



HAL
open science

Depuis Rue Las Cases. A Conversation with India Mahdavi

Javier Fernandez Contreras, India Mahdavi

► **To cite this version:**

Javier Fernandez Contreras, India Mahdavi. Depuis Rue Las Cases. A Conversation with India Mahdavi. Steve Crist, Gloria Fowler. India Mahdavi, Chronicle Chroma, 2021, 978-1-7972-0323-2. hal-04212776

HAL Id: hal-04212776

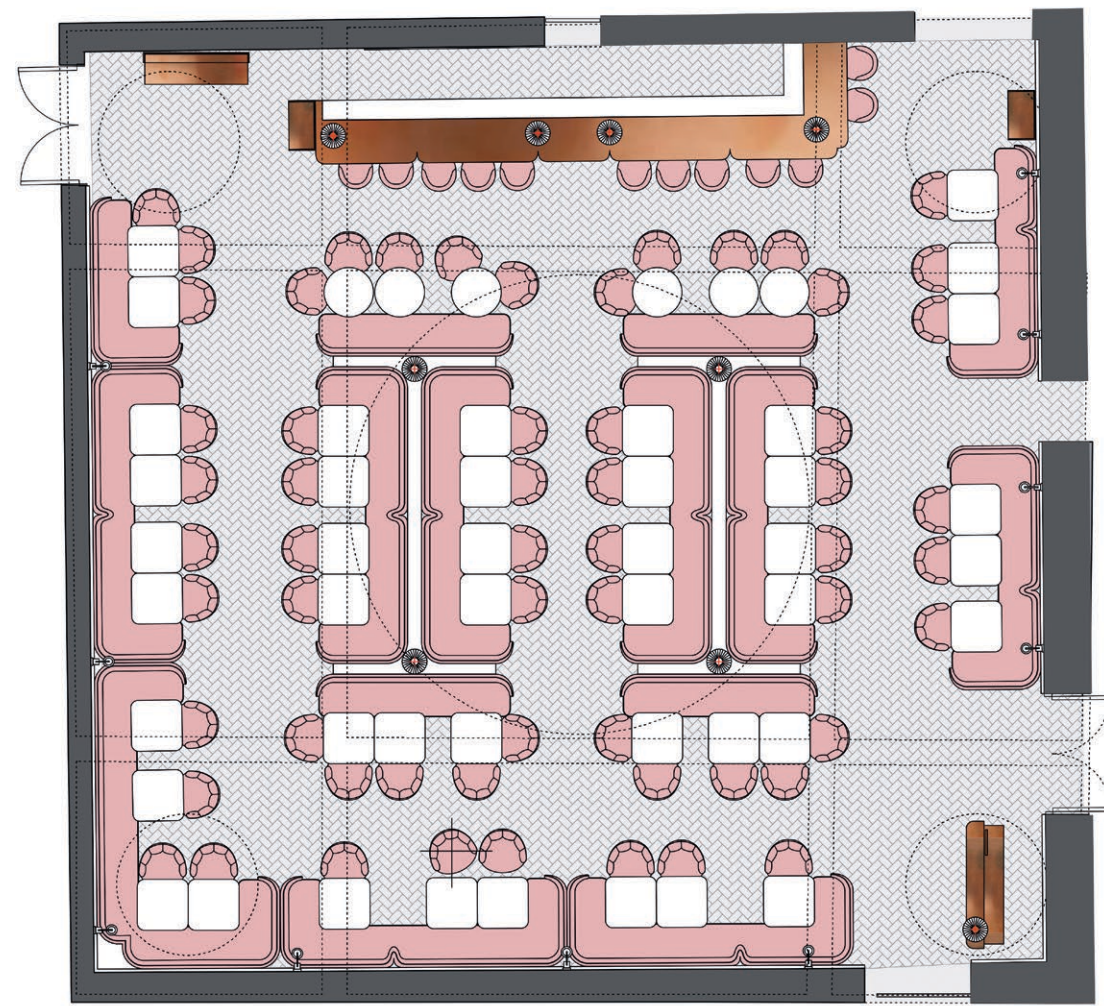
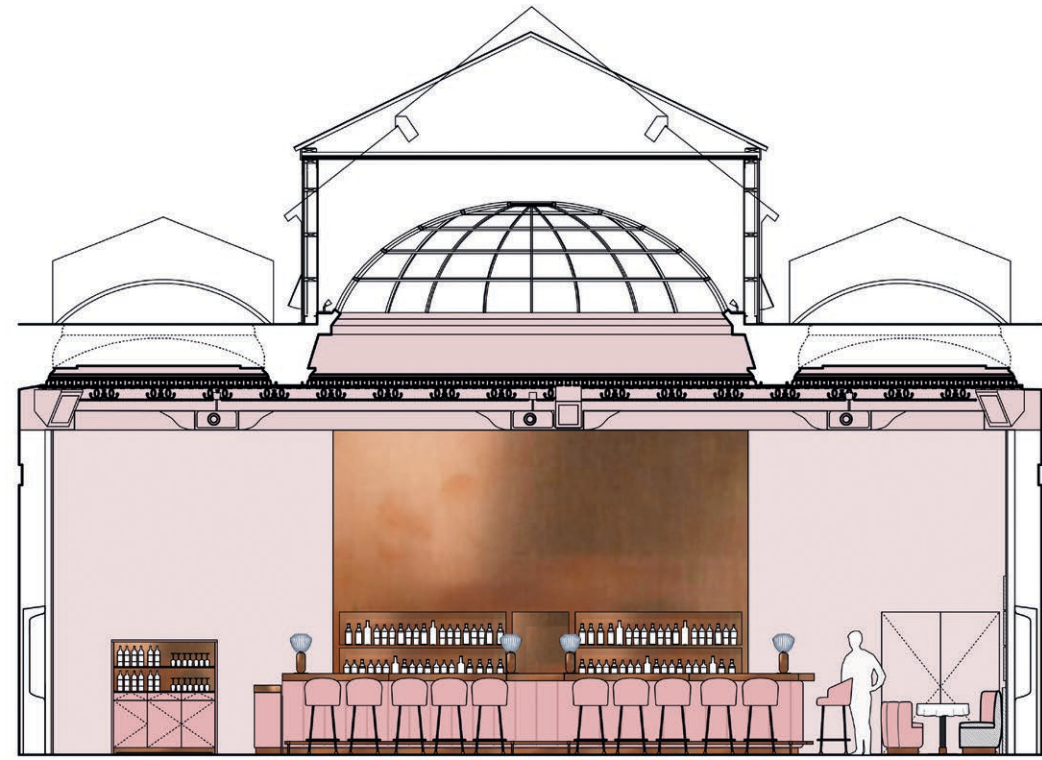
<https://hal.science/hal-04212776v1>

Submitted on 22 Sep 2023

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Copyright



DEPUIS RUE LAS CASES
A Conversation with India Mahdavi
by Javier F. Contreras
March 7–8, 2020

JAVIER F. CONTRERAS I would like to start with a look at the history of how you have constructed an “India Mahdavi” ecosystem in the Rue Las Cases area of Paris. You have your office there, your showroom, you’ve just opened a new gallery in the Rue de Bellechasse, and now we’re at your own apartment in the Rue de Grenelle. It’s unique—in a world where everything tends to be outsourced to external locations, you do the exact opposite. There’s a concentration of activities and the creation of a personal environment that touches all the categories of a designer’s life—in this one district, you have your living, design, and display spaces. How did you get here?

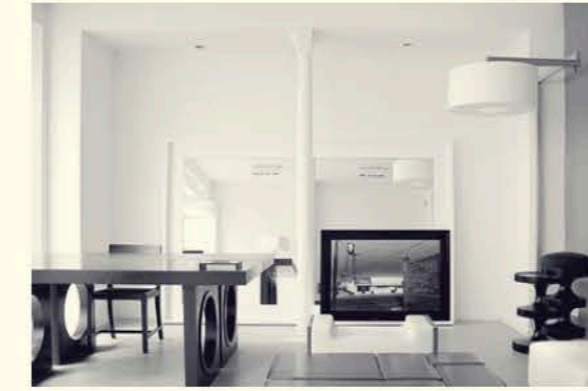
INDIA MAHDAVI It all started here in this apartment, nearly twenty-three years ago, when my son was a newborn. He was actually one of the reasons that I decided to make a big change in my life. I resigned from my position as an artistic director for

Christian Liaigre and decided to go on my own. I worked from the dining room table, with a fax and a telephone.

My very first office was this little room, just one floor below, with the nicest view facing the courtyard. At one point, I was asked to vacate the space, and I fortunately encountered number 3 Rue Las Cases, located on the same block as my apartment, which has been my anchor ever since. Originally the space was used for film editing—I loved that idea—it was ground level and had this large window on the street.

When I started, I was mostly working on residential projects, which allowed me to design bespoke furniture pieces. Thus, after several years, I had a little collection of pieces that I displayed in the window. A few years later, another space freed up in the building next door, which allowed me to move the design studio upstairs, and number 3 became my showroom. It was the year 2003, and, in a way, this Parisian space was

necessary for me because all my projects at the time were in foreign locations: London, Miami, New York . . . everywhere but France.



Showroom, 3 Rue Las Cases, 2004

JFC The international condition that you refer to at the beginning of your career is a reflection of your training in the 1980s between Paris and New York, between your architecture studies at the École des Beaux-Arts and your decision to become an interior designer, which you could articulate in several American colleges, including the School of Visual Arts and the Cooper Union. I wanted to briefly put the years preceding the start of your independent career in context. In your work, there is always an evocative Technicolor side paired with a recurrent straightforward vision—both American sides to a certain extent—clearly discernible in the intelligence with which you early on established your Paris showroom.

IM When I finished my architecture studies in Paris, I found myself at a dead end. I knew I didn’t want to be an architect—I needed time and distance from Paris—so I spent a year in New York, where I enrolled in different courses: product design, graphic design, and furniture design. I was trying to explore a different scale than that in architecture.

The time I spent in New York gave me the confidence I was lacking: the positive,

American, “just do it” type of energy that goes with it. It also echoed those years I spent in Cambridge, Massachusetts, as a child, where I drew my Technicolor palette and playfulness from.

During that year [in New York], I managed to design and produce my very first pieces, notably the Ladder Chair, which was displayed in a small design gallery called Surface, if I recall well. A metal structure allowed to adjust the seat at different heights, so it could be a stool, a chair, or a barstool—all in one.

JFC From the outset, we can recognize the same attitude that lies behind iconic pieces of furniture, such as the Bishop or the Charlotte—an object, a striking title, and a compelling narrative that appeals to the imagination. With this first Ladder Chair, there is already in the young India Mahdavi the will to position it, publish it, and make it iconic.



India with Ethan Cohen, on the Ladder Chair, New York, 1990

IM Absolutely; I returned to Paris, and I was able to show it at the Salon des Artistes Décorateurs (SAD), a famous design fair which no longer exists. The Ladder Chair was



The New York Times, October 26, 2000

a concept on its own. Names are important to me—they can reinforce a concept or give another dimension to a piece.

JFC After this professional period, at the end of the 1990s, you opened your studio in Paris. You began working, from your apartment, on projects for private residences. Then, at the very moment of transitioning to the public space in the Rue Las Cases—first with your office, then your showroom—you also started to transition towards public-program



The Townhouse Hotel, Miami

projects for hotels or clubs, for the same clients, in international locations such as London, Miami, and New York. This produced a sort of expanded domesticity, in which the living space influenced your approach to designing for public spaces. Could you tell us about these first projects, such as the Townhouse or APT?

IM I really started my international career thanks to Joseph Ettedgui, the visionary behind the Joseph stores. Not only did I design a small collection of furniture for

his very first men's store, and a home down in the south of France, he [also] introduced me to my very first clients, the Booth family.

Right after my London period, where I was mostly designing residential projects, I met Jonathan Morr, a New-York based restaurant owner, for whom I designed two public spaces: the Townhouse Hotel in Miami, and APT in New York. Both became “manifestos” for future projects.

For Townhouse, the brief was simple: cool, hip, and affordable. For the very first time, the use of color became obvious to define an identity and to remember a space. I used a palette of three colors: light blue, beige, and red, inexplicably beautiful under the sunlight. I also added a large floral fabric—very New England—which was a sweet reference to my early years spent in Cambridge, Mass. We came up with simple and inexpensive ideas that made the space correspond to the new era in the hotel industry. For instance, the headboard was one, single, oversized pillow; your morning wake-up call was a crowing rooster.

There was no space that allowed for a swimming pool, so we invented a beach—without a swimming pool, without the sea, without water—by using waterbed mattresses, which were considered the epitome of tackiness in America. Mounted on a teak base, covered in red fabric, and placed next to each other as to form a pair of mirrored L-shapes, they morphed into the most surprising and elegant feature. The entire terrace became a monochrome, all red, from mattresses to umbrellas.

The Townhouse had caught Miami's attention.

Retrospectively, I realize how fortunate I was to carry out such a project at that

early stage in my career. I was suddenly free from my previous aesthetic references and was able to pursue my creative identity.

JFC You're known as the person who designs the world's most photogenic interiors, but there's a critical aspect of “performance in space” in your work. An artist friend said to me recently, “What India does is actually more difficult than what interior designers do (designing spaces to be lived in) or set designers in cinema or theater (creating decors to be filmed or photographed), because she simultaneously works in these two complementary but sometimes dissociated domains.”

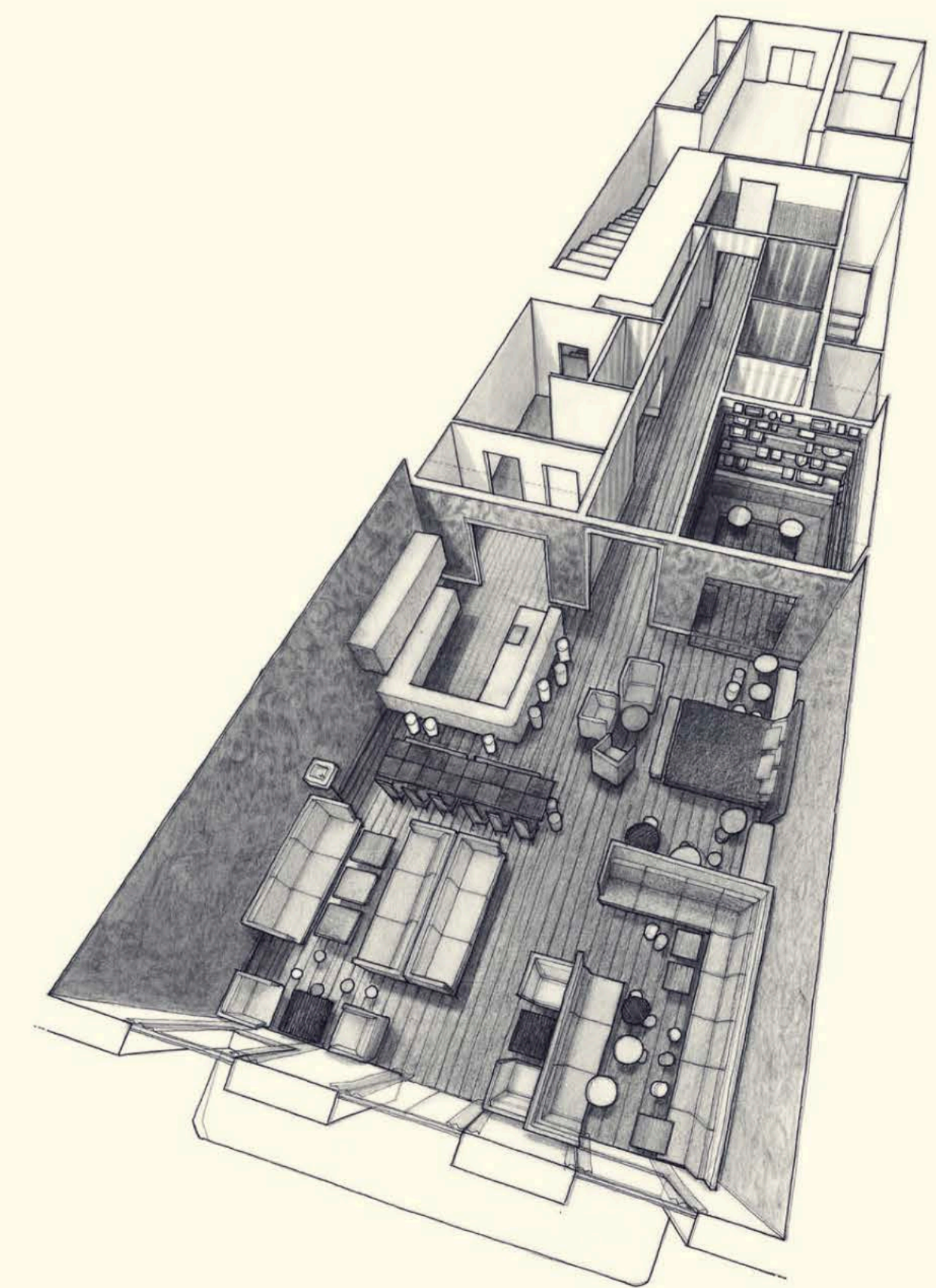
IM I nearly find it addictive to rethink the living experience of a space—a kind of spatial scenario.

For Townhouse, we introduced simple ideas which were then unconventional—they were little kindnesses which became supplements of life—which means that a decor is never quite enough on its own; it's only a fraction of the entity. I believe that spaces affect one's mood. There is a possibility of creating joy that I like to reveal, a *joie de vivre*¹ that I like to convey, and I use whatever I can find to express it. It might be an experience, a memory, or a detail that I capture. But mostly, with the spaces I create and through the experiences they can enjoy, I want people to feel that they are the actors and directors of their own lives.

JFC Indeed, you always construct a very strong visual world, which must be performed and which can only be experienced in a direct way, on the spot. That was apparent from the start of your career, with designs

such as APT—a very important project in New York, with Jonathan Morr.

IM After Townhouse and its success, Jonathan asked me to design a private club located in the Meatpacking District of New York. I was reluctant because I felt so disconnected from the nightlife as a young mother. One day, as I was talking on the phone to Jonathan, an idea popped into my head, and I said: “What if I designed the club as if someone had lent me their apartment for the evening, and I had organized a party whilst they were out of town? We can then call it APT.” After a



APT drawing, 2000

¹ *Joie de vivre* constitutes a part of what the French define as *art de vivre* (lifestyle). I define my own *art de vivre*, particular to a space, in three parts: *joie de vivre*, *douceur de vivre*, and *éthique de vivre*, which are, in retrospect, the foundations of my design philosophy. *Joie de vivre*, literally joy of living, refers to the intrinsic happiness that a place can reflect on your behavior. *Douceur de vivre*, literally softness of living, stems from the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern warmth of heart and climate. One suddenly becomes listless. *Éthique de vivre*, literally ethic of living, refers to the truthfulness of thought, values, and production.

few moments of complete silence, I hear, “Great, I love it. Let’s do it *baby*.” Then I thought: “*Merde*, I have to do this.”

Because there were so few constraints, I found it easier to build this project around a fictitious story, as a sort of personal brief. I created an imaginary character named Bernard,² a Frenchman in his mid-fifties, professor at Columbia University. For better readability, I willingly created a caricature of an apartment, insisting on the flaws, like awkward wasted space (i.e. an unnecessarily long corridor). But I also introduced elements borrowed from the typology of a New York loft: a bed staged in the middle of the space, and an open kitchen with a large communal table. I replaced the domestic bookshelf with a photo shelf, displaying Bernard’s family photographs, his dog, his French country house, his convertible



APT, Bishop barstool, 2000

sports car, and his young wife. These were all bought at the flea market of Saint-Ouen and curated in order to substantiate the illusion of Bernard’s life.

Bernard held his own private club in the basement, in which I mirrored two L-shaped bars, surrounded by a “forest of stools.” I then imagined a sculptural stool in turned wood, like a chess pawn, in order to avoid the “forest of legs” effect. And that’s how the Bishop was born.

JFC Some design techniques can be seen very clearly with APT and Townhouse, such as the use of colors to construct immersive spaces, the reinvention of program through user’s experience, and the construction of narrative and visual fictions. Since starting your career, you developed in these manifesto projects a design toolbox that would be later associated with some of your most iconic interiors.

IM With those two projects, a few principles started to emerge in my work. First, I realized how naturally I worked with color, to a point where it became an expression of who I am.

Then, within the process, I discovered that a project begins with a space and grows inside a conversation, which includes experiencing the space and the defining of a program.

Finally, fostering the *joie de vivre* of a space that revives your childhood comes naturally to me.

These three elements remain in my work to this day.

JFC With these first American projects, you constructed families of iconic objects, such as the Bishop and the Fullhouse table, which would give rise to the Bluff family. These were objects designed for specific contexts, but you ultimately decontextualized them, producing series that could be showcased in Paris. In 2003, when you opened your showroom

at 3 Rue Las Cases, it was really the beginning of the ecosystem that we know today, with a debuting collection of objects.



Bluff table,
India Mahdavi collection

IM Because most of my projects were abroad, people thought I was based in London or New York; I had this frustration of not “existing” in my home city. Opening the showroom in Paris gave me the anchor I needed, and a home to the small collection I had designed during the two previous years, composed of fifteen pieces or so. Most of them were genitors of a family.

For instance, the Bishop stool designed for APT gave birth to the wooden Bishop side table, which inspired the Bishop in ceramic, which, in turn, inspired the Baby Bishop and the Bishop Cocktail.

The Fullhouse table designed for APT gave birth to the Bluff table, and, in turn, gave birth to a whole family using the same principle of assembling modules to form an entity.

It was the beginning of my collection of “historic” pieces. But I never designed a collection as such. I was not thinking, “Let’s design a living room, or a dining room.” It was more the editing of the pieces designed for specific projects that were assembled in one space. It was the antithesis of the *total look* that was dictated by the design industry.

JFC Your career could have had a stronger American dimension. However, the events of 9/11 and your predilection for living in Paris have created the India Mahdavi whom we know today: international, polyglot, and polychromatic, yet always based in France.

IM At the time, I was working on a project in NYC, which never came to life. It was for hotelier Ian Schrager. He was, with Steve Rubell, the founder of Studio 54, before changing forever the hotel industry—hiring renowned designers such as Andrée Putman for the Morgans hotel, or Philippe Starck, who designed some of his best work with the Royalton, the Delano, and the Paramount hotels.

There was no better client to have in the United States at the time.

We designed and built two prototype rooms for the Empire hotel, a four-hundred-room hotel located opposite the Lincoln Center. I had secretly imagined it for James Bond, which almost immediately prompts a dramatic setting. The whole bar was upholstered in Bond’s family tartan; this total look was pop and classic. (As I was recently going through my archives, I came across the drawings, and I realized that I still believed in the project.)

Then came September 11, 2001—and the world came to a halt.

JFC In recent years, your representation with Ralph Pucci International has allowed you to further develop your relationship with the US in a different way. The display of your designs in his galleries in New York, Los Angeles, and Miami is, in a way, an expanded, recontextualized India Mahdavi showroom in America.

² Bernard, the character I designed for APT, was a hybrid of real people that have had an importance in my life. He was a leftover from the May '68 (ex-soixante huitard), the student revolution which took place in Paris. This social event, seen as a civil war at the time, was the reason for my family moving to Heidelberg instead of Paris—a change in the course of my life. Bernard was an intellectual, similar to my father who had been teaching at Princeton.

IM It's interesting to think about this: in the United States, I was about to start an interior design career at a high level, but, today, I believe I am more known for my furniture, thanks to Ralph Pucci, with whom I have been working for more than ten years now.

I see my representation with Ralph Pucci as an echo of my Parisian showroom in the United States. The very first time I exhibited my work with Ralph, in May 2008, I had



Ralph Pucci, New York

reproduced the floor plan of my showroom by marking out the floor with pink fluorescent tape and placing furniture accordingly, giving birth to a ubiquitous setting.

Since then, I have created showrooms in every location, from New York to Los Angeles, in a colorful setting, on a scale I do not have in Paris.

JFC I would like to focus now on your design space. In 2003, when you established your showroom at 3 Rue Las Cases, your office moved from the ground floor to the fourth floor at number 5 on the same street. The

programmatic distribution of this studio illustrates your way of envisioning design. The main meeting room and library run parallel to a longitudinal corridor that articulates two rooms: one for space design, the other for object design. At the end of the corridor there



Cabinet filled with little objects of the studio

is the material library and a small office, where you keep a graphic archive with all the photos you've taken in your life. Even this corridor is a space of production, with the wall always full of collages of images that guide the design process, as well as cabinets and drawers filled with little objects, which you collect. It's a work structure where there's a direct relationship between the space, the number of collaborators, and the design process. Did this structure already exist in 2003?

IM Yes, with about the same number of assistants. Within the team, I enjoy having people from different backgrounds and nationalities: architects, interior designers, designers, graphic designers, textile designers, and illustrators. It's important that it remains a creative hub open to all spectrums.

The organization of my studio is quite straightforward: a space for interior design, another for design, the material library,

the archives, and my office where I gather my personal artifacts, including my library of images. One of the most important spaces is the long corridor that links all the spaces. Every day, my team pins up the drawings of the projects in progress. By walking up and down the corridor, I consciously and subconsciously work on iterations. Printing, hanging, and taking a step back allows a different perspective and a more constructive exchange with my team.

JFC This kind of subconscious thought that the corridor implements makes me think of a visual *flâneur*, who never stops strolling, looking, and thinking. It's also a democratic construction of the space, because the wall is a collective surface—a visual meeting point for the entire team.

IM Yes, and it makes you feel like you know what is right. The design process is a conversation.



Studio material library

The wall of corridor and the space of the showroom are both the surface and the space of the conversation—one is with the team, the other with the public.

JFC Next to that, you have your bureau, with your graphic archive. All your photos are printed, dated, and indexed. How do you use this personal photo library? What inspiration comes out of it?

IM Yes, my eye works like a camera: I've always had an awareness for framing and a sense of depth of field. Photography is important; I use it as a visual diary, but not only that. I sometimes see better through a lens;

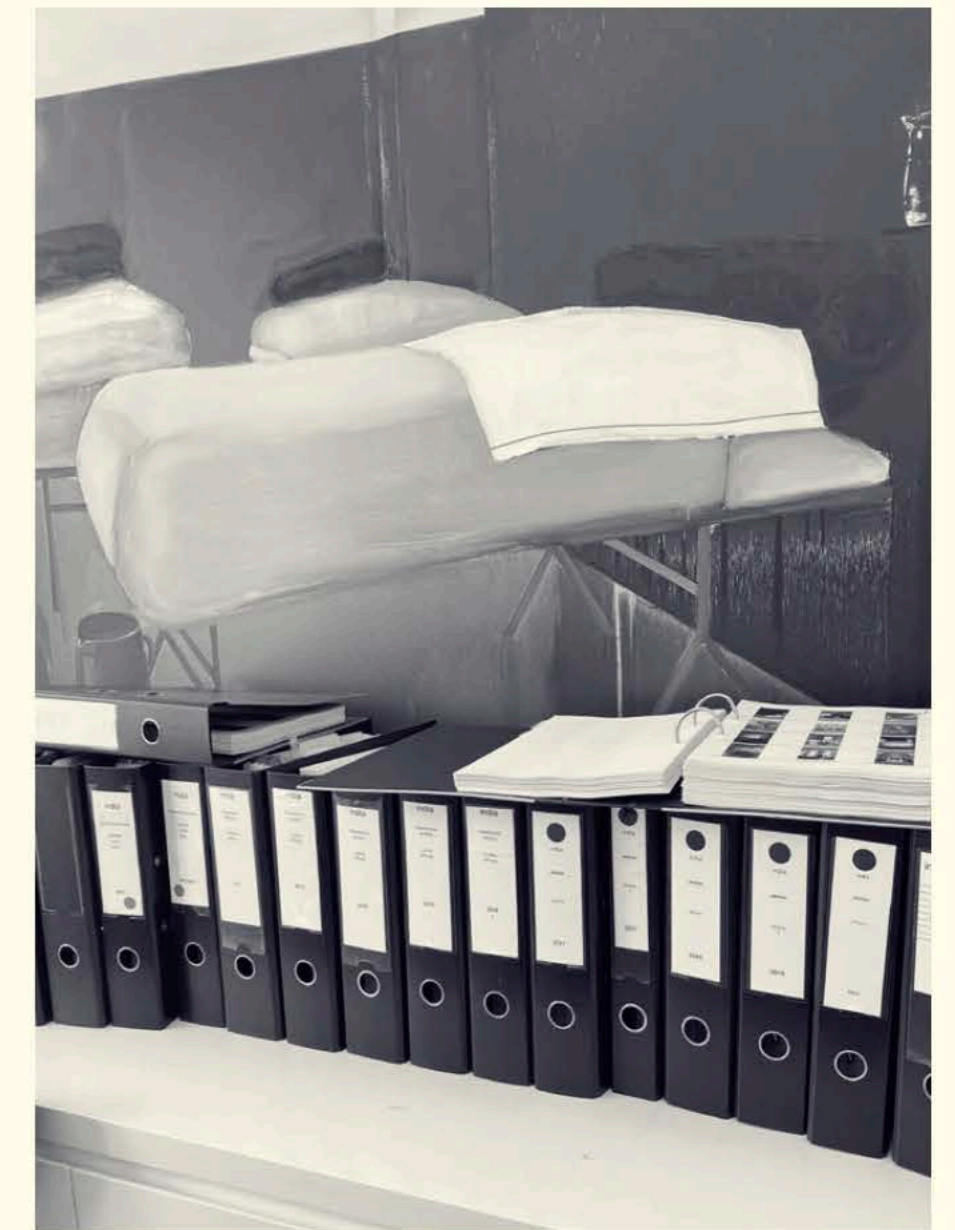


Photo library in India's office at the studio

in this sense, it becomes an analytical tool. My photo library is of utmost importance because I have experienced everything I have photographed, and I can therefore metabolize the content. It is my "*realm of forms*."³

JFC All this makes for a visual world, but your design process is also guided by a tactile

3 The term is borrowed from Plato's *theory of forms*. I appropriated the term to name the ideal library of images and forms that are essential to my process of work.

dimension that is epitomized in these drawers full of little objects that you collect. They illustrate a certain need to touch and embrace with the hand that can also be recognized in your practice.

IM My field of practice is one of sensuality and physicality. I listen, understand, and live the spaces that I alter. My eye works with touch. When I see colors, I need to touch them; it very often works together. The material library that I have built over the years serves this exact purpose. I always have this memory—a child in a candy shop with all these colors—that I want to have, to touch. Many objects please me by their forms, by what they evoke, by their graphic qualities. And I keep them as a kind of library of objects, which inspire me, and which were the starting point of a number of projects, even if what I do with them becomes very different. In fact, I metabolize them. Their presence is important because if you have them out of your sight, it is not the same.

Designing requires awakening all your senses and being alert to your surroundings. Additionally, I live with a form of synesthesia by which the colors and things that I see have a texture, taste, or smell; so collecting objects, colors, and images becomes a necessity to enrich my landscape of references.

JFC In 2003, we can already recognize all the ingredients that have marked your career over the last fifteen years: the development of your visual and tactile worlds, the affirmation of your international career, and the construction of your Paris ecosystem. Let's now turn to other spaces and geographies of belonging,

with your first projects in Mexico and Monaco: the Condesa *df* and Monte-Carlo Beach hotels, completed in 2005 and 2009, respectively. Mexico is a very natural association for you, where color is such an intrinsic part of its culture.

IM Discovering Mexico was a revelation in many respects, but Mexican color was the biggest of them all. From the Mayans to Luis Barragán, the use of color is a pillar of Mexican culture and has influenced the world's greatest colorists.



Condesa *df*, Mexico City

When Carlos Couturier and Moisés Micha (cofounders of Grupo Habita) approached me, many of my projects had been cancelled because of September 2001.

The hotel in Mexico City was a 1920 art deco building located between the neighborhoods of Roma and Condesa, frequented by artists, much like the then ungentrified New York Village in the '60s.

We had the idea to hollow out the building in order to create a large inner courtyard around which horizontal

and vertical circulations would flow. The strong feature of the project is certainly the courtyard surrounded with mobile shutters, which were adjusted depending on the weather and time of the day. Today, those shutters are white, but I had originally conceived the courtyard as a strong chromatic feature with a selection of hues that came straight from my scouting in the neighborhood. Carlos and Moisés felt uncomfortable with color and urged me to switch to white.

Three weeks before the grand opening, as they picked me up from the airport and took me to the construction site, they told me: "We're disappointed; the project is boring and flat. Please fix it." And they were right; it was lacking depth. On the spot, I picked a turquoise blue from a color chart, made sure they approved it, and had the whole ground floor, from walls to ceiling, painted overnight. The next morning, it was all blue, and it transformed the whole building, anchoring it to the ground. It was no longer floating. I then adjusted the whole color scheme accordingly.

Today, Hotel Condesa is linked to turquoise blue, a color which was quite common because it is often seen in popular markets and other public spaces. By using it in this context, I gave it another meaning.

JFC London, the United States, Mexico . . . In the second half of the decade, you began to bolster your position in France, with projects linked to the Mediterranean, such as the Monte-Carlo Beach in Monaco, or the Villa des Alyscamps and the Hôtel du Cloître in Arles. In your imagery, there's a clear relationship of the psychological, creative, and emotional belonging to different geographical contexts, which become both physical and mental places. In this sense, the

Mediterranean runs right through your whole personal and professional life and influences your understanding of light and color.

IM The Mediterranean, as I like to see it, is part of the greater south, synonymous of warmth, and *douceur de vivre*.⁴ I spent my early childhood in the United States, and, at age six, I moved with my family to Germany. I remember seeing my life switch from Technicolor to black and white. When we moved down to the French Côte d'Azur a year later, the light came back, and my life with it.

Ever since, part of my heart remains in the south of France. I do not know if it is a coincidence, but I have completed quite a few projects, from Monaco, Saint-Tropez, Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat, to Arles . . . Though each belonged to its specific location and to its own context, I have tried to redefine a personal aesthetic for the south reusing forgotten materials like terrazzo, ceramic tiles, *cassons* (assembled broken tiles), and more organic materials like rattan and caning. But also by introducing strong colors—those I brought back from Mexico and India, those anchored in my Technicolor memory—I'm always revisiting tradition whilst proposing a new language that belongs to the south.

JFC The Monte-Carlo Beach hotel is the first project in this return to the south. The interior spaces are immersive, but there is also a visual and programmatic relationship with the sea.

IM The Monte-Carlo Beach hotel deals with the notion of the French Riviera, referring directly to the great era of the café society, from Elsa Maxwell to Grace Kelly, artists like

Matisse, and photographer Hoyningen-Huene. It was an interpretation of a very sophisticated vision of the Mediterranean.

I always start a project by working on the plan layouts. Having trained as an architect, plans matter to me, because circulation and flow are intrinsic to a fluid atmosphere. It's the finest tool to present potential scenarios to the client and to question a program. In this case, our main concern was to reorient the public spaces towards the sea. We moved the hotel lobby to create a large rotunda that links the restaurant to the outdoor terrace. We gave sea access to the bedrooms located on the upper ground floor, which transformed them into independent cabins overlooking the sea.

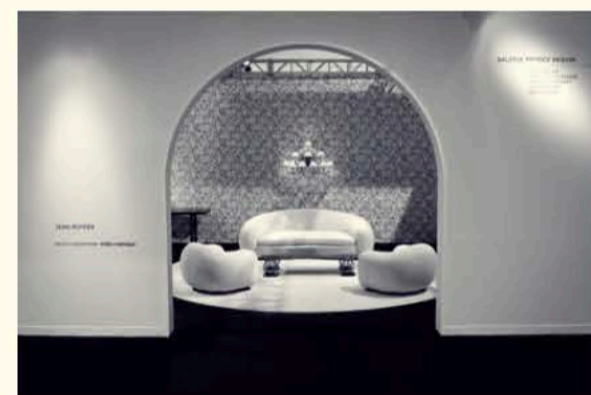


Cap Martin armchair,
India Mahdavi collection

The bedrooms had a very elegant and joyful seaside soul: marine stripes; oversized, Matisse-inspired drawings by Aurore de La Morinerie; and the use of materials such as terrazzo and rattan. I designed the Cap Martin armchair (proponent of the Cap Martin family).

JFC Still in the Mediterranean area, you next journeyed to Arles. In recent years, the town has become a cultural epicenter, thanks to the intelligence of Maja Hoffmann, who, in 2013, inaugurated Luma Arles. Your relationship with her began earlier, almost at the time when you did Monte-Carlo Beach, with projects for the Villa des Alyscamps and the Hôtel du Cloître—completed in 2009 and 2011, respectively. These are Mediterranean examples but also schemes where the preexisting heritage and architecture obliged you to reinvent yourself with an acupuncture exercise where there are two recognizable identities, understandable as overlays: the existing tectonics as backdrop, and the work of India Mahdavi as figure and figuration.

IM Actually, it was Hotel Condesa that caught Maja Hoffmann's attention. We were introduced by Patrick Seguin; I had designed some of his gallery's scenography. This was the beginning of a long collaboration and friendship [with Maja].



Jean Royère scenography for Galerie
Patrick Seguin at Design Miami, 2000

In Arles, the Villa des Alyscamps, the Hôtel du Cloître, and the Réfectoire were part of the Les Maisons d'Arles, which itself was an infrastructure in the Luma Arles project that she founded. The hotels and the

restaurants we created are really a part of the Luma Arles experience.

Projects with Maja always begin with a conversation, a direction. It's a more organic way of working. The programs get defined as we go along, and Maja is very much part of the creative process that she inspires and encourages.

The Villa des Alyscamps was the first project I did for Maja—a historical building located on beautiful grounds at the foot of Saint-Honorat Church and the necropolis, and right across from the Parc des Ateliers. I understood the Villa as part of a larger territory, namely the Camargue. It was the outfit of the local herdsmen that inspired me: colorful *souleiado* shirt patterns over plain white trousers.

In the same way, I saturated the bathrooms with tiles, veined marbles, and patterned wallpapers and curtains—whereas the bedrooms remain relatively light, yet furnished with unexpected pieces, designed or selected from Maja's collection. The overall result is unique. It possesses the soul of an old family house and proposes a new way to look at the south. A stronger way, in a sense. Where colors and materials challenge the historical building to take it towards a new life, whilst preserving the fragile equilibrium between both. The Villa serves as a place of inspiration and creation for Maja's Core Group, with whom she conceived Luma Arles.

The proposal of Hôtel du Cloître was an expansion of my work initiated at the Villa des Alyscamps. It was an architectural patchwork from the thirteenth to the twentieth century. The difficulty rested in tying all the elements cohesively to give a fresh identity. In order to do that, my

intervention had to counter the historical elements of the building without offending them. I therefore introduced a range of materials—such as rattan, caning mounted on metal structures, and modernized *caissons* floors—with a strong visual presence to reveal new juxtapositions, like the saffron yellow velvet to the exposed stone. Besides their physical attributes, it is the association of their respective time frames that creates a truthful conversation, resulting in a renewed authenticity. It is a hotel that works as a home.

JFC This expanded domesticity can also be recognized in your first public projects in Paris—Le Germain, the Club Paradisio, and the Hôtel Thoumieux—three projects concluded between 2009 and 2011, which culminate the first decade of your independent career. Le Germain is normally associated with the visual iconicity of *Sophie*, a sculptural character that endows both floors with a narrative continuity; but the project incorporates profound structural and topological transformations of the Parisian bistrot. There are also sophisticated spatial experiments in the way the windows on the ground level are mirrored on the columns, which become planes of symmetry between what they hide and what they show: the street outside. It's already a project of great maturity, which creates a *trompe l'oeil* effect in space, with a sort of depth in the construction of the image. It's an image within an image, a reality within a reality.

IM This was the first time I was undertaking a public project in Paris. And it was the beginning of my collaboration with Thierry and Gilbert Costes, who later founded the

Beaumarly Group. The Costes family were to the restaurant business what Ian Schrager had been to the hotel industry.

Le Germain was, at first, a patchwork of spaces that we redefined to create legible sequences: the covered terrace with its geometric, Mondrian-style ceiling; the bar and its *Friends* corner with two facing chesterfield sofas; and, finally, the restaurant room at the back. I borrowed and twisted all the codes from the Parisian bistrot, banquette, mirrors, chair, lighting, and black-and-white tile floor, and introduced acid colors to bring a dynamic energy that was in line with that specific area of Saint-Germain-des-Prés.

There were a few interesting features: the mirrors, formed by a geometry of old mirrors, reflected the exterior in such a



Terrace at Café Germain, Paris

way as to invite the street to its table. In order to bypass the regulations due to the narrow pavement, we reinvented the outdoor Parisian terrace. Instead of a classic seating arrangement, we created high-seat benches with integrated tablets—a model I have often seen copied in Paris.

But the most stunning feature was the Xavier Veilhan sculpture, an oversized *Sophie* piercing through the ceiling and leading us up to the first-floor lounge. Around Sophie's head popping out of the floor, I created an overwhelming combination of colors, materials, and floral and geometric patterns, as if Sophie's thoughts had materialized in space.

Through these projects, I discovered I had the ability to mix and match colors and materials with ease—a form of innate sense of orientalism⁵ translated to a different context—a process that served me to design the bedrooms of Hôtel Thoumieux.

JFC The success of Le Germain opened your Parisian chapter and allowed you to continue collaborating with the Costes family on other projects, such as the Hôtel Thoumieux and the Germain Paradisio, a private cinema that seats thirty people. Both designs inaugurated the use of curved and undulating lines for the furniture, like a signature. It was also the start of a fluid collaboration with M/M (Paris), with a more integrated approach between space and graphic design.

IM Thierry partnered with mk2, the famous French film distributor, for this part of the project. The Paradisio was supposed to be to the cinema what a private jet was to aviation. You could rent your private cinema for the evening by choosing a film from the mk2 library whilst having a drink or dinner with your friends.

The basement space was a difficult one: not one straight wall, exposed pipes and shafts . . . I bypassed the flaws by absorbing them in generous curves that defined the perimeter

of the room: it resulted in a hyper-sensual space, and a very different feel from the floors above. I pushed the idea of *elsewhere*⁶ by introducing an interpretation of a tropical forest, inspired by Henri Rousseau, that I expressed with stud nails on leather panels and patches of bright color felt, forming a modern fresco.

M/M (Paris), who designed the logo for the restaurant above, used the shape of the plan and the studs to create the logo for Paradisio. It came as an additional layer of elsewhere.

As for the Hôtel Thoumieux, it was composed as a succession of small spaces. The rooms were plain and dull with low ceilings. I had the intuition, contrary to common preconception, to work with saturation of color, materials, and patterns, working towards an *over-identity*,⁷ as if eras had overlapped. There is a deliberate uncertainty as to the era and location of this project, and this is where its modernity lies. The private dining room restaurant was conceived as a portrait of Chef Jean-François Piège, with the feel of a winter garden, soft pastel hues, in which the curves of the Nouvelles Vagues sofas add movement and femininity to a geometric background. The carpet pattern and the trumpet wall lights of M/M (Paris) added this futuristic strangeness.

JFC The Thoumieux inaugurated a new chapter in your use of color, with its pastel palette and velvet depth, which would be recognizable in later, iconic projects such as Sketch or Ladurée. You belong to the genealogy of great colorists, such as Le Corbusier or Ettore Sottsass. However, while these designers used color to fragment spaces and objects by surfaces, your chromaticity is immersive, liquid. This

includes your collaborations with such brands as Pierre Frey and Mèriguet-Carrère.

IM I make a distinction between the way I use color in a space and the way I use it on furniture. The Petits Objets boutique showcases a good example of both applications.



Petits Objets, 19 Rue Las Cases

For the latter, I often tend to apply colors as they are seen in cartoons, through the use of flat tints. That's why velvet has been a recurrent fabric throughout my career, not only because of its soft texture, but especially because of the wide range of shades and the saturation of color you can obtain. I designed the True Velvet collection with La Maison Pierre Frey (named after David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*), with three different line weights—bold, medium, and fine—exactly like pencils.

When it comes to spaces, color is used mostly to define a volume, rarely do I use it as a surface—which is what you refer to as “liquidity.”

The range of colors edited for Mèriguet-Carrère, a French paint company, is the continuity of this range of pencils where I included most of the shades I used in my projects. It's a selection of experienced colors.

JFC The opening of your Petits Objets boutique in Paris coincided with the

5 Not related to the nineteenth-century movement, the orientalism I speak about is one where juxtaposed geometric and floral patterns lose their respective identities to morph into a whole. I often describe my work as “pop orientalism”: a hybrid between my oriental DNA and my occidental upbringing.

6 Elsewhere is where I come from; elsewhere is where I belong; elsewhere is where I am going, a world where there are no borders.

7 Over-identity is an exaggeration of an identity, a part of my language. I like to define spaces by creating an identity of their own; by personifying them they become themselves and exist as a living entity.

culmination of your first decade of working independently—with legendary projects in the US, Mexico, and France. In your career, every significant period has been accompanied by a change, usually an extending of your Rue Las Cases ecosystem. Petits Objets would in this way complement your showroom and become an extension of the drawers in your office, full of little objects you have collected and designed.

IM It's interesting that you make that connection. When I put aside architecture to concentrate on interior design, I understood the importance of objects. You can build a room around one—you suddenly zoom out instead of in. In other words, you change your perspective. Some of the objects you see here are starting points.

I had always designed small-scale objects, but the larger pieces of furniture in my showroom drew attention away from the smaller ones. I opened the Petits Objets boutique in 2011 to display them all together at 19 Las Cases. All content has to stem from worldwide craftsmanship; they are warm touches that can bring joy to your house in an accessible price range. It became another active element in my ecosystem, which instantly attracted a new public.

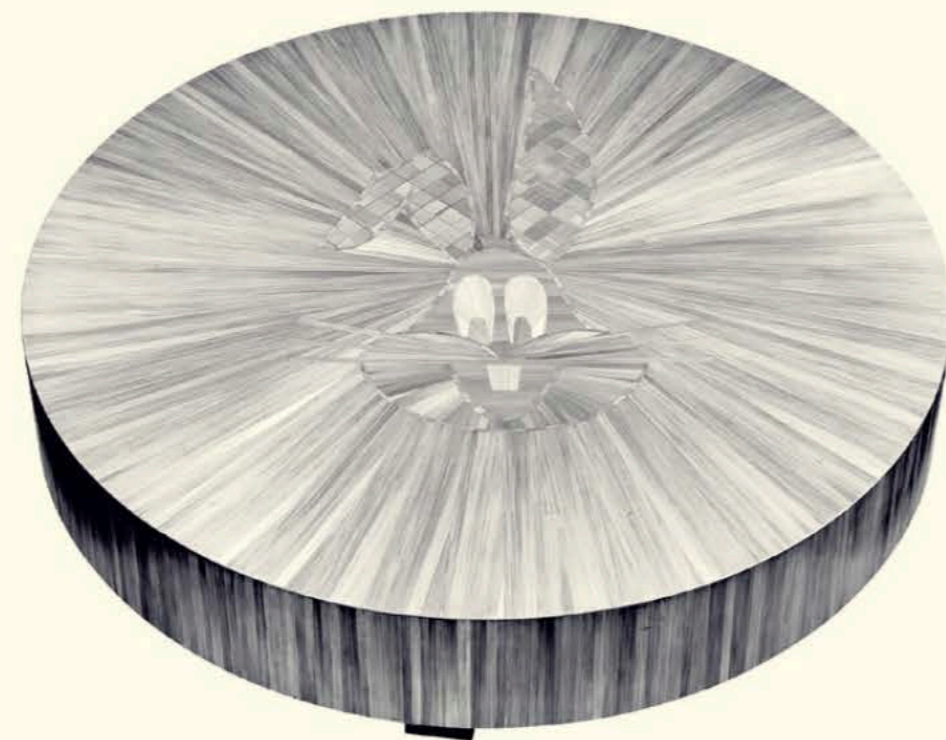
JFC At the same time, you remain firmly anchored in Paris. Yesterday we passed together by Mériquet-Carrère, and you are now developing a new collaboration with Lison de Caunes, whose production space is in Paris. You clearly have a strong desire to work with the craftsmen around you.

IM My furniture is made, for the most part, in France. Ever since the beginning, for me,

it has always seemed obvious to explore local manufacturing and craftsmanship. Today, all of my manufacturers are based in Europe.



Jardin Intérieur collection for La Manufacture Cogolin



Bugs Bunny table, collection India Mahdavi

Sadly, production has become more and more difficult in France.

Lately, I have been collaborating with historical French manufacture houses such as

La Manufacture Cogolin, Poterie Ravel (pottery), and Emaux de Longwy (ceramic partition technique), and as much as possible with Parisian-based ateliers like Mériquet-Carrère (for my paint collection), Lison de Caunes (straw marquetry), Atelier Midavaine (lacquer), and Maison Drucker (outdoor furniture). I see these collaborations like an exchange between know-how and design, which result in the making of products that have a truthful identity. It perpetuates tradition and nourishes creation. I hope this is what the future holds.

JFC This desire for an integrated approach in the design and production phase can be clearly seen in the Café Français—a project which, in a way, inaugurated the second decade of your career and for which you collaborated again with M/M (Paris). The project anticipates Sketch for several reasons: the reticular plan that contrasts with the ergonomics of the round armchairs, and the immersive atmosphere that binds together objects and space to produce a piece of *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

IM Exactly. It's not an addition of things; it's a whole composed of multiple elements. The Café Français is a large brasserie located at the tip of a block overlooking the Place de la Bastille; it was to become the flagship of the Beaumarly Group. It's a project I cosigned with M/M (Paris), with whom I had already collaborated for Germain Paradisio and Thoumieux. I composed the spaces, the flow, and the sequences; but the decorative elements stemmed from the typography of the logotype, and were applied to different scales and surfaces to form a true decorative alphabet.

The Café Français was designed like the great brasseries of the 1940s: everything is held, like the aesthetic concept *Gesamtkunstwerk* (where the work of art is total), which makes it stand the test of time. It was a new approach that I used for Sketch, also thought of as a whole.

JFC The Gallery at Sketch in London is one of the world's most Instagrammed interior spaces. Completed in 2014, it was a new departure in your career, but, above all, a point of inflection in contemporary interiors. The previous project by Martin Creed well illustrates that period of interior design where all colors and pieces of furniture were different—the Dutch collage approach mixed with a typically British atmosphere of color stripes that harks back to the era of the Hacienda in Manchester. In a way, your project is rebellious: immersive in the use of color, symmetrical on the plan, monumental in the staging of the furniture, and cinematographic in its image.

IM There were so many factors to take into consideration that I had no other choice than to conceive it as one entity. When twenty years of experience are condensed in five minutes.

The tight schedule (four months from design to installation) and an immutable budget were part of it.

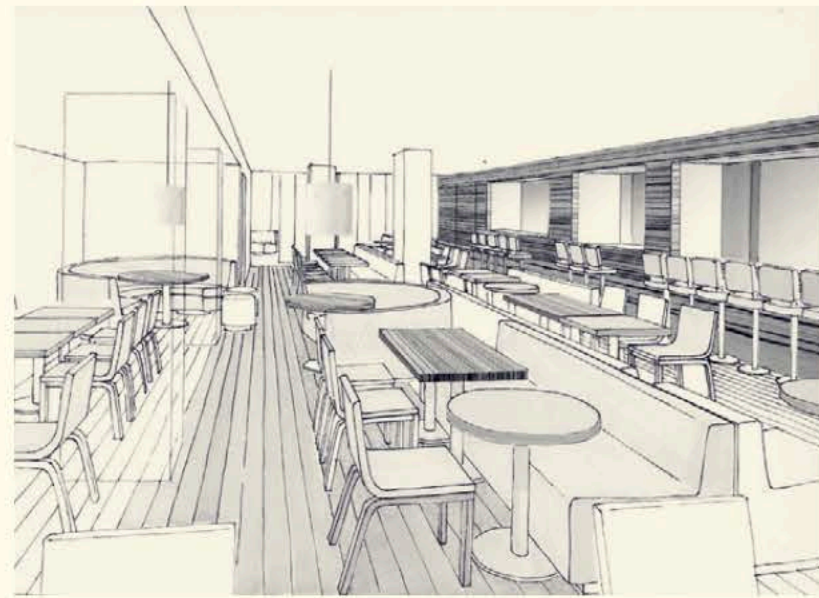
Sketch houses several restaurants under one roof—all very different from one another, but all with dense and ornate features—an overall eclectic setting which personifies Mourad Mazouz, the famous founder of Sketch.

As I walked into the cubic space of The Gallery, I immediately felt a need for brightness, freshness, in order to contrast as

much as possible with the previous installation and the other restaurant spaces. I told Mourad, “I will do the project, and I will do it pink.” To which he replied, “Do what you please, but I don’t like pink.”

It was conceived as a modern brasserie, with a very structured and symmetrical plan, banquettes all around, over which hover David Shrigley’s black-and-white drawings. His provocative and humoristic artwork contrasted the all-over pink.

JFC It was really the first time you created such an immersive space in terms of color, as if it was liquid. Had you used pink before?



Pink Japanese restaurant, New Bond Street, New York (unbuilt)

IM I had already used pink for Bond St. Lounge, in the basement of Townhouse in Miami. But, in small touches, I had also designed a pink Japanese restaurant for Jonathan Morr, which never came to life. Pink was on my mind.

I conceived this project as an ephemeral one. It was closer to an installation or a movie set because it was only supposed to last two years. This gave me a certain freedom and lightness of reflection. That’s how I came to dare pink: the color of childhood, the color of girls, the naïve and gullible pink, which

I opposed to this monumental square room with no daylight.

It’s the first time that I used color in such a radical way, like a propaganda. This room became important through the monochromatic use of color, through the immersive experience which it offered.

The Millennial Pink became the Pantone Color of the Year, but I never knew if Sketch had anything to do with it.

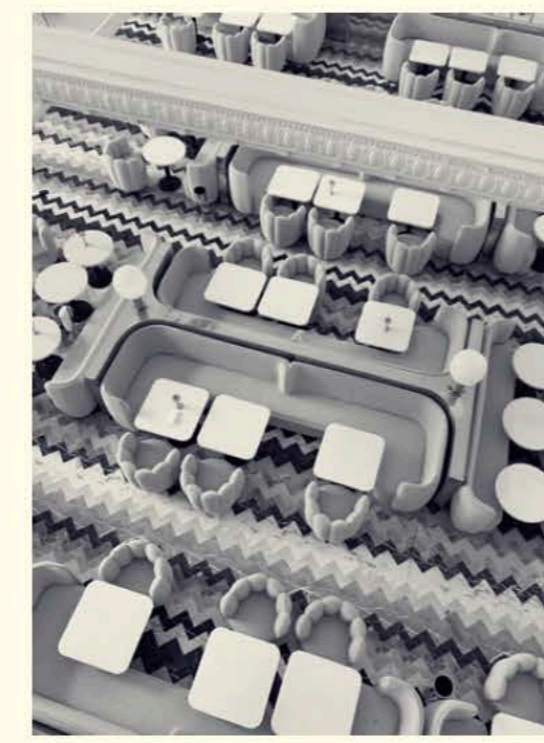
The Gallery, which was supposed to change every two to three years, has survived now more than six years. I see the pink Gallery as the Scheherazade of restaurants; she only owes her survival to her success.

JFC The wall behind the bar, is it copper? It’s very cinematographic and pointillist in its luminosity, contrasting with the immersive pink in the rest of the space. In a way, the Charlotte chairs construct a soft socle for the lamps to float in the center, with the bar at the end.

IM Yes; it’s copper leaf. Gold had to be pink as well. On the opening night, I realized that this pink hue gave a wonderful complexion to everyone! I hadn’t imagined such a cinematographic dimension; I felt as if Stanley Kubrick had been in charge of the lighting.

The Charlotte chair was specifically designed for The Gallery at Sketch, and it was based on the Eva Gabriella model designed for the Café Français. I wanted a feminine feel, something that felt sweet and welcoming, because I was told the room would serve teatime. I had the idea to use those ladyfinger biscuits to translate the idea of sweetness.

When you enter The Gallery, your eye captures the Charlotte armchairs immediately, which are evocative of 1940s Hollywood



Model of The Gallery at Sketch, including India

movies and give the impression you’re on a movie set. They are the starring actresses of the room, along with the blown Don Giovanni lamps, which had just been designed as part of the Séducteurs collection. They became the lights that stole the limelight—floating in the setting.

JFC With Sketch, you also restructured your team and design method. We can see in your career a progressive reduction of elements and an intensification of their role in the construction of interiors. You’ve recently finished a very precise 1:10 model of the project, with subtle modifications as compared to the original design, in what has become a different way of thinking of the project in retrospective.

IM Over the period of a year or so, the senior members of my team had left one after another, which obliged me to renew the team. It is never simple, but it brought some positive aspects: notably, skills for 3D modeling and other technologies, which allowed a shift in my *modus operandi*. The 3D representation gave me the possibility of exploring and experimenting with ideas on a different pace with incredible precision. It made me simplify the expression of the narrative to its essential form in order to give immediate readability to the space, to the idea, to the experience.

The model you mention was the outcome of a conversation I had with Mathias Augustyniak (from M/M Paris), who suggested that I rebuild a selection of my projects on a scale of a model (from 1:10 to 1:7). Spaces age; they are altered by the users and become difficult to photograph after their opening.

In making a model, another aspect of my work related to my need to be an architect becomes apparent, such as the composition of the plan and the articulation of the spaces; and it is something that images never show. We tend to only perceive the decorative aspect over the rest of the elements.

The Gallery at Sketch will eventually change, and the model will provide a volumetric archive. I am in the process of creating a herbarium of the projects that I have designed. This has inspired the theme of the master's degree you direct at HEAD in Geneva.

JFC Having a “herbarium” of iconic interiors as archive is a way of recalling these spaces with a disparate physicality, scale, and temporality. Interiors are always both ephemeral and mediatized domains in the sense that they disappear rapidly, yet they remain as different realities in media.

IM I think art form becomes important when archives are kept, otherwise it no longer exists. In this case, it's a way to render permanent an originally ephemeral place. With Sketch, I have even modified the model to explore other aspects from the real version. The idea is not that it represents a reality, but an imaginary world, which only exists as a field of possibilities.

JFC Other projects that should be added to your herbarium are, of course, REDValentino and Ladurée: two recent designs that were anticipated in their immersive character and chromaticity by Sketch. Developed between 2016 and 2017, Ladurée is the first spatially ubiquitous concept in your trajectory, since it exists in several cities: Geneva, Los Angeles, and Tokyo.

IM Yes, I worked on three different locations. David Holder came to see me, having noticed my work for The Gallery and REDValentino, and he told me: “In the history of Ladurée, we have had

only women: Marie-Antoinette, Madeleine Castaing; and we are trying to define Ladurée's vision for tomorrow.”

When you think of Ladurée, you think about their marvelous flavored macarons and of Marie-Antoinette, their long-time chosen muse who embodies a feminine vision of Versailles. When I think of Versailles,



REDValentino Sloane Street, London

I think of its gardens. I came to the conclusion that Ladurée could be seen as a garden of sweetness,⁸ where all those components could come together and serve as a background for a revived Marie-Antoinette.

We started by exploring the idea of a winter garden, with an allover lattice feature on pastel backgrounds, sitting on a black-and-white geometric floor. Then we introduced furniture pieces and details inspired by shapes of sweetness, from macarons to meringues, from barley sugar to candy. All the features were exaggerated to be bigger than life, transcending the place and giving it a surreal feel. All of a sudden, Marie-Antoinette began to travel from Geneva to Hollywood, from a pop universe, flower power, to the *salon étoilé*; Marie-Antoinette went kawaii chic in Tokyo. The *salon étoilé* in Geneva, with gold-embroidered macarons on dark-green

satin and velvet banquettes embellished with ceramic candies, created a poetic, magical dimension.

JFC REDValentino is a hugely sophisticated work, a project without windows where floating rounded mirrors become “places” incorporated into the room, giving way to a space-image. There's also a parallel play of reflection with references and distortions to objects, which, being very literal, become dreamlike, such as the staircase that leads nowhere, and the Rubik's Cube, as if one were playing in another scale.

IM RED was another project I nearly refused because it was part of a competition, which I never do. The REDValentino team was so insistent they came to see me in Paris. I then accepted to put together a mood-board based on their brief. There was one image of a chewing-gum bubble blowing out of pink lips, and another showing a bubble being pierced by a nail, that caught the eye of Maria Grazia Chiuri and Pierpaolo Piccioli (artistic directors at Valentino), and I was given the project.

In the brief, the “RED girl” was described as romantic, rebellious, and poetic. She was first and foremost young at heart. I see youth as a form of perfection, and the most perfect shape is a circle, which I used as the starting point to develop the project.

We placed oversized, pink, terrazzo polka dots on the floor, fading away as youth does, and added elements which seemed to come out of a sequel of *Alice in Wonderland*. We introduced elements such as a velvet staircase that led to nowhere; round mirrors like floating moons over the clothing racks to compensate the lack of daylight; half-womb

velvet changing cabins; and display cabinets inspired by the Rubik's Cube in an off-white lacquer, as if its color had been forgotten in childhood. It's a parallel reality.

JFC The floating mirror is to be seen once again at Tod's, in London, overlaid on the red shelving. As a decorative setting for a shoe brand, it verges on the theatrical, but it is also very domestic. In the main room, there's another mirror, which is like a door, as though it were an arch leading to another room—which doesn't exist.

IM Yes; exactly. It gives it depth.

This store was imagined as an apartment at the request of Diego Della Valle, the owner of the Tod's group. Stores on corners are always difficult because the window space is usually twice as large, and the street overpowers the interiors. In order to soften the interior/exterior contrast, we framed the windows with green velvet curtains, to create an apartment-like intimacy, and placed arched and oval mirrors to capture the attention indoors. They become interior openings.

JFC You have mentioned before the mood-board for REDValentino. For many projects, you do boards with images, references, and graphic collages, sometimes directly on the wall at your office. This constructs an imagery not necessarily linked to the physical condition of the space, which is mainly resolved in independent, complementary material boards. Has this been your practice since the beginning?

IM Yes, more or less systematically. It can be anything in reality. An image, an object, a detail, or a memory can trigger my

8 Idea of sweetness is not only referring to the lexicon of pastries and sweets, it is a form of politeness that is welcoming and warm, like a mother's hug.

imagination. For Condesa, it was a picture of a lady smoking a cigar. For Townhouse, it was an old photograph I found at the flea market which expressed happiness. Then with APT, of course, Bernard was inspired by certain characters I once knew.

Mood-boards became systematic later. To this day, I haven't found a better way to express a direction before starting a project, other than through a collage of images. I try to explore my own camera roll as much as possible. To express an atmosphere, I sometimes oppose two images that are not physical spaces. This is important because images of physical spaces carry an influence that can rob your project from its essence.

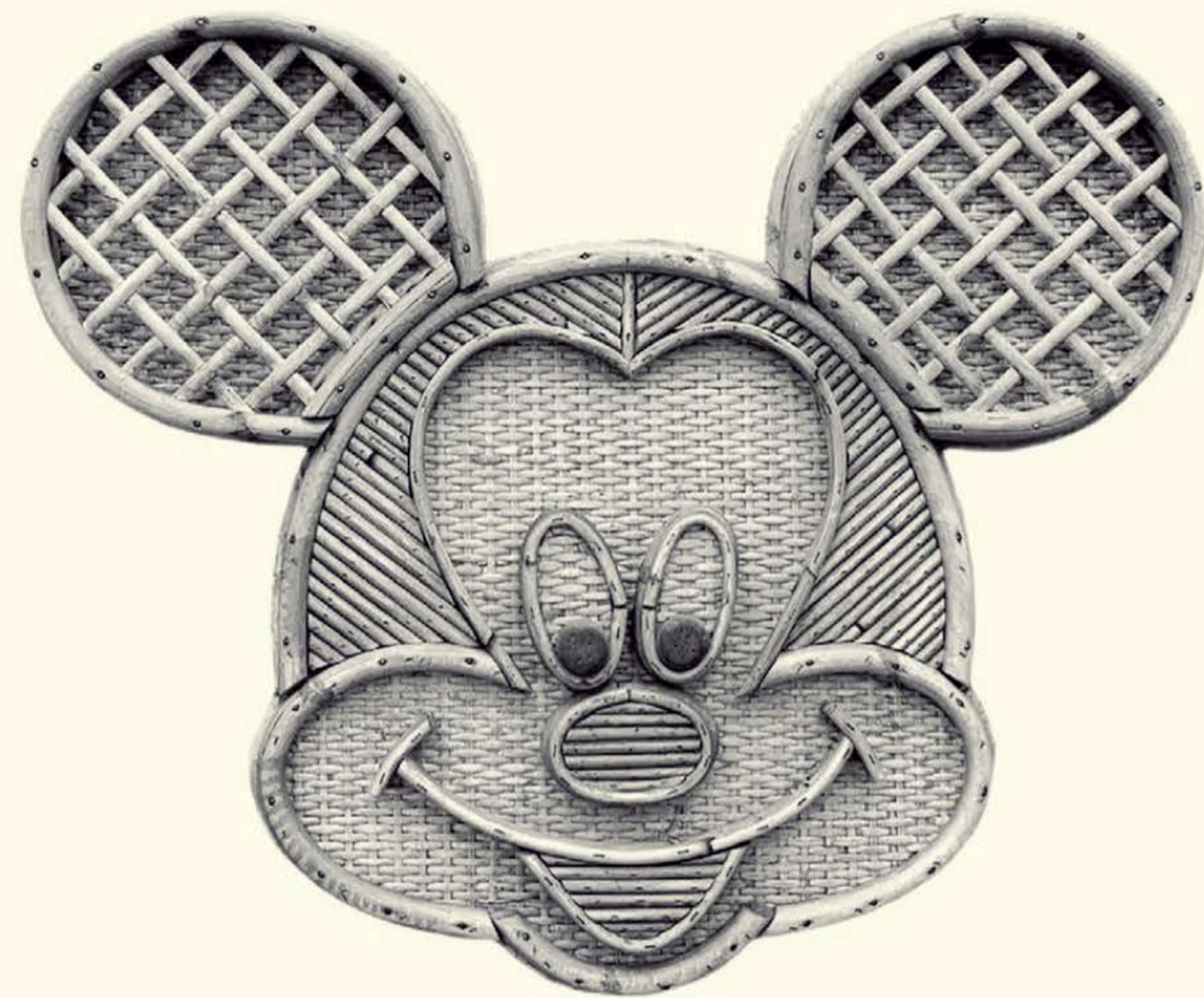
I have tried to archive every project, starting with the mood-board, the drawings at every stage, and finally a material box, where the principle samples of every project are stored.

JFC Narration is central to your way of thinking and practicing interior design. There is recurrently a fictional character at the center of the narrative's construction: Bernard, Marie-Antoinette, the young girl for REDValentino, the lady in the photo for Condesa, etc. Do you regularly write when you create mental narratives for your designs?

IM I've always loved reading, and words inspire me.

For instance, for Homo Faber (the exhibition organized by the Michelangelo Foundation at Fondazione Giorgio Cini in Venice), where I was asked to create a scenography on the importance of craft in interior design, I started with a text, because I needed to clarify my view on the

subject. By affirming that "the know-how of craftsmanship is at its best when serving the imaginary," I was able to free myself from a didactic exhibition and let my imagination flow to create two pavilions which were opposed to one another, in shape, color, and materials.



Mickey Mouse rattan mask,
India Mahdavi collection

Most often, as I said, mood-boards replace the writing. They are a starting point for the story.

But words are important in the construction of a project, either by their title or the way you promote them. For instance, I proposed the name APT, short for apartment, which summarized in three letters the whole concept. Chez Nina was another name I came up with, which echoed the famous French club Chez Régine—simple but effective.

I manage somehow to simplify or to de-complexify a space to make it accessible,

readable to all publics. That's why I participate in the writing of the press release of a project and make sure there are a couple of sentences that can hook the reader—same with my Instagram account, which I handle myself, where the words complement the images.

This profession can be seen as a projection of oneself in a space. By projecting myself, I become another self; and by drawing a place, I always imagine the actions that accompany them, and I become an actor of that space. Spaces are so connected to your body, to your physical movement. This emotional dimension of the perception of space, of what you are going to experience, can also be a starting point for creation. I think it comes from a film culture, but it's also related to a way of telling stories, so it's literary as well.

I have very often created spaces around characters, fictitious or existing: Bernard at APT, Marie-Antoinette with Ladurée, James Bond for the Empire, Sophie at Germain, Nina at Chez Nina.

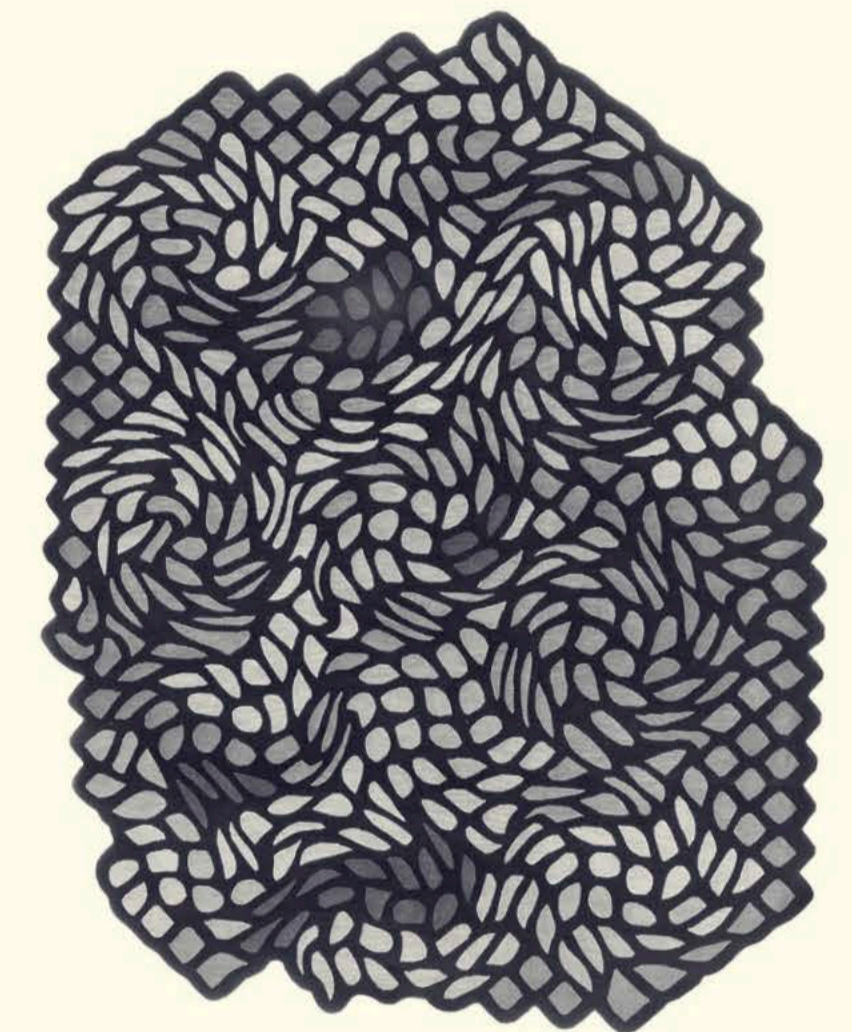
APT was probably the most scripted project even though I didn't write a storyboard; the story became the place.

JFC There is a project that's not a part of this narration, but that has confirmed a wider geography of impact in your career: Chez Nina, the ephemeral bar created for the 2018 Salone in Milan. What are your memories of that week in Milan?

IM That specific week in Milan was exciting because it gave me a whole new visibility that I do not have at Rue Las Cases. Chez Nina was a new program between reality and fiction, like a pop-up club that lasted a couple of years. Even if it wasn't a real club, it

became a real space where the design crowd of the Milan fair could meet and exchange.

Chez Nina was a private club designed as a portrait of Nina Yashar, an eccentric and essential figure of the design scene. It was located on the first floor of the Nilufar Gallery at Via della Spiga. We reinterpreted the Charlotte sofas with multicolored fingers, and, most importantly, we designed the silk hand-painted wallpaper with de Gournay as an abstraction of an urban landscape referring to Giorgio de Chirico. The juxtaposition of



March free shape, Garden of Eden
collection for Golran

that backdrop, the vertical office shades from the '70s, the red neon on the facade, Martino Gamper's hairy stools, and Vibeke Fønnesberg Schmidt lighting added color to the night.

I also presented a bathroom collection for Bisazza, which broke with the traditional, all-white bathroom look. Instead I proposed a bathtub, sink, and mirror in shades of pistachio, blueberry, and strawberry—and

where presented on a rotating round platform gave it a very playful and joyful outcome. Finally, that same year, I designed the collection of rugs for Golran, titled Garden of Eden, referring to the fact that the design of a Persian rug is an interpretation of a garden.

In one year I had presented three distinct types of projects: a space, a product, and a textile design.

JFC Paris, New York, Milan . . . Finally, I would like to discuss your lesser-known projects, linked to personal geographies of belonging: Iran and Egypt. Over the last few years you have rediscovered Tehran, a city that for you is both close and distant. You have recently published a book of photos on Tehran, a curated selection from your personal image library, in which the layout attests to your visual intelligence by juxtaposing the urban brutalism of the city with extraordinarily poetic and decadent interiors.

IM That is Iran. Despite this brutalism and the revolution, there is also this very strong sweetness, and this poetic dimension. It's a kind of nostalgia without being one, because I've never lived there.

Iran is my father's homeland. There is not one country that moves me more than Iran, so much so that I captured Tehran through a series of photographs in my *Portraits de Villes* publication.

I have been going back to Tehran on a regular basis since 2012. I reconnect with things that are part of an unconscious memory, which are intrinsic to who I am today. I have linked elements of my creations to typically Iranian attributes without

realizing it. Most of what inspires me today comes from Iran. I metabolize what I see to reinforce my vision.

I abandoned Iran when I was one-and-a-half, at the age when you don't yet have any memories. I use the word "abandon" deliberately, as abandonment is a word that suits Tehran well – When I "rediscovered" this city that I never really knew, was first struck by the sweet melancholy of this feeling – it was like things had been frozen in time and echoed back to a world that no longer exists, but which endures in the cracks of this city under never-ending construction – Everything stays still, but everything is moving – Today's downtown Tehran was yesterday's city centre – the heart of Tehran has moved further north, towards the mountains whose peaks break away from the horizon. Most of the photos in this collection were taken in this shifting territory, where – if you know how to observe them – the roughness of the city in motion and the gentleness of these preserved moments cohabit – that for me, is the poetry of Tehran. The city where life and absence can merge into beauty, as a perfect circle compared to a hole in lace. Where splendor and humility, deprivation and generosity mingle. This is how Tehran, a grey, dusty, polluted city, can become an Eden in the eyes of those who love it. These images are the moments that travel back in time to a childhood, moments that float within me. I returned to grandmother's home, abandoned for thirty-five years. When I visited her then, I was a teenager. I found colour under the grey, various shades under the layers of dust, fragments of this time gone by, but not lost, realising just how much it continues to inspire me in my work. Combinations of floral and geometric patterns in bright shades – it all resonated with me. And if there are quite a few flowers and fruit in these photos, it's perhaps because every time I go back to Tehran, I feel a little like a tree that has grown elsewhere and has been reunited with the true land of my roots.

JFC Your Iranian and Egyptian origins have also prompted you to develop a Middle East line of vernacular architecture in Siwa, less well-known than your interiors, in which you

create spaces with traditional techniques of construction. These are more abstract schemes where the bearing structure is the space itself, with no decoration or added colors. This demonstrates a double engagement taken in the exploration of your personal origins and those of architecture's primitivism.



Works in Siwa with Mounir Neamatalla

IM Egypt is another emotional homeland, as my mother is Egyptian. The first time I went to Egypt, I was twenty-eight, but I did not discover Siwa until I was thirty-five.

Siwa is an Oasis in the Egyptian Sahara, located a few miles east of the Libyan border. Siwa has a long history behind it but is widely renowned for having introduced

Alexander the Great to the Oracle of Amun's prophecy. I discovered Siwa thanks to my cousin Dr. Mounir Neamatalla, the environmentalist and visionary owner of the Adrère Amellal Eco-Lodge, with whom I collaborated on the construction and development. This brought a whole new dimension to my work as I took part in the rebirth of Siwa's vernacular architecture.

It was the sculptural, physical, and unscripted process of experiencing architecture that gave me a new perspective. They build in kershef, a mortar composed of earth and salt blocks (extracted from the surrounding salt lakes), which only emphasizes the feeling of *sculpting a building*.¹⁰ I have been going for more than twenty years, and have worked with the local craftsmen—notably with the salt master, Saied—to produce salt photophores that revealed salt as a material (other than construction) to the entire community. I would have to write a book about it, as this place is the most human and beautiful I have seen.

JFC We had begun this interview from the interior of your apartment, near the Rue Las Cases, and I propose that we conclude with a vision of the future linked to your new gallery on the Rue de Bellechasse. Just as your showroom did in 2003, and Petits Objets in 2011, we can anticipate that this new space inaugurates a new period in your career, perhaps more experimental, with stronger ties to other means of expression and design, such as cinema, theater, or fashion. How will the "India Mahdavi" universe evolve from here?

¹⁰ The Siwi vernacular architecture is built without drawings—we would define the perimeter of the walls by tracing the soil with a handful of salt. This enabled construction to start immediately; we built from the inside out and decided as we went along on the circulation flow, on which view we would be framing. Kershef is a malleable material and enables us to take walls down and modify openings as it remains wet. I once returned to Siwa and had a whole floor demolished because it was blocking the view.

IM During the past twenty years, I have continuously expanded on the same street, by taking over number 3 for the showroom, number 5 for the studio, number 19 for Petits Objets, and then the little number 3; so India Mahdavi has slowly become synonymous with the Rue Las Cases. My world has expanded like a mangrove, giving birth to an ecosystem. I have just opened



29 Rue de Bellechasse

number 29 Rue de Bellechasse, right in the axis of Rue Las Cases, as if it were a punctuation. This new space is program-less; I see it like a volumetric canvas for a liberated expression.

Throughout my career, I have designed fabrics, wallpapers, tiles, bathrooms ... I have composed a toolbox of my own visual universe, which I can now stage in an unexpected way to tell stories that differ from the conventional retail setting. I've always been attracted to this discrepancy: to send an object's functionality to the backdrop. I was also missing the need to create a dynamic

rotation of, what I call, mind scenarios. They enhance the excitement and entertainment that I was looking for.

JFC With this potential capacity to transform this space into a stage of stories, fictive worlds or mind scenarios, the street itself becomes a scene set focused upon your showcase. It's nothing less than the construction of a universe of performances, fictions, and narratives—almost a novel that unfolds on the space, featuring your creative personality in a new chapter of your career that we will be eager to discover.

IM I am not particularly interested in accumulating retail venues. This space is open to experimentation and freedom without the economic constraints of a showroom. It is my own playground, which feeds my imagination and vice versa. Yet again, this notion of family is recurrent in my work, only this time with spaces on the same street, like a family of spaces.

I opened with a series of seven pieces that were each designed around specific crafts—and were floating on a blue background—with, as the only decorative element, a rainbow arch, to result in a colorful minimalism.

It takes time to understand the potential of a show-space,¹¹ and I believe it will grow organically.

It opens yet another chapter to my imagination.

Javier Fernández Contreras (Dipl. ETSAM 2006, PhD 2013) is an architect, Associate Professor, and the Dean of the Department of Interior Architecture at HEAD – Genève, Geneva University of Art and Design. His work explores the relationship between architecture, representation, and media, with a specific focus on the role of interiors in the construction of contemporaneity.



11 For lack of a better definition, it is not a shop, not a showroom, not a gallery, and not only a window.