

Inquiring Minds

## Another Fine Mess

Brazil's recession troubles.

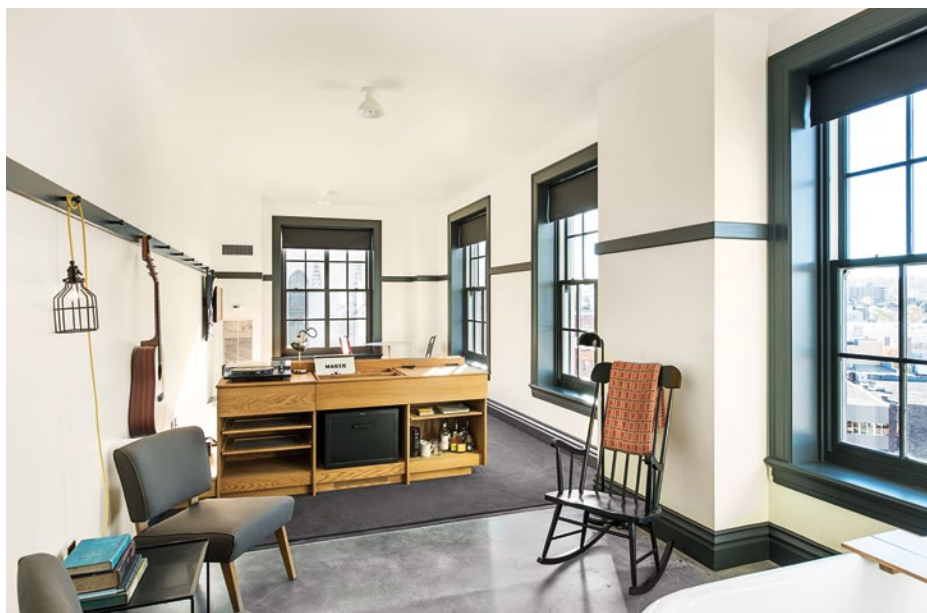
*Não pise na bola.* Literally: don't step on the ball. Figuratively: don't mess things up. Either way, the advice isn't being taken. For months, the country has been stepping on the financial ball over and over again, creating an economic mess that may take decades to clean up.

Runaway inflation, rising unemployment, a rapidly depreciating currency, a titanic corruption scandal, a president who is a hair's breadth away from impeachment, a country-wide viral epidemic—if you're looking for problems, Brazil's got them. Most of the economic ones can be traced back to commodities: oil, iron ore, sugar, soybeans, coffee, and a variety of other materials the world wants. Over the past decade, the country has made a pretty penny shipping all of these overseas.

Not anymore. As the world's economy went bust, so did Brazil's—so much so that the country's central bank reported the economy contracted by a whopping 4.1 per cent last year. The International Monetary Fund predicts more of the same in 2016, with a drop of 3.5 per cent. Bond rating agency Standard & Poor's has passed its own judgment on the country's fortunes, dropping Brazil's sovereign debt rating two steps below investment grade.

Meanwhile, the country's leaders have been busy creating a mess of their own. Current president Dilma Rousseff faces impeachment over allegations that she used accounting sleight of hand to hide the government's deteriorating fiscal position in the lead-up to the last federal election. Meanwhile, Brazil's former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva has been accused of profiting from large speaking fees and dubiously cheap renovations—both financed by the same construction companies currently being scrutinized in a massive kickbacks-for-contracts investigation. Unsurprisingly, residents have been venting their frustration.

The most depressing part of the story: it's the same old story. This is not the first commodity-driven boom-bust cycle Brazil has suffered. But things were supposed to be different this time, creating jobs and infrastructure. The millions made from pulling things from the earth would be used to lift millions of citizens from the *favelas*. Instead, the money has funded half-built Olympic venues and empty football stadiums—along with more than a few luxury watches, condos, and cars for ministers and bureaucrats. *Desculpa a bagunça*: please forgive the mess. **James Dolan**



## Ace Hotel Pittsburgh

East Liberty goes rock and roll.

For over a hundred years, South Whitfield Street has been the home of a distinctive five-storey building, the YMCA in Pittsburgh's East Liberty neighbourhood. Restored and renovated by Atelier Ace along with Chad Chalmers of hometown outfit Moss Architects, the city landmark is the Ace Hotel chain's first expansion into the northeast Rust Belt.

Keeping the turn-of-the-century charm and filling common areas and 63 rooms with vintage pieces and custom-designed furniture by local artisans, the Ace Hotel has stayed true to its ethos with their Pittsburgh property, choosing an up-and-coming neighbourhood that is approaching its tipping point.

The entry features original terrazzo floors, dentil moulding, and a stained glass window by Pittsburgh's Glenn Greene, a modern homage to the city. The bustling main floor is an open space shared by the dining room, reception counter, lobby, and bar. Morning caffeine needs are fulfilled by Stumptown Coffee; an in-house tavern, Whitfield, serves breakfast, lunch, and dinner—where diners will find themselves shoulder to shoulder enjoying locally sourced cuisine overseen by executive chef Bethany Zozula and executive pastry chef Casey Shively—and the bar is routinely crowded with people partaking in handcrafted cocktails post-work.

There's a steady stream of people wanting to peek at one of the hotel's common areas: the gym hasn't been altered since its YMCA days, except for new paint on the running track's metal railings. The weathered wood floors and peeling paint

of a fading mural paired with new picnic tables are quintessential Ace style—on Open Gym nights, the public can join in competitive cornhole (for the uninitiated, as the name implies, it's a game in which players take turns throwing bags of corn at a raised platform with a hole in the far end) and ping-pong, fuelled by cocktails, pints, and—on particularly popular weekends—a DJ's beats.

Brooklyn design group Uhuru fabricated the larger built-in structures for the rooms, while decor elements include custom-designed Pendleton wool blankets, Woolrich textiles for window benches, a wood luggage rack and stool by Pittsburgh designers Bones and All, and a vintage red East Liberty YMCA chair. The bathroom's black-and-gold-tiled oversized shower (with thick Wings + Horns sweatshirt robes) is a nod to the city's official colours, and of course there is musical inspiration: Tivoli radios and Martin acoustic guitars, while larger rooms feature a turntable with a curated vinyl collection.

The original marble staircase does double duty as a gallery, currently featuring works by East Liberty photographer Charles "Teenie" Harris. The bold images of community life in previous decades celebrate the neighbourhood's heyday, a complement to the local entrepreneurs and curious community members who crowd the hotel's public spaces on weekends, eager to see what the YMCA has become.

There's even a T-shirt for sale at the reception desk that cheekily suggests an answer: "Ace Hotel Pittsburgh—A Place You Can Go". **Waheeda Harris**

**Photo:** A suite at the Ace Hotel Pittsburgh, a former YMCA and the latest newcomer to the city's hotel landscape.

ACE HOTEL PITTSBURGH PHOTO BY ROB LAWSON