

Standard Fare

MONDAY, MAY 20, 2002



LOS ANGELES — Not long after Andre Balazs bought the marble and stainless-steel former Valhalla of

Superior Oil, he sent a pirate flag up a rooftop pole.

It's as much a funny-bone gesture of the hotelier responsible for the chic and cheeky temp quarters of West Hollywood's The Standard, Hollywood's Chateau Marmont and New York's Mercer, as it is a friendly overture to the kind of cultural takeover Balazs hopes his latest project — and latest Standard — will be to the city's reviving downtown.

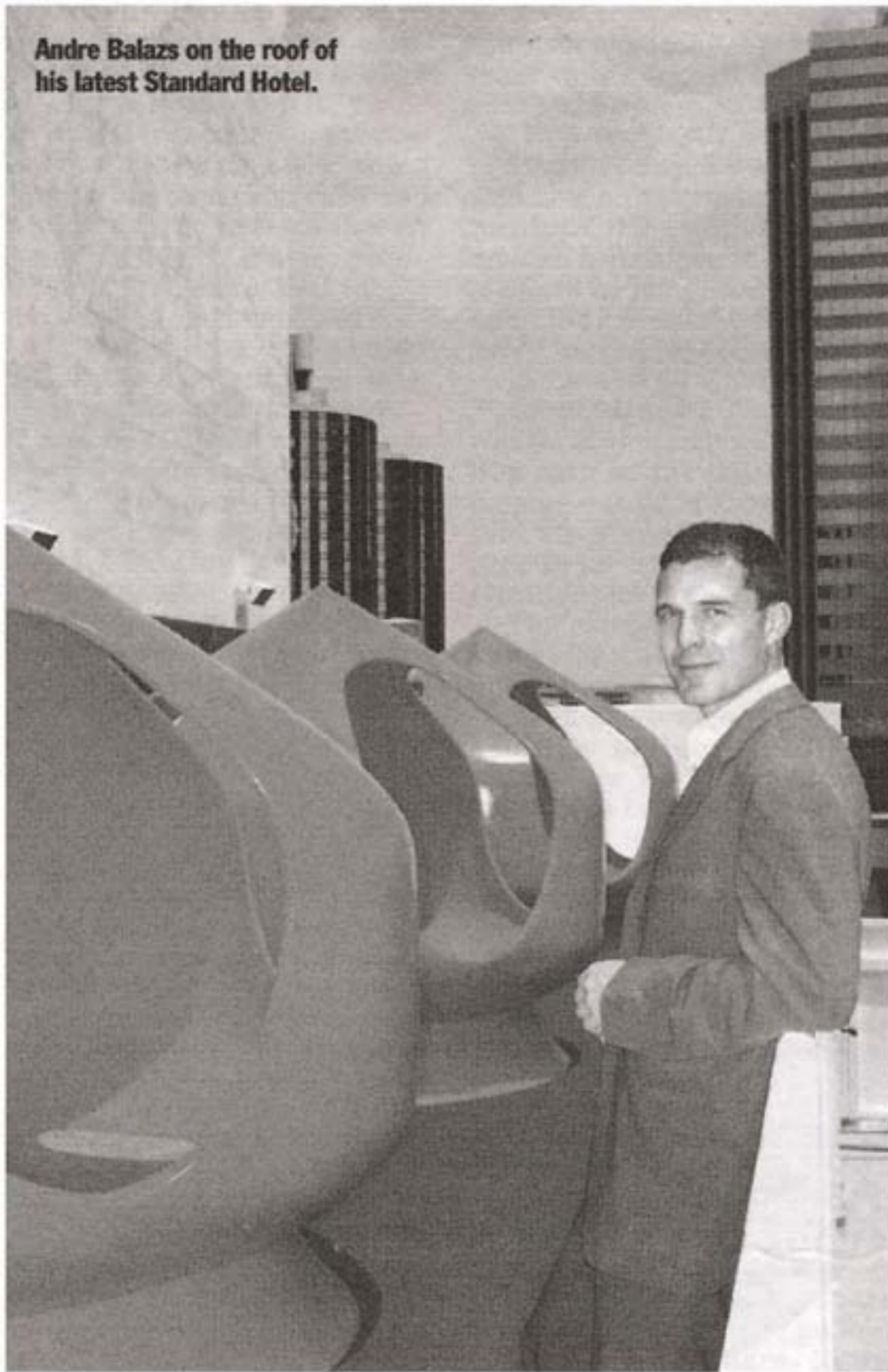
"We just decided when we moved here to put it up," he enthuses, a few days before guests began checking in on Thursday. "It was like the aliens are in town and we're taking over."

The invasion unofficially began Saturday night. On the roof, with its synthetic grass strip for bocce ball and Twister-dotted dance floor, 150 of Balazs' closest and newest Angeleno pals and extended family were treated to dinner along with a striking view of the surrounding mirrored and concrete corporate monuments in this district known as Bunker Hill. On Tuesday night, Jane's Addiction and Ja Rule will strike up the bands for a Sony Playstation party, followed by Friday's official opening pajama bash featuring the Velvet Hammer burlesque troupe and cohosted by Charlize Theron, Sofia Coppola, Kirsty Hume (hubby Donovan Leitch is helping organize the event) and others.

While the night promises all the "fun and playfulness" that are clearly part of Balazs' mantra for the hotel (a foosball table is at the valet station), it's also the kind of nighttime recreation a swinging capitalist lord of the Sixties and Seventies could've indulged in. And that, too, is Balazs' plan.

Think Malcolm Forbes, John DeLorean, he offers. "These were tremendously interesting businessmen, mavericks, who also had a lot of style." As did Superior Oil's Keck family, who had the mettle, or ego, to sign off on Claud Beelman's modern design in 1956. The Los Angeles architect erected a temple to business that parlayed all the technological advancements, self-confidence and future optimism of corporate America. Even the 12 stories of fire stairwell are sheathed in marble. Neighboring landmarks include the Byzantine-

Andre Balazs on the roof of his latest Standard Hotel.



Egyptian-moderne main campus of the city public library and the very private power lodge, the California Club.

The S-shaped, bronze door handles that once denoted Superior — and now Standard — sealed the deal when Balazs first visited the building 26 months ago and didn't think twice about snapping it up. The entrance is outfitted with stainless-steel corporate symbols such as a 15-city wall clock and a frieze over the front doors illustrating the oil process. "Isn't this gorgeous," declares Balazs, as he frequently does throughout the tour. He signed up the space, along with the exterior, with its white marble and stainless-steel spandrels, on the federal registry of historical landmarks.

The imposing escalators in the lobby were installed by the last tenants, the Union Bank of California. But even these have been embraced by Balazs and his design collaborators, Hank Koning of Koning-Eizenberg in Los Angeles, and Shawn Hausman, a former production designer.

Overhead hangs a giant, white Calder-style mobile. A 150-foot, hot pink sofa, the Omnibus, designed by Vladimir Kagan, snakes sharply around the room, and at one point curls around the DJ booth, boxing it in. Nearby is a mirrored pool table. A glass wall peers out to the sunken seating area and fireplace in the courtyard. "With a hotel, the public spaces should serve as your living room," he notes.

The registration area — attended by a great-looking staff outfitted in YSL- and Courrèges-inspired looks — is accented by a black Plexiglas flat map with red light points indicating Standard Holdings, real, imagined and planned (branches are in the works for Miami, London and New York).

"It's very SPECTRE, don't you think?" he muses.

The first of two restaurants is a sharp, lemon-colored space that spills out onto the courtyard. There's also a "gentleman's barbershop" called Flint, complete with a Dunhill-stocked smoking lounge.

As for the rooms, they are anything but the closets that have become customary in boutique hotels, including the Mercer. Ranging from "cheap" (\$95 for 280 square feet) to "gigantic" (\$225 for 460 square feet) to the bigger penthouse (\$500 for 1,000 square feet), they creatively maximize space for the weekday business guest and weekend partyer. In the smallest rooms, a glass shower wall also offers a voyeuristic view from the bed just a couple of feet away.

There are the whimsical and personable details that have become a signature of Balazs' hotels: an alphabet of amenities (DVD and CD players; T1 lines); Mr. Bubble and tiny Patron bottles in the mini bar; specially designed icons, even for the toilet tissue roll; a "plushie" stuffed animal for VIPs. There are white-tiled tubs and 8-foot-long beds large enough for four guests — or an NBA player. The Lakers' Staples Center, after all, is only a mile or so away.

Back on the roof, Balazs continues basking in his newest home away from home. He's standing near the long, slender pool, next to the three repainted, teardrop iron pods filled with vibrating, heated water beds. Against the skyscrapers, it's almost alien. Then again, it's also totally L.A.

— Rose Apodaca Jones

“It was like the aliens are in town and we're taking over.”

— Andre Balazs