



# Game changer

Shoreditch's Ace Hotel heralded a new kind of hospitality space, rooted in the community, now shut, its legacy lives on, as a new Ace in Brooklyn opens

*Words*  
Harry McKinley

*Images*  
Andrew  
Meredith

An ace card: in poker, both a high and a low. It's an analogy that Ace Hotels' founder Alex Calderwood used often, seeing it as a pithy expression of his brand. Ace's relevance is to this day still found in its embrace of both ends of any spectrum: aspirational and accessible; understated and confident; urbane and youthful. Its hotels are places to work and play, to dip into and to stay. It's why, when Ace announced that its landmark property in London's Shoreditch would not be reopening post-pandemic, there was shock.

For anyone who lives in the east of the city, or ventures there, this was where weekday coffee meetings happened, where post-work cocktails flowed and where weekend brunches ran long; its closure a loss not just to travellers, but to the local community. It's a testament to just how groundbreaking it was. After all, few tears were shed when the drab hotel that previously occupied the building was shuttered: a place where brown plaid was a prominent design theme, minus any sense of hipster irony.

"We didn't set out to revolutionise," says Brad Wilson, president of Ace Hotel Group. "We just imagined that a different way was possible. We sensed Shoreditch was hungry for a hub and somewhere that would crystallise its place in the contemporary identity of London." That was in 2012 when, thanks to the Olympics, the capital was selling itself to a global audience as cooler than New York, weirder than Paris and more fun than Tokyo. Ace tapped Universal Design Studio to shape its first – and to date only – European outpost, which was until then known chiefly for its clever fashion retail schemes. It had never tackled a hotel, so its unpolluted vision and

*Left*  
Universal Design Studio tapped into Shoreditch's creative vibe for the hotel, with a check-in desk that featured vinyl racks and various merch

progressive attitude aligned neatly with the hotel world's chief disruptor.

"Ace were, and are, very design literate," says Paul Gulati, director at Universal and one of the project's leads. "We didn't have all of the answers at the beginning, but that's the best way to go on a journey. When you don't know where you're going to get to, you end up somewhere unexpected." On the partnership, Wilson says that "it felt like kismet."

It's hard to overstate the role that Ace Hotel London Shoreditch, which ultimately opened in 2013, played in shifting the paradigm. It's been cited as an inspiration and a reference point for projects as diverse as Tbilisi's impressive Stamba Hotel (a brutalist, 61-room property in a former Soviet publishing house), the many citizenMs and the genteel, rapidly growing family of Lockes, which put public spaces and community interaction at their core. Ace wasn't the first in London to reframe the lobby as a democratic space, but it was arguably the most effective – much of which was down to the make-up of the neighbourhood.

"The whole project was about creating a hybrid space that allowed for locals and transient visitors to come together," says Gulati. "At the time, Shoreditch was still at the crossroads of emerging ideas in culture, design and art. It was a transitional point between different worlds, where there was a collision between students and the money of the City." Micro-territories were carved out, giving the otherwise sprawling space purpose and form, while other elements bred spontaneity. "I could talk for hours about the Ace table," says Gulati about the huge table that dominated the lobby. "I've had people tell me how genius it is that it compelled you to talk to the person next to you, because you needed to lean across to plug your laptop in. I have to admit to them, that wasn't our intention, but it's fantastic."

Elsewhere, design elements were a response to the location: the Crittall windows a nod to surrounding warehouses; the bespoke lobby door handle a wink to fixie bike culture. There was a mixing of high and low code design:



Above  
The lobby reframed public hotel space as more than transient, hosting nomadic workers at its giant table

Below  
A high-low approach to design saw utilitarian materials such as tiles and concrete used with bespoke pieces



Paul Raeside



Kent Johnson

inexpensive vinyl embedded into custom Benchmark tables and cheap corkboard in guest rooms hovering above bespoke leather change dishes by accessories designer Ally Capellino. Where other hotels picked a lane and stayed in it, Ace Shoreditch careened across them all to dazzling, seducing effect.

Ace of course lives on elsewhere. Many of the cues seen in Shoreditch will be found in Ace Brooklyn, designed by Roman and Williams and opening in spring. "Both then and now, I think it's the quality of curiosity that draws people most to Ace – we've got an appetite for the stories in things and our guests are genuinely interested in discovery," says Wilson. "I think that as long as you stay attuned to that, the well of possibility is continually renewing itself." In Brooklyn perhaps there is a glug of the same secret sauce that made Shoreditch so successful – the creative tension between communities and the sense of an area still fluctuating from what it was to what it will be.

"Atelier Ace and Roman and Williams drew on the cultural history of the neighbourhood, weaving together threads of inspiration from the waves of immigrants that have deeply enriched the borough," says Wilson. Guest rooms allude to the raw utility of artists' studios, public spaces include indoor and outdoor midways that ease into the city and an indoor garden features a double-sided fireplace and sawtooth skylight. Rowan and Williams' design principles are rooted in primitive modernism and it's reflected in Ace Brooklyn, in the honest, sensitive use of materials such as poured concrete and Douglas fir.

What it isn't, of course, is in London. And so the question remains: what's next for Ace in the city it helped to nudge forward? "While we don't have plans we can share right now, we've made no secret of our love for the UK," says Wilson. "We don't see this as the end of a chapter though; we expect to write plenty more pages in the city before long."

Above  
Roman and Williams' work at Ace Brooklyn, opening in spring