

GRUPO HABITA



AUGUST





Moisés Micha, the co-founder of Grupo Habita's collection of chic hotels, talks about his inspirations, building his house, and how to be a VIP guest in your own home.

INTERVIEW BY DUNG NGO
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ADRIAN GAUT

Bringing Work Home



*COVER: The sculpture
Unfolding/Flip Chair by the
Mexican artist Damián Ortega.*

*PREVIOUS SPREAD: A Pierre
Jeanneret table stands in front
of the living room's pivoting
floor-to-ceiling windows.*

*THIS PAGE: The exterior of
Micha's home in Las Lomas.*

*OPPOSITE: Canadian artist
Terence Gower's sculpture
The Couple terminates the
view from the front door into
the interior of the house.*

DUNG NGO: You grew up here in Mexico City. Do you remember the first time you stayed in a hotel?

MOISES MICHA: Yes, the hotel was the Pierre Marqués in Acapulco. At that time, Acapulco was not the thing that it is today. It was an old fashioned hotel, on the ocean but very low. Normally we did not go to a hotel for holidays—we would go to our grandparents' home in Cuernavaca, so this was a very special thing. The big memory that we had was of me and my brothers and sister being prohibited to open the mini bar. The parents were like: "Oh, no, you cannot touch that!" It was a lot of fun.

DN: Was that when you decided that maybe one day you will open hotels?

MM: Oh, that was much later [laughs]. Before being in the hotel industry, I was an investment banker. I did banking for 17 years, and on the side I started a small real estate company with Carlos Couturier, my business partner. We started with small projects in Polanco, converting these large houses into office space. Polanco had been very residential, but then

retail starts to come into the neighborhood, with restaurants and shops; and then some offices wanted to be in the area. We have beautiful properties where we preserve the architecture instead of tearing them down, as was the practice then. We found that there was interest in the historic architecture, mainly by foreign companies at the time. We had tenants such as the *Wall Street Journal* and Christie's that didn't want to go to a high-rise building and wanted something a little more personal and unique.

At one point there was an apartment building where the original Hotel Habita is now, and Carlos had the idea of turning it into a hotel, with the intention of giving it to a third party to run it. But we didn't find the right people, so maybe six months before finalizing construction we hired a general manager and a chef and created a team.

I was still working at the bank at the time, and we needed more investors, so we invited my two brothers and the four of us became partners.





OPPOSITE: The verdant hanging garden, as seen from the living room, was planted by the architect Alberto Kalach himself.

DN: And all of a sudden you're hoteliers.

MM: At that time I was working for the Bank of Boston here in Mexico City and the CEO said to me, "Moisés, you have to be honest with yourself..." So I said, "Okay, now I have to focus on the hotels."

DN: Banker by day, hotelier by night. What year was that?

MM: That was 2004, just before opening CONDESAdf, which was a big project for us.

DN: The Hotel Habita was designed by the Mexican architect Enrique Norten, but you decided to select a designer outside of Mexico for CONDESAdf. How did you choose India Mahdavi for this project?

MM: With Habita it was all too simple. Enrique and ourselves decided, "Okay, this is a white canvas, what do we do?" And then we went showroom shopping in New York. "Oh, the Eames chairs and B&B Italia would be good..." And a couple of custom-made things or so, but it was not an designed interior environment.

DN: So you had no interior designer on Habita?

MM: No, it was Enrique and ourselves. But with the Condesa property, it was a landmark façade from 1928,

very French with limestone, and we thought that for sure we needed to bring an interior designer to the team. At the time Carlos was the one that deals with the new projects; he was in Miami and saw the Townhouse, which was super fun, and it was designed by India. We contacted her and she came to Mexico City. She really loved it and then everything started from that.

But CONDESAdf was other scale for us, even if it's only 40 rooms versus 36 at Habita: we have several restaurants, a rooftop terrace, and a nightclub in the basement.

DN: Both you and Carlos travel a lot. What were some of the hotels that were inspirational for you?

MM: In Mexico we always had small properties in beach towns, managed by a couple, a family, or that kind of thing; but never in the city. So obviously an inspiration was Ian Schrager with the Morgans Hotel, and then the Paramount and the Royalton and so on. In 1996 we decided to make a competition for the Habita, where we invited four different architecture firms for proposals—that's how TEN Arquitectos, with Enrique Norten and Bernardo Gómez Pimenta, got the job.

OPPOSITE: View from the kitchen towards the lightwell and the entry hall of the living floor.

THIS PAGE: The open raw-steel staircase is a new insertion by Kalach into the old structure.

NEXT SPREAD: Filtered light pours into the kitchen, with an artwork by Jose Dávila on the wall.



DN: So from the beginning design was very important to you.

MM: Super important. Even with the first one I remember we won a really nice prize with Habita, I think it was *Newsweek* Magazine’s “Good Designs is Good Business.” So that really stuck with us.

DN: India Mahdavi’s name was known in design circles before 2004 but it was Condesa DF that I always thought of as her first important project. And so in a way you had a big hand in creating her reputation and her career. And all your hotels now, you seem to have this strategy of working with younger designers and architects and helping to take their career to another level.

MM: And we also have fun during that process. For us it’s very fulfilling to have different teams each time, which we always try to do. There are some exceptions: with Enrique, we did a second hotel in New York. But he had an office in New York and the place was very important to him.

DN: How do you and Carlos choose the architects and designers? Do they come to you or do you just go and look, and ask people for advice?

MM: All of the above. Carlos might be in Paris for a period of time asking around, meeting people. Parisian interior architects have been very good to work with. I think they understand interiors because in Paris they cannot build from the ground up; they are experts in interiors. And also the idea of luxury—they know.

DN: Who are some of the firms that you’re working with now?

MM: Right now it’s very exciting. We have this expansion going and we’re now working on six, and potentially eight or nine new hotels.

We’re working on another hotel in Mexico City, just behind the Cathedral with views to the main square—a very impressive old building with two patios. On this project we’re working with Jorge Ambrosi and Gabriela Etchegaray. Then we’re working in Puebla, a second property with Frida Escobedo. She’s





super talented and it was just announced that she will design the Serpentine Pavilion this summer. Because of the size of these two projects, both firms are doing everything—architecture and interior design. It’s nice when it’s a small project that it feels integrated, and with only one mind behind it.

And then we’re doing a new property in La Paz, Baja California, and the architecture is by Max von Werz. He’s a German guy living here in Mexico City and he designed the OMR Gallery here. This is a great property because it’s on the beach in La Paz, which has these old islands in the Sea of Cortez that are natural preserves, so you cannot build on them, which is a really nice thing. And the interiors are being done by JAUNE—these two women from Marseille and based in Paris. We feel that they understand the ocean and the nautical life since they grew up on the beaches of Marseille. The hotel has that feeling of a cruise, it’s very, very special.

And finally the fourth one that we have already started construction is in Merida. We found a great abandoned hotel right in the center of the city, one block away from the cathedral. And because it was already built, we thought it was more of an interior architecture project. For this one we are working with a duo, Christoph Zeller and Ingrid Moye. He’s German. She’s Mexican. They are based in Mexico City and Berlin. They both met doing the Tate Modern extension with Herzog & de Meuron. But at the same time, they are still very young.

DN: It seems important to you to find properties that are existing historical buildings; do you make an effort to do this?

MM: We do feel very comfortable with that. For a city hotel, being in an area that is already a center of town, it’s very probable that it would be an existing building. In the case of New York or Monterrey, where it was a ground up, it’s more because there was nothing there. It was a car garage in New York and just a piece of land in Monterrey.

But, yeah, it’s a nice challenge to bring life again to a building. In Chicago that building had been abandoned for 30 years or 40 years and so it’s nice.

DN: It’s more expensive to rehab a building sometimes, no?

MM: It’s more expensive but there are tax credits that the government will give you if you do that. So at the end, it’s comparable.

DN: And sometimes you get a much better building.

MM: Of course.

DN: What about downtown Los Angeles, is this an old building as well?

MM: It’s a century-old traditional red brick building, a really nice property; it used to be a factory right there on Fourth and South Alameda, and it will have 66 rooms. And we are thrilled: we just got all the permits approved after a lot of work and a lot of time. And for that project we are using Jorge Gracia, an architect from Tijuana that we had already worked with at the Villa de Guadalupe in the wine region. And the interior design is by a French firm Studio Henry.

And finally in Austin, we’re working with Rick Joy, who we like a lot. It’s in east Austin, so it’s a city hotel, but the location is on the edge of the river, so it’s facing nature.

DN: So after 20 years of building over 15 hotels, you just finally built a house for yourself.

MM: Yes. Which was actually very complicated. I knew I wanted that property, but the house was not for sale. But I knew who the owner was, so I reached to her and I tried to convince her. And I brought Alberto [Kalach] to see the property, which actually was very ugly.

DN: So why did you choose this particular house to pursue?

MM: Because in that area, which is very nice part of the city, most of the plots are very big, for big families, with big yards. For me that is not possible. This house is compact with three stories, the perfect size.

So when I had the chance to go inside the property and see it, I brought Alberto to ask, “Oh, is there something very special that can be done?” And he said, “Yeah, this house is a fun and very interesting challenge, let’s do it.” Because the existing house had no windows, it was very bizarre. And there were three separate apartments.

DN: So in fact it’s considered to be a renovation, not a new building?

MM: It’s a renovation. Under today’s laws, I wouldn’t be able to build this height, and I’d have to keep some percentage of the lot unbuilt. So, we got all those benefits of having an old building. Alberto kept the original structure and work from that. After our first meeting, I said, “Here’s a big challenge: the house doesn’t have a garden.” So, before the design had a garage but



OPPOSITE: The dining room is furnished with a custom wood table by Nicolas Schuybroek and Marc Merckx. THIS PAGE: Moisés Micha, photographed by Ana Hop. NEXT SPREAD: (left) A chair by Frida Escobedo overlooks the exterior staircase to the rooftop terrace. (right) The bathroom is lined in arabescato marble, with a Noritoshi Hirakawa photograph of the Casa Luis Barragán's bathroom.

it was not covered; Alberto managed to make a garden on top the ground floor. That made everything works nicely.

DN: Were there any lessons that you learned from building hotels that you brought to the house?

MM: Definitely. Being certain that things will age properly and using only a few materials in the house; making it very natural, comfortable.

DN: It's four stories; for a single person it may be the most luxurious hotel suite.

MM: The nice thing is that I actually use all the different spaces a lot. So, yeah, I have a good time at home [laughs].

DN: You worked with other architects for the interior and the furniture...

MM: At some point I felt that I knew how I wanted to live, I thought it would be really spectacular. But then maybe I would like to have the feeling of an art space, or something completely minimal. At the time that I was working with Alberto on the renovation we were working with Nicolas Schuybroek and Marc Merckx on the Robey hotel in Chicago. So I asked them if they would be interested in doing the house's interiors,

and we made a really nice collaboration. They designed the kitchen and the built-in furniture, the dining table and the desk on my bedroom. It was a nice mix to have some custom-made furniture designed by them, some pieces just off-the-shelf, and some vintage pieces. So the three groups in my personal point, I think they work very nicely.

DN: And it's also a formula that you apply to your hotels.

MM: Of course.

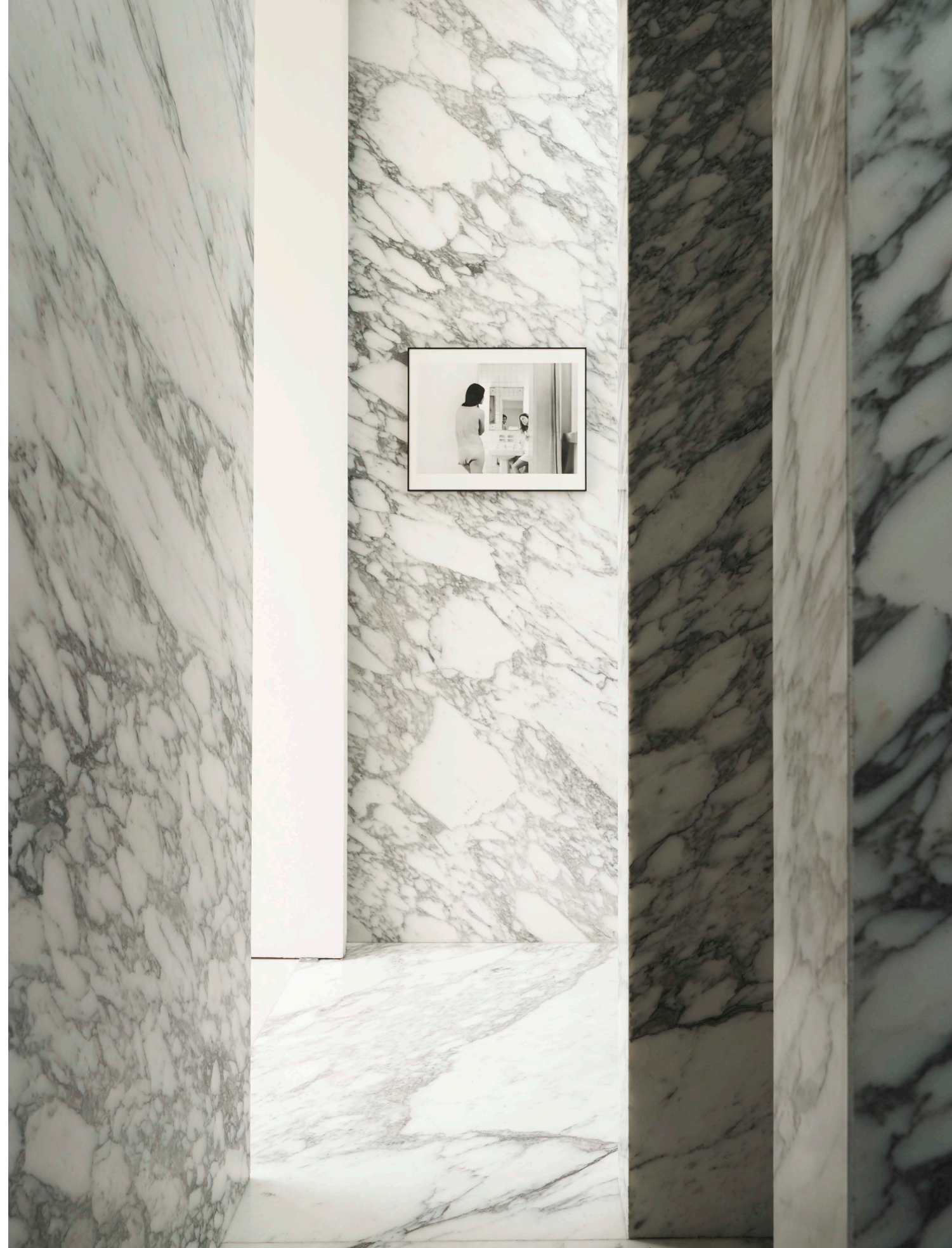
DN: One last question: After building this house, you obviously learn many things about yourself. Do you feel like you have the need to build another house?

MM: I think it might be addictive, you know? Now that we're working in America, it's like, "Oh, it would be great if I found a house there that I can renovate..." Or maybe more of a weekend thing, something on the beach in the coast of Oaxaca. It will be a very small thing—maybe a couple of rooms just to make something for myself, yeah.

DN: I look forward to seeing your next house.

MM: Yeah, for sure you will be invited. +





Internationally awarded Grupo Habita is the pioneer of lifestyle hotels in Latin America. A hotel group boasting trend-setting properties that are consistently breaking new grounds.

MEXICO CITY
HOTEL HABITA
CONDESA DF
DISTRITO CAPITAL
DOWNTOWN MEXICO
DOWNTOWN BEDS

PUEBLA
LA PURIFICADORA

MONTERREY
HABITA MTY

GUADALAJARA
CASA FAYETTE

VERACRUZ
AZÚCAR
MAISON COUTURIER

ACAPULCO
HOTEL BOCA CHICA

PUERTO ESCONDIDO
HOTEL ESCONDIDO

NEW YORK CITY
HOTEL AMERICANO

CHICAGO
THE ROBEY

COMING SOON
CATEDRAL / MEXICO CITY
Ambrosi Etchegaray Arquitectos

HABITA CUATRO CUATROS, ENSENADA
Mauricio Rocha / Gabriela Carrillo

LA PAZ, BAJA CALIFORNIA SUR
Max von Werz / JAUNE

MAZUNTE, COAST OF OAXACA
Le Coadic-Scotto Architecture

MERIDA
Zeller & Moye

OAXACA CITY
Alberto Kalach

PUEBLA
Frida Escobedo

LOS ANGELES ARTS DISTRICT
Jorge Gracia / Studio Henry

EAST AUSTIN
Rick Joy Architects

HOTEL HABITA
MEXICO CITY

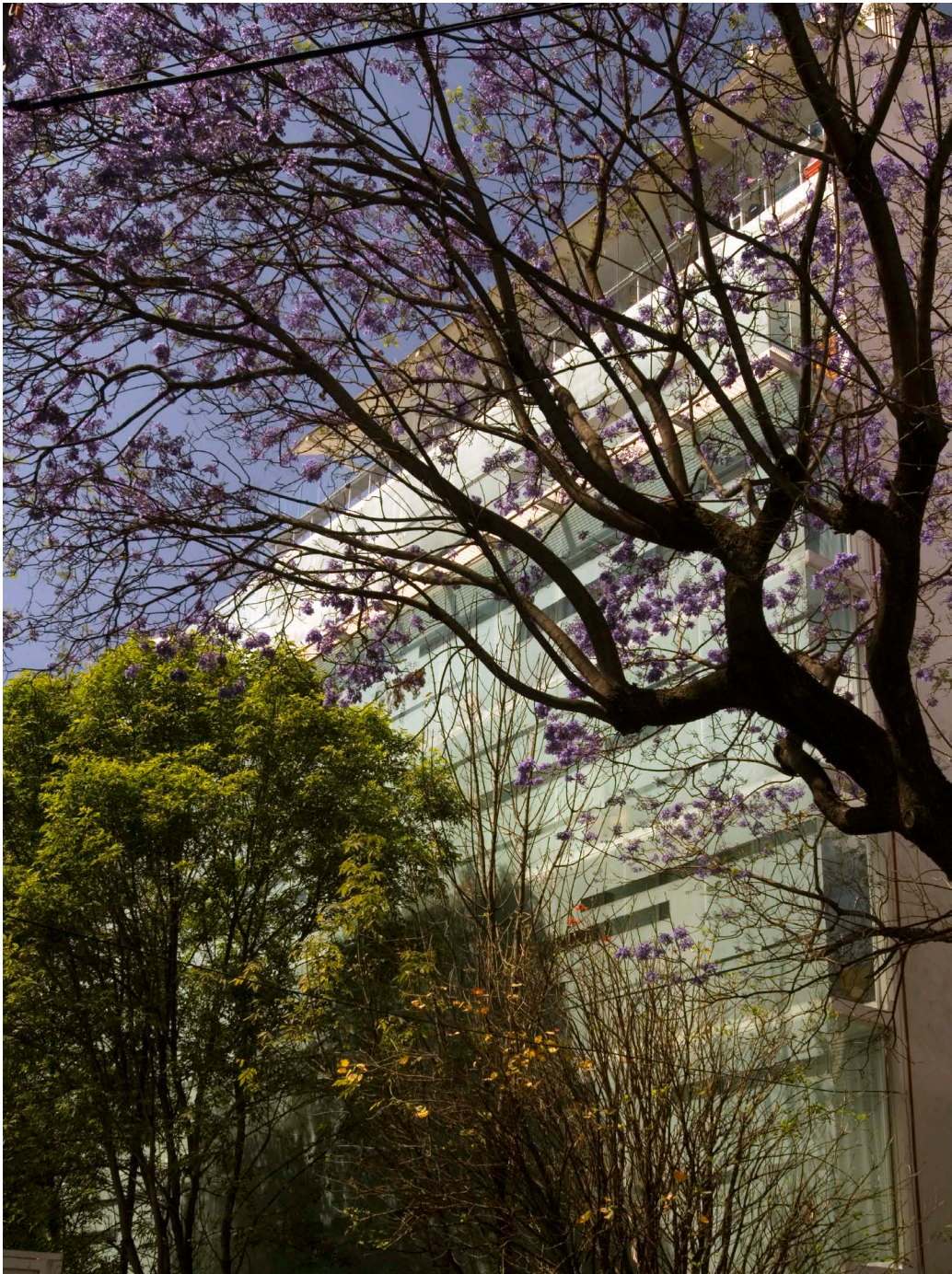


Photo: Undine Prohl

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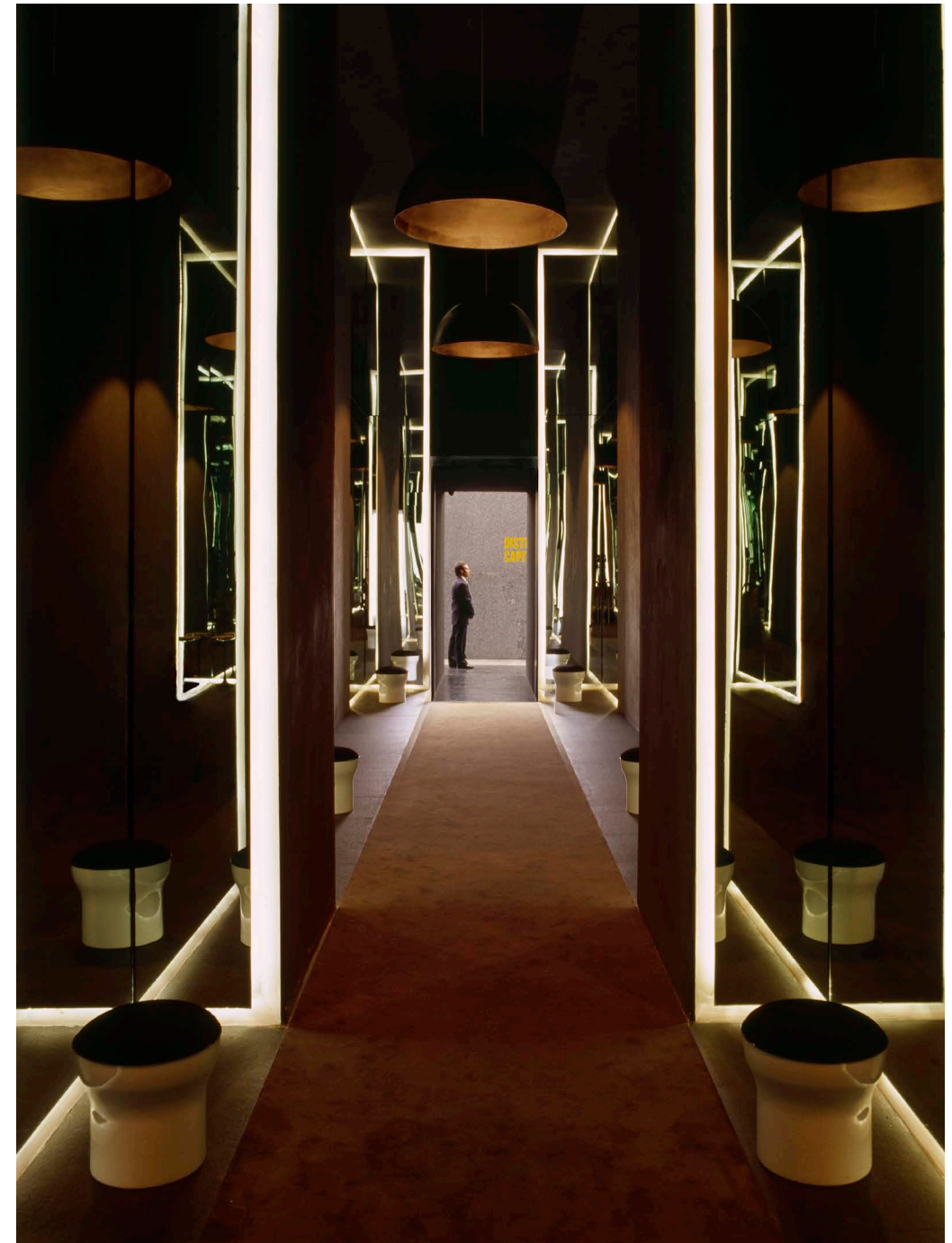


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Photo: Undine Prohl

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DOWNTOWN BEDS
MEXICO CITY



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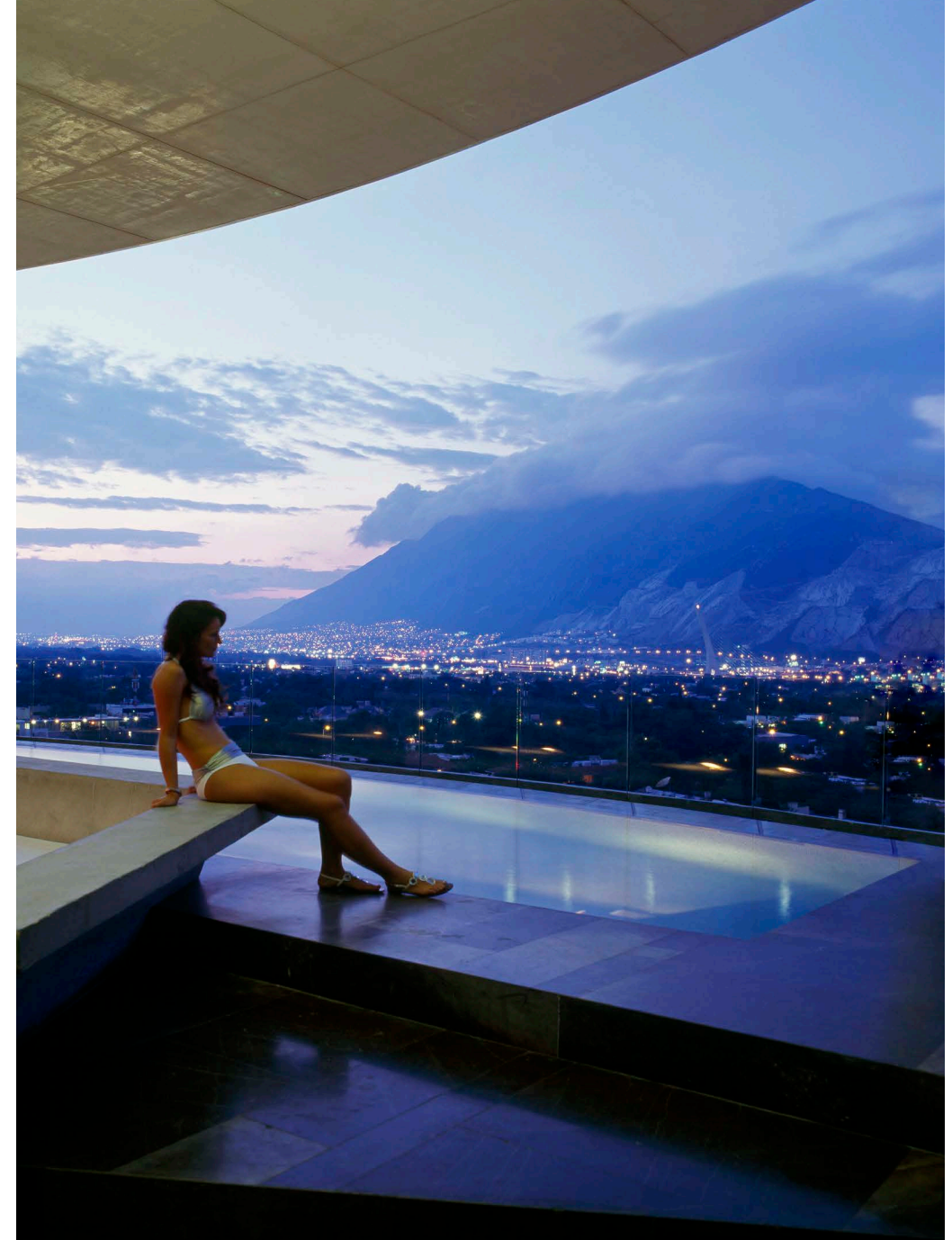


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Photo: Undine Prohl

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Photo: Undine Prohl

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PUERTO ESCONDIDO



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HOTEL AMERICANO

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Photo: Adrian Gaut

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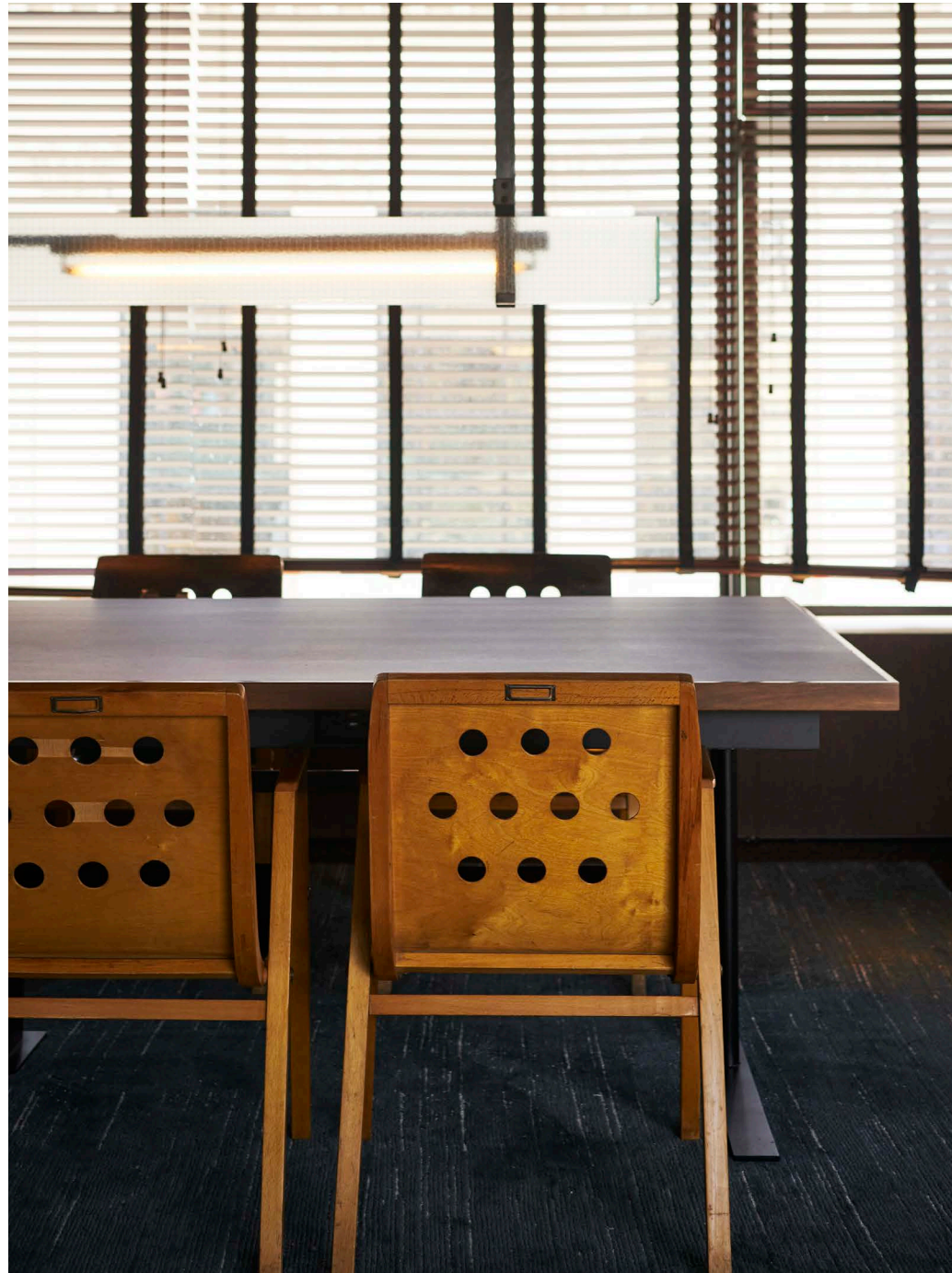


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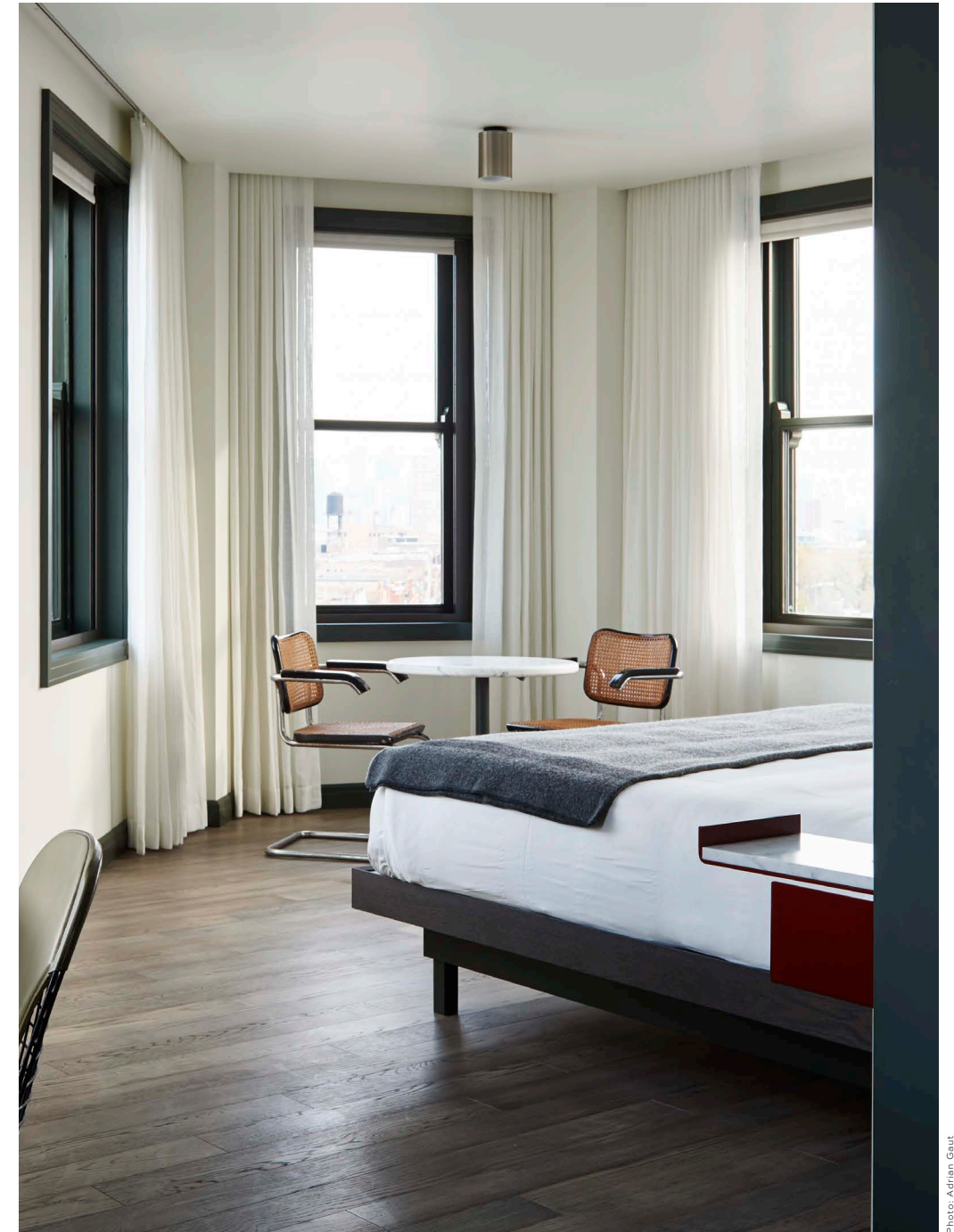


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