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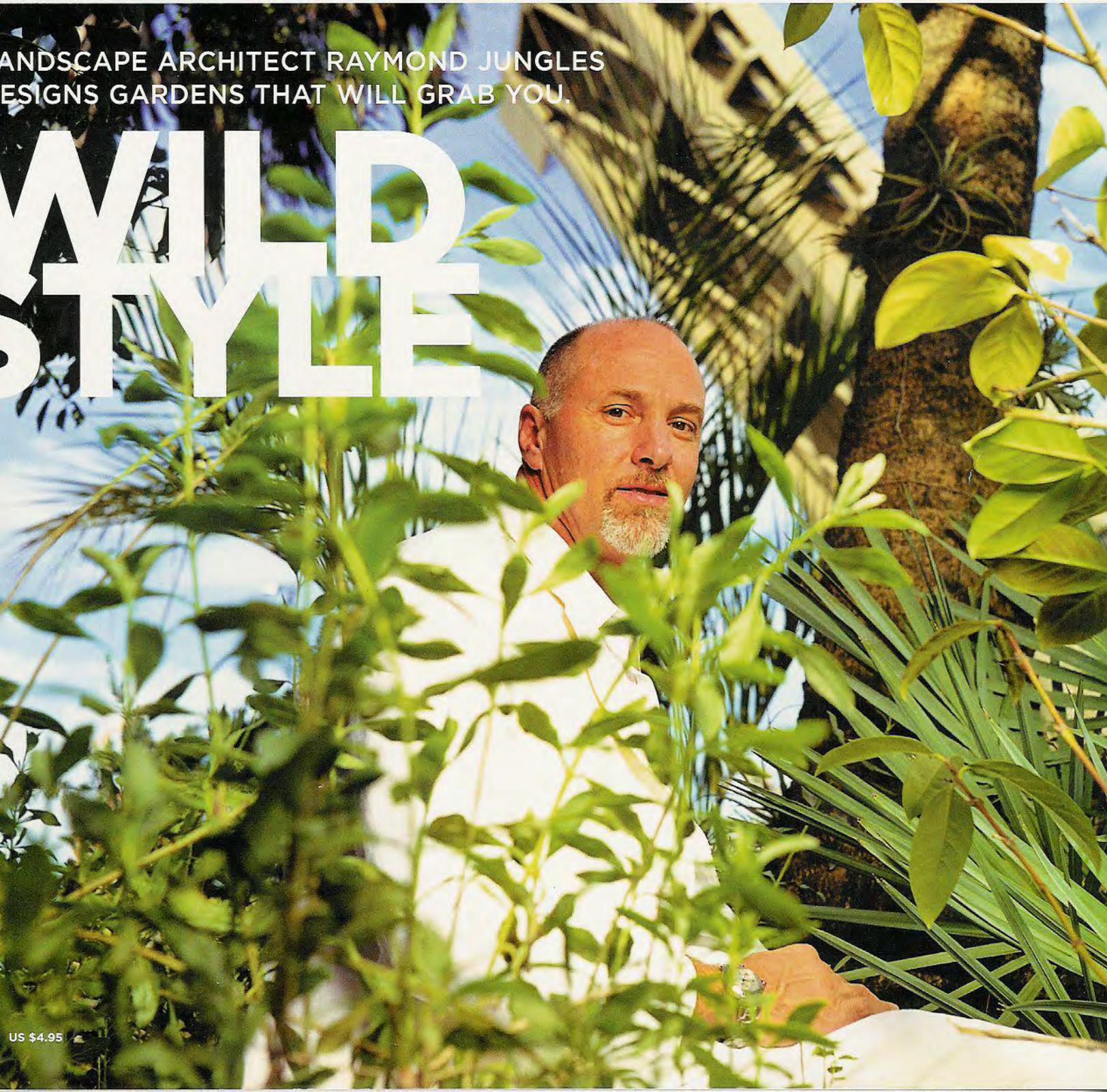
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WILD STYLE







THE GLITTER DOME

CAL FORTIS'S REDESIGN OF THE COMEJO THEATRE IS A HIGH-CONCEPT HOMAGE TO NEW YORK'S PALLADIUM AND THE ERA OF DIRTY DISCO.

BY BRETT O'BOURKE PHOTOS BY ROBIN HILL

"It's going to happen," says architect Cal Fortis, who is sitting in a small office in the Cameo Theatre, chain-smoking Marlboro Light 100s, talking about his attempt to remake his world-famous crobar nightclub, of which he is a part owner, into a whole new nightclub that looks as little like his previous one as possible. "Everyone is going to compare it to crobar. It's inevitable," he says, exhaling a long stream of smoke into the air.

For years, Fortis and business partner Ken Smith, along with various investors, owned a series of restaurants and nightclubs throughout the Chicago area, for which they employed a string of architects and designers. "I'm very hands-on, so I basically had a bunch of little apprenticeships," he says. "There came a point, in my thirties, where I realized I didn't want to be 40 and be responsible for [just] standing at the door of my next nightclub." Fortis went back to school: restaurant and club owner by day, architecture grad student by night. "I figured I could, at least, design and build stuff for us and potentially use architecture as an exit strategy down the road."

In 1992, Fortis and Smith opened a nightclub called crobar in what was then a low-rent neighborhood in Chicago. People liked it. Some of those people had in their possession large piles of money, money that was used, in part, to bankroll a Miami version of the club.

From Miami Beach real-estate magnate Zori Hayon, Fortis and Smith secured a 10-year lease at 1445 Washington Avenue. The space, then known as the Cameo Theatre, opened in 1938 as a movie palace, but by the early '90s it was hosting everything from boxing matches to poetry nights and punk concerts. The venue was a favorite of concert promoters; over the years acts like Lou Reed, the Meat Puppets, Psycho Daisies, and the Dead Kennedys,

along with Michael Capponi and Gary James's legendary Disco Inferno parties, gave teens a good reason to lie to their parents about where they were going at night

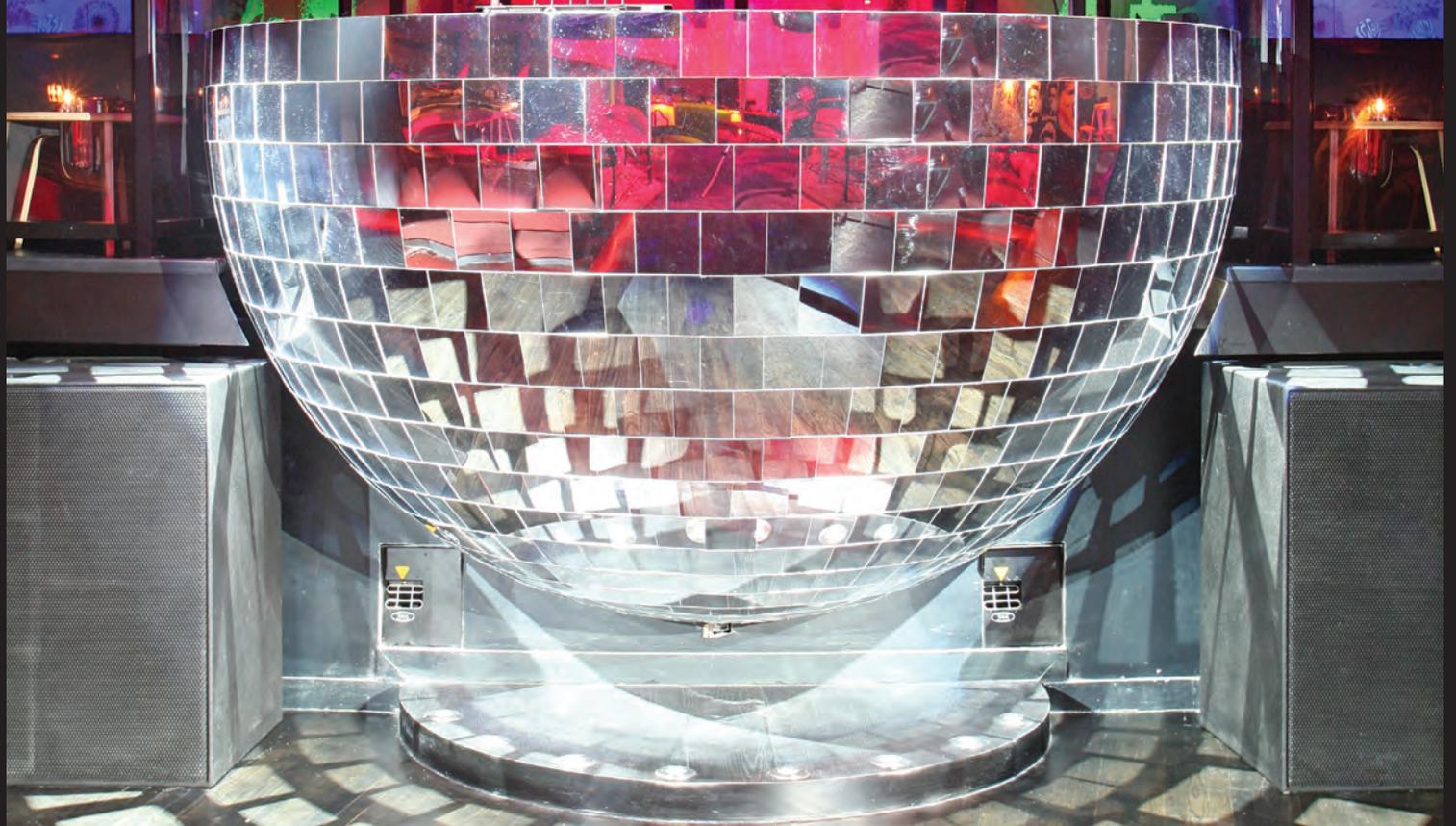
When Fortis and Smith took over, the place was beat to hell. They spent six months and about \$4 million turning it into a cavernous, upscale megaclub with state-of-the-art lights and sound, and a posh upstairs VIP section in what used to be the theatre's balcony. The club opened December 30, 1999, just in time for the new millennium. (On a personal note: I was at the next night's New Year's Eve blowout—with a smoking-hot blonde, cracked out of my head, listening to Moby perform—and I can attest to the sheer immensity of the crowd, the volume, the *experience*. I'll stop there, since a) my youthful exploits at crobar have little to do with architecture, and b) my wife is sure to read this, as she is the club's marketing manager.)

Now, eight years later—an eternity in the fickle world of nightlife, in which two successful years is considered a good run—Fortis again finds himself charged with reinventing a beat-up nightclub in the historic space. For starters, Fortis (along with architect Orlando Lamas, an associate with Fortis's firm, Bigtime Design Studios) gutted as much as possible of what was quintessentially crobar, including the huge columns and raised DJ booth. The one defining feature he was left with was the massive proscenium arch at the east end of the main room. It not only got the architect thinking about the space's origins as a theatre but its rebirth as a nightlife venue during the glory days of the '80s, when nightlife was dirty, sexy, raw.

Famously, the dirtiest of "dirty disco"—a term Fortis uses liberally to describe the vibe he's going after—went down in the mid-'80s at Ian Schrager and Steve Rubell's post-Studio 54 New York sin bin, the







Palladium. “There was a freer sensibility to nightlife then—gays, straights, freaks, trannies all mixed on the dance floor,” says Fortis. “Drugs were OK, beepers were going off at 11 o’clock.... I want to sort of bring back that darkness, that danger and sex appeal; *Scarface* meets the dark side of *Saturday Night Fever* meets Brazilian hooker, in an analog rather than digital world.”

Coincidentally, like Fortis’s club, the Palladium, designed by famed Japanese architect Arata Isozaki (his first U.S. commission; the second was the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art), was a discothèque housed in a former movie palace. It was also the first nightclub to be considered seriously as architecture. A week after it opened, in May 1985, *New York Times* architecture critic Paul Goldberger (now of *The New Yorker*) declared the room “a spectacular interior, full of light and movement and genuine spatial drama.”

For his new club—which reopened in February as the Cameo—Fortis has drawn heavily on the aesthetic language of the Palladium. The most obvious nod is the floor-to-ceiling superstructure, shaped like an elongated tic-tac-toe board. A huge elliptical bar at its base cuts off the front third of the main room, solving one of Fortis’s major challenges: how to make the big space work as multiple smaller spaces but still open up for the crowds on big DJ nights.

“What I get up front is a 1,600-square-foot bar,” says Fortis. “Inside the structure will be video screens that close off the big room, so we could have people come in, like, on a Tuesday to what is essentially a small bar, but with big-club architecture that doesn’t look like we closed off the rest of the room with curtains.”

The architect sucked up more space in the main room by shrinking the dance floor, bringing the DJ booth down to ground level, and setting rows of long, arching blood-red leather banquettes along the sides. A metal rail now sets the boundary for the gropefest that will become the dance floor. The DJ booth, a 10-foot-diameter disco ball with its top cut off, is certain to become the most celebrated aspect of the room.

“It floats just off the ground,” says Fortis. “[It’s] a \$30,000 piece. I took an actual DJ booth, put it into AutoCad and scaled it up



Cal Fortis in his element

times 10, which is a [architect] Steven Holl trick, oversizing human objects to gigantic scale. It’s ridiculous.” Three more outsized disco balls hang overhead, which is really quite a lot, perhaps too much, disco ball for any room.

The other major nod to the Palladium is the feature wall, framed by the now fully revealed proscenium arch. Rather than the Palladium’s bank of televisions, huge Lexan panels have been printed with, on one side, Warhol-like images of Marilyn Monroe and, on the other, dollar bills. In this case, though, Marilyn is punk: She sports a safety pin in her eyebrow; butterflies and skulls float around her. The dollar bills are stamped with little Tony Montanas. The scene changes depending which side of the panel is lit.

For the Palladium, Schragger and Rubell commissioned murals and installations from artists Francesco Clemente, Kenny Scharf, and Keith Haring. Fortis followed suit. The exterior hull of the DJ booth was fashioned by a sculptor. Graphic designer Sean Drake made the images for the feature wall, as well as graffiti and vintage concert poster-covered wallpapers. Pop artist David “Lebo” LeBatard created a mural of a hip-swinging, erect-nippled Latin-looking woman, whose hair and heart-shaped vagina threaten to envelop you as you descend one of the narrow staircases.

Upstairs, in what used to be the crobar VIP lounge, things take a more blatantly risqué turn. Partially inspired by the rock and roll and

stripper aesthetic that is the current vogue in nightlife, Fortis went after something a little more interesting, or, at least, off-putting. One of the bars has a mirror in the floor, lit so sneak peeks can be had of skirted ladies’ panties, or, ideally, lack thereof. The lower wall is plastered with what appear to be pornographic images on a film reel, evoking a snuff film brand of danger. The obligatory stripper poles descend to the dance floor. The whole room—the furniture, the bars, the walls, which are clad in beautiful, rippling, Escher-like panels—is done in stark blacks and whites. Now dubbed Vice, the Cameo’s upstairs will be programmed and promoted as a separate club.

“You should walk into that room and, until you’ve had a couple of cocktails, feel completely uncomfortable,” says Fortis. “And then once you’ve had a couple, go ‘I fit right in here. This is perfect.’”

The only area that didn’t get touched is the lobby. That, Fortis agrees, should stay as close to vintage as possible: “The lobby is the lobby and it’s beautiful, and it’ll always remain that way for as long as we are in the space.”

While many will walk in and say it looks just like crobar, and a few will say it’s a Palladium rip-off, the informed nightclub connoisseur will appreciate Fortis’s nods to the past, both ironic and iconic, in designing a space that works architecturally, brings an imaginative new madness to the nocturnal masses, and helps us feel so good and dirty one more time. ♦