

The Man Behind the Ace Hotel Empire

Matt Gross



Alex Calderwood, left, an owner of the Ace Hotel, in the bar. Bottom right, the lobby's library-style tables; top right, the hotel's Stumptown. Deidre Schoo for The New York Times, left and bottom right; Hiroko Masuike for The New York Times, top right

WALK into the Ace Hotel, on the corner of Broadway and 29th Street, at any given time, and here is what you may find: The band Jác might be playing in one corner of the vast lobby, their horn-and-accordion tunes bouncing off the century-old mosaic floor, the dark wood paneling, the 17 1/2-foot white columns. In one of the red-suede sofa nooks, under a huge American flag bought at the Brimfield Antique Show, a motley crew of friends from Washington — a women's-wear designer, a tour guide, a defense contractor — might be striking up a conversation with the British pop-soul singer Edei. In the middle of the lobby, the long library-style black tables have been colonized by MacBooks.

Someone, somewhere, is sure to be saying, "I hear Q-Tip D.J.'s here on Fridays."

The flow of people is a constant: into and out of [the Breslin](#) and the [John Dory Oyster Bar](#), restaurants run by April Bloomfield and Ken Friedman of the Spotted Pig; past a wall covered with two decades' worth of graffiti-tag stickers; into and out of the boutiques Opening Ceremony and Project No. 8; into and out of the brass-floored elevators — those ancient, analog devices that lead to the Ace's 260 guest rooms, where you can pile onto bunk beds or settle into a corner suite with a guitar and a turntable.



The Ace Hotel lobby draws a constantly changing crowd. Michael Nagle for The New York Times

The people who throng the Ace are fashionable, but not overly so; no one appears eager to turn heads with a striking outfit or outrageous hairstyle. To do so might be to acknowledge, however subtly, that the Ace — their club, their office, their living room — is a bona fide scene, whose aesthetics and business model are redefining the overlapping worlds of drinking, dining, sleeping and shopping.

“We’re not trying to be a quote-unquote hip hotel, per se,” said Alex Calderwood, a pale, curly-haired 43-year-old. Wearing a T-shirt,

Levi's and sneakers he designed in collaboration with Converse, he could pass for one of the stylishly unobtrusive guests. Mr. Calderwood is the face of the Ace Hotel Group, a chain that began in Seattle, expanded to Portland, Ore., and, in the last year and a half, opened ambitious new properties in Palm Springs, Calif., and this Manhattan neighborhood (so overlooked that it doesn't even have a name —perhaps the coolest thing about it).

"We don't view ourselves as just catering to a sort of bleeding-edge audience, or a bleeding-edge hip audience," he said in the Ace's boardroom, where a long custom-built wood table was piled with books like "Dorfsman & CBS," about the network's design director. "It's the whole combination, or mix, but I think that makes it all human."

And human the Ace definitely is — for better and for worse. The story of the Ace is the story of Mr. Calderwood. And his story, as befits the age of social networking, is one of an ever-expanding circle of friends, partners and, inevitably, ex-friends and former partners.

ON the fifth floor of the Ace, in one of the 711-square-foot corner suites at the prow of this Flatiron-style building with mansard roofs and a cupola, there is a metal lamp. It is not flashy. It has an adjustable arm, and its color lies somewhere on the brass-green spectrum. Nearby is a wall bearing a re-creation of artwork by the late Dondi White, one of the first graffiti artists to cross over into the mainstream art world. But it was the lamp that Mr. Calderwood lavished with attention.

"This is an industrial lamp that you would buy for, like, your garage," Mr. Calderwood said. "This is off-the-shelf from a company called McMaster-Carr, and I just love it. It works. It's solid and it's not fussy."

And there, in a lamp, you have the essence of Ace aesthetics. It's not just that it represents retro cool. It's also highly functional —

indeed, purely functional; McMaster-Carr is an industrial supply family-run Chicago firm that makes U-bolts, sprockets and 480,000 other products.

Which means (and this is important for the Ace, too) that the lamp is cheap. Inexpensive lamps and unpainted metal doors mean there's more cash available for room art. And it means the rooms themselves are affordable (in New York terms), running from \$169 a night for a modest-size bunk-bed room to around \$800 a night for a suite.

This approach is hardly new. It's been honed over two decades, ever since Mr. Calderwood, described as an easy-to-like social butterfly by those who know him, from Bellevue, Wash., befriended Wade Weigel, who was hosting parties at Seattle's decrepit, formerly grand NP Hotel.



*The spacious loft rooms at the hotel come with guitars and turntables.
Deidre Schoo for The New York Times*

Over lunch one day in 1992, the pair had the idea to open a rock 'n' roll-themed hair salon, Rudy's Barbershop. A mix of the classic (tile floors, sturdy barbers' chairs) and the punkishly improvised (walls plastered with snapshots, magazine tear sheets and concert posters), Rudy's was a hit, and today has expanded to 15 locations

in Seattle, Los Angeles and Portland, with at least one planned for New York.

Running barbershops satisfied neither man. Mr. Calderwood was busy giving parties for Apple, Microsoft and Nike. “I’m just a barber and a tattoo pimp,” Mr. Calderwood told Interview magazine, which in 1994 photographed him — shirtless — at the Chelsea Hotel.

One day (Ace-related stories frequently begin with serendipity) someone offered Mr. Weigel and Mr. Calderwood the lease on a 28-room flophouse in the Belltown area of Seattle.

“We were stupid enough to take it with all its tenants in it,” Mr. Weigel said. “It was just a nightmare. It was a bunch of crazies. People would throw toilets out the window.”

During renovations, the partners brought in their friend Doug Herrick to run the operation. When Ace Seattle opened in 1999, they had another hit. The atmosphere (Shepard Fairey, now famous for his Barack Obama posters, did room art) and affordability (rooms with shared bathrooms started at \$65) struck a chord in a city reconciling its grungy roots with its high-tech wealth.

The next phase of expansion brought in a new partner, Jack Barron, an architect who’d contacted Mr. Calderwood through the Ace Web site. After several false starts, the four partners found themselves in possession of the blocklong run-down Clyde Hotel, in Portland.

As Mr. Barron described it, his theory was to make the hotel a “nodal point” in the city. “The whole idea was to sell the place, not the hotel,” he said. “You know? We didn’t want to toot our own horns, we wanted to talk about what a wonderful place we were all in.”

The approach worked spectacularly well. The 79-room Ace Portland, which opened in 2007, had the right combination of

location, price and feel (free bikes, rooms with turntables). Replicating that in New York, however, presented challenges. Like, how do you sell a city whose identity is not so neatly pigeonholed, a city populated by fierce tribes proclaiming their individuality? By giving them the thing almost no one in New York has: space.

The Ace is big. A relic of an earlier era, it offers plenty of room, not just in the lobby but in Liberty Hall, the basement bar and performance space, and in the restaurants, and the shops, and the hallways and corridors that lead between all these pockets. You can just hang out here in a way you never could at a W Hotel, the embodiment of an earlier hotel-as-nightclub era. It's the hotel as hipster mall.



Ryan McGinley and Kirsten Dunst at an after party during Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week last February. Marc Stamas/Getty Images

A similar dynamic is at work across the country at Ace Palm Springs. The design there is much lighter — white-painted concrete, canvas sailcloth, snapshots clipped to headboards, djellaba-style robes in every room. It's midcentury motel chic, a stop on a fantasy road trip. The clientele there, and in New York, are

self-selecting, and the Ace is less a gatekept democracy than an anarcho-libertarian paradise. Unlike, say, Soho House or the Standard, there's no sense of exclusivity; you don't derive status from membership, you get it by deciding to go in the first place. It's almost Calvinist.

But paradise is never perfect. A couple of guests in New York complained that they had to show their key cards at the entrance on crowded weekend nights. One busy evening, the employees gently tried to eject Chris Luna, a dating coach, and his trainee pickup artists. Nor has the neighborhood been transformed — gentrification hasn't yet displaced the vendors of bootleg perfume, gray-market cellphones and marcasite jewelry.

Some people, in fact, hate the Ace — although that doesn't necessarily keep them away. One couple told me the Ace was too hip for them, but they loved the pickle-backs. "This would be a shot of whiskey chased by a shot of pickle juice," the young man said, observing the lobby scene with disdain. "And the pickle juice here is house-made, therefore it is the best pickle juice."

Others have sharper criticisms. "You go because it has good backdrops to get photographed against," Choire Sicha, the Internet gadfly, wrote in an e-mail. "You can check in on all the blogs and Twitters and Tumblrs for pics later; you can totally compete for its Foursquare mayorship. It's sort of like a Las Vegas version of New York City. Though to be fair to all this: it's a far more democratic society than, like, the Met Costume Gala! To be fair to the kids partying too: maybe I'm just too old!"

Another prominent naysayer is Mr. Barron, the Ace partner whose ideas about "nodal points" the hotel would seem to embody. During the development, Mr. Barron said, his relationship soured with Mr. Calderwood and with GFI Capital Resources Group, the company that invested \$140 million in the project, to the point where Mr. Barron withdrew from involvement.

“I didn’t want to be in big business,” he said. He seemed to feel the developers — whom even the Breslin’s Ken Friedman told me, not entirely facetiously, were “creeps, like most developers are” — ignored him, as did Mr. Calderwood, who’d been surrounded, Mr. Barron thought, by sycophants and overwhelmed by New York itself, a “ruthless, demanding, fairly inhuman place.” Mr. Calderwood’s drinking didn’t exactly help, Mr. Barron said.

“Just so you know, I’m very proud of my sobriety,” Mr. Calderwood said. “You get to a certain age, and you get to a certain point, where you realize this is just, like, dragging me down. It’s not fun anymore. I’m not enjoying it.” After a stint in rehab, he’s now been sober for five months.

Even so, the falling-out represented a shift in the direction of the Ace Hotel Group. Mr. Calderwood is now buying out the interest in Palm Springs, New York and the Ace name from his partners. To hear the partners tell it, this was almost inevitable. Neither Mr. Weigel nor Mr. Herrick particularly likes to travel, each said, and Mr. Barron, who hasn’t visited Ace New York since it opened, admitted: “I think I have been proven wrong in some respects — happily. I think that New York and Palm Springs seem to be doing well, but they’re not necessarily the situations that we wanted to be working in, any of us.”

It looks as if Mr. Calderwood is taking the partnership’s dissolution in stride. The New York hotel, he said, “feels like Ace — it feels like what we intended.” And anyway, now he’s on to the next project, an Ace in Los Angeles, or maybe Chicago, or maybe Tokyo — wherever he can meet cool artists and buy cheap lamps.

“For something like this,” he said, “there’s a lot of pieces of the puzzle. It is not just an interesting design, it is not just the right choice of typeface, it is not finding the right executives or team — it is all those pieces of the puzzle. I love putting all those pieces of the puzzle together. I get off on it.”

One night, after a few hours of hanging out at the Ace, I finished my nearly perfect lamb burger at the Breslin, paid my bill and caught a taxi outside. As the driver, Ayman Eltal, turned down Broadway, he asked me, "Is that a restaurant?" Briefly, I explained the Ace's history, and Mr. Eltal let me in on a secret.

"Whenever it's slow," he said, "I can pick people up here. Not many drivers know that."

Correction: February 13, 2011

An article on Jan. 30 about the Ace Hotel in Manhattan referred incorrectly to McMaster-Carr, which supplied a lamp in the hotel. It is based in Chicago, not California, and it is an industrial supply company, not a manufacturer.