americano in Chelsea, New York.

WHITEWALL: I read that you always try to break rules in every hotel that you do. For Grupo Habita's newest property, Hotel Americano in Chelsea, opening this summer, what rules did you break?

CARLOS COUTURIER: We were always told that in America it was very difficult to work with customized whatever, that things that were customized were almost impossible. That was one of the rules we broke. We insisted that we didn't want to go for things that were already in the market. We wanted things that were made for this property. It was difficult to find the right suppliers, but when we found them they wanted to do it. The bed platforms, the desks, and the facade are customized. That was the biggest fight with this project. The facade is a belt conveyor, like from the airport, and for three months we looked for a material for it. It couldn't be too heavy, too expensive, too obstructive. It took a lot of research and we found it, and they actually wanted to do something that was original and different.

WW: This is the first hotel in America for the Mexico-based Grupo Habita. Why New York?

CC: Our first choice was Austin, because it's closer to home. We thought we could afford it because it's a smaller city. We thought, "It's our first hotel outside Mexico, so let's do somewhere where we can still be a 'best-kept secret' and make mistakes and we can fix it." But in the end we had to come to New York because, since New York is so dynamic, things move faster. In Austin, city permits and finding a partner took awhile, while in New York we did everything very quickly. New York is our first city in America, but we're ready for it. It's difficult to work in another country because the codes are all different.

WW: Did you find it helpful, then, to work with Hotel Americano's architect, Enrique Norten, because he was familiar with building in New York?

CC: Yes. Enrique was the one who told the developers about us. He did our first hotel. We knew that our first hotel in New York had to be in Chelsea. My partner Moises Micha's family are collectors. In Mexico they have an amazing art collection, modern and contemporary. So Grupo Habita's art connection comes from Micha's family's passion for art and he infused that into our group. I am an art lover now, but it's something that I learned; it's not in my family background. As soon as we opened our first hotel in Mexico City, Habita, it became a hub for contemporary art in the city,



CARLOS COUTURIER

CO-FOUNDER OF GRUPO HABITA

BY KATY DONOGHUE, PORTRAIT BY AMY McCULLOCH

All the artists and gallerists were coming. And we became the hotel where, if you're into contemporary art, you stay at our hotels in Mexico. We opened in 2000, before the Jumex Collection. So we thought, "Let's go to Chelsea — this is where the art is." And we wanted great architecture, for sure. The art world are not only sophisticated in art — they love architecture, they love design, they travel a lot, they like to discover — so how can you please this crowd and keep your own rules and essence?

WW: There's no art in this hotel, though. That's almost a company rule you broke, since Grupo Habita hotels are so known for the art they showcase. Why no art?

CC: We have no art in this hotel. All of our hotels are known for art. We like to promote and support contemporary artists, global talent. We are part of Zona Maco Mexico, and all of our hotels have contemporary pieces. But in this case, because we are in Chelsea, we said, "Let's do it the other way around. Let's make this space a neutral space for the art community.

They come here, there's no competition, we're like Switzerland." It's to relax, to have a good time — not about looking at someone else's art. Nothing is on the walls. Everything is about the architecture, the interior design, the volumes.

WW: Was that always the plan, not to have any art on the walls?

CC: Getting more familiar with the neighborhood, going to art shows, we thought, "What can we put in this hotel that would make an impression? We want to have major gallerists coming here, and it's tough." So we said, "It's much better to do the opposite. We have a strong proposition in interior design and architecture, and let's skip art."

WW: How have you been developing your interest in art?

CC: I go to the fairs all the time. My partners are really passionate about art and they have taught me a lot. I like black-and-white photography. I go to Frieze, Art Basel, Zona Maco. I go to biennales, Venice and São Paulo. I always try to go to museums in cities that I'm visiting.

WW: With all that traveling, are you interested in opening hotels in Europe?

CC: Probably in Berlin, because of the art connection. Barcelona. Definitely Paris. But we have to make New York a success first.