

# BROOKLYN SCENE

Angeleno nightlife impresario-turned-architect Bret Witke opens up about his trove of never-before-seen Polaroids documenting two of Hollywood's chicest hangouts

PRODUCED BY **MICHAEL SLENSKE**  
POLAROIDS BY **CHRIS DAGGETT**

IN THE AFTERMATH OF ARTIST-FUELED NEW YORK HOTSPOTS LIKE CLUB 57 AND AREA, where Bret Witke worked for a bit on the heels of a European tour as a bon vivant architecture student, the Los Angeles native returned home to find a nightlife scene dominated by makeshift clubs in vacuous warehouses that left something to be desired by the chic habitués of his old haunts. “I wanted a real place that you came to every week, a room,” explains Witke, 55, who along with his late boyfriend Chris Daggett (and later with hospitality mavens Eric Goode, Andre Balazs and Serge Becker) produced a pair of L.A.’s most unforgettable nightlife experiences—Boys & Girls/Au Petit Café and B.C. (for Bret and Chris)—in a brief, if Roman candle bright, moment in the late eighties and early nineties. That scene—known then as the “Bret Pack”—surrounds him to this day. “I still talk to all of those people from back then,” he reminisces.

Now, as the head of Witke Design Group, the architect is still creating fashionable L.A. spaces (from hot spots like Jar and République to numerous residences for the same Hollywood elite that entered his establishments back in the day). He also curates an elegant design boutique on Melrose, Witke Shop, purveying everything from T. H. Robsjohn-Gibbings armchairs to Ellsworth Kelly prints. “If I did it now I would do a place this big,” says Witke, drawing his finger around the dozen-table dining room of the Pikey, which sits a block west of the Sunset Strip building where B.C. once resided. While busy with his design practice, Witke still toys with the notion of opening the L.A. version of Elaine’s or The Mercer Hotel, perhaps in a single building. “If I could find the right space, I would do it again, because people don’t seem to know how important the smallest details are,” he says. “Even if guests don’t notice them, they feel them.”

Here, Witke reflects on those Halcyon days—and the never-before-seen Polaroids snapped by Daggett each night—exclusively for LALA.

IMAGES REPRODUCED BY JEFF VESPA





"I went to Europe to go to school for architecture for three years in Zurich, Milan, and Paris. I met a bunch of people, then I came back to New York for two years. The biggest club at that time was Area, and I started working with them designing. They changed the space every month, and I later became partners with [Area founder] Eric Goode out here. When I came back to L.A., I worked on Rodeo Drive for a year selling clothes. I knew the owner of the Versace store because I shopped there so much and he was like, "Why don't you work here?" I said, "Can I have a two-hour lunch?" He said, "Do whatever the fuck you want." So I said okay and I sold more clothes than anyone.

My boyfriend at the time was Chris Daggett and in 1988, we found this tiny space, 600 square feet, that was two rooms on top of each other on Vine and Lexington. It was a restaurant called Au Petit Café in the sixties and seventies, and then it was Donna Summer's music studio in the back. It just sat empty in the front, so we found the landlord and asked if we could rent it and we built it out ourselves with \$7,000 that we borrowed from a friend. Everybody from New York came to clubs in L.A. back then and when we first opened the doors we didn't tell anyone, maybe five people. I ran the door. I was outside every night, while Chris worked inside and did stuff like this [showing the Polaroids]. That was the only way it would work.

You paid a \$20 donation and then once you were inside you didn't pay for anything. You got beer, wine, and I made this blue drink that was in one of those punch machines that churned and it had vodka, blue curaçao, and some people say it had Ecstasy in it. There was also a kitchen there so we made French fries. You entered into the basement and there was a tack leather stairway going upstairs. It was very whimsical. All the walls were painted

silver and the banquettes downstairs were covered in fake grass. We did these big lights that were world globes. You could probably get 80 or 90 people in there. It had a dance floor downstairs with a DJ and a brick floor and we had this guy Sergio D.J.'ing who played all old Motown music. It was really fun, all the big fashion photographers, models, young actors all came: Madonna, Sean Penn, Al Pacino, Thierry Mugler, Julien Temple to name a few. It was everyone before plastic surgery and everybody dressed up. There was a single blue light bulb outside, a rope, a bouncer and me. One night Peter Berg came up with his manager, Loree Rodkin, and I let her in but told him he had to wait outside. He punched me in the face. It's the only time something like that ever happened, and when B.C. opened she made him come back to apologize because he wanted to get into the club. Everyone did. When we would go back to New York, the doors flew open for us. It was like being royalty everywhere we went.

At some point Polaroid found out what we were doing and gave us free cases of film, because Boys & Girls was where you talked to people. Yes, people used to have conversations, and we stayed open until six! It shouldn't have been documented in a way, and nobody really knows that it was documented. There were no cell phones back then, no cameras were allowed, beside that one. The thing about Polaroids that was great was that they made everyone look so good because everything was so candid. It wasn't like getting your picture taken—nobody was posing.

The world has changed so much with the cell phones and Internet. You can't live like this, nobody feels that comfortable in any given moment any more. Back then, there weren't even paparazzi outside. One time the paparazzi showed up when Richard Gere came, but he just came inside and that was it.

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Timothy and Barbara Leary were there all the time with the late Tina Chow and many others. George Michael was there every week because he was our friend. We had a New Year's Eve party where Sandra Bernhardt did a whole show and Nando Scarfiotti and Anthony Machado decorated the whole place with baby dolls and shawls hanging from the walls. We did this birth of baby Jesus, and George [Michael] and his ex-girlfriend Kathy Jeung were Joseph and Mary. It was hilarious.

That place went on for a year but the landlord eventually closed us down because he wanted a share of the deal and we wouldn't pay him. He wanted to own the club and we said no, so we gutted it and left. He tried to reopen it but it didn't work.

After that we did a couple little clubs in weird spots when we were building B.C. One was called "Your Needs Met...For Now" and a place called Max's. These were little bars around town. B.C. was short for Bret and Chris, sort of an analogue to M.K. in New York. The week before we opened, Chris O.D.'d and died, so the opening night of B.C. was the memorial for him. Everyone was happy because that's what he would have wanted, but it was still the opening night, and it was crazy. There must have been 500 people outside trying to get in. It was nuts.

B.C. was huge, literally. It was 10,000 square feet with a restaurant, bar, and disco on Sunset where Bonham's auction house was. Before that it was a Russian club called Mischa's and before that it was Rodney Bingenheimer's English Disco. We put \$2 million into it. The dining room was beautiful. We even hired the chef from Indochine to come to L.A. and design a menu of French-Vietnamese food.

The design was a combination of Pierre Chareau and Frank Lloyd Wright. We designed our version of a Frank Lloyd Wright brick, had it cast for the walls with Allen Jones tables everywhere and

a huge fish tank filled with pufferfish and baby sharks. We had the guys from Sea World build it. It was crazy. We also bought these solid brass bulldogs from the Mack trucking company. It was kind of our mascot. We bolted them into the balcony railing that looked over the dance floor, up where the D.J. booth was, and we had a condom machine in the bathroom with the bulldog on the packaging. Mack tried to sue us but these are the things—coasters, stir sticks, matches, and condoms—that nobody thinks about, that nobody thinks are important anymore. But that's what makes a place important and special. It's kind of the lost art of the restaurant business.

B.C. became a huge nightclub immediately. There were 300 people trying to get in on any given night. At 10 o'clock, the whole wall opened and the disco started on the other side. It would be younger, older people. I just picked people I liked. People did whatever they wanted there, there was a freedom knowing that nobody would do anything. One night Matthew Modine's car got stolen out front and I gave him my Porsche to take home because I never went home. I would sleep on the booths at night. Then the phones would start ringing first thing in the morning with people trying to get in the next night. Everyone wanted to come to the club, but when my New York partners transferred the liquor license from Mischa's to B.C. they hired the wrong law firm and they fucked it up. The neighbors started going crazy with the number of people, parking, etc. So when we went back to court to get the license the court stopped the transfer. We even tried to buy the house of the neighbor who was complaining to get him off our back, but he said no, too. It was a great space, it had great food, it was well-built, and I think it would have lasted a while. At least a few years. These other clubs last a year and they tear them down again. That's what LA is like, but I want nothing to do with places like that. In the end, it only lasted 8 months, but it was so much fun."

—Bret Witke



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