

Checking In With Hotel Interior Designer Jean-Philippe Nuel

The man behind some of France's splashiest new boutique hotels talks about minimalism, flea-market furniture and the films that inspire his work

WHEN IT COMES TO inspiration, French architect and interior designer Jean-Philippe Nuel often finds himself wandering over to his bookshelf and randomly picking out a volume of poetry. Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Octavio Paz.

"It's just to have a little bit of soulful input that goes beyond the realm of graphic arts," says Mr. Nuel, who's comfortably installed beside a virtual-flame fireplace in the lounge of the Cinq Codet in Paris, one of his latest boutique hotel projects.

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Trained as an architect at the city's Beaux-Arts, Mr. Nuel, 54, has designed the interiors of some of France's splashiest new hotels. Their styles range from the luminous, cream-colored suites of the Intercontinental Hôtel Dieu in Marseille to the hip Art-Deco-meets-street-art of Paris's Hotel Molitor, a restored 16th-arrondissement landmark.

The designer's latest venture, opening this spring, is the sprawling seaside Cures Marines Hotel Thalasso and Spa in Trouville, a destination once frequented by wealthy Parisians for the fashionable casinos and thermal baths. It was also a favorite with the literary set, from Stendhal and Flaubert to Proust and Marguerite Duras, and Mr. Nuel says he'll pay tribute to some of their best quotes in the décor.

"I'm always influenced by the history of each place, but I never try to reconstruct the past," Mr. Nuel says with a smile, from his perch on a low-slung sofa of his own design. "And as much as I like creating contemporary furniture, you should feel at ease about putting your feet up on the table. Otherwise, there's no point."



Clockwise from top left: Mr. Nuel's dog Eames, named after Charles Eames; Event Hall in Osaka, Japan, by Kengo Kuma & Associates; Le Corbusier circa 1950; a residential street in Brooklyn PHOTO: CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT, UIG/GETTY IMAGES; POPPERFOTO/GETTY IMAGES; OLIMPIO FANTUZ/SIME/4CORNERS IMAGES; JEAN-PHILIPPE NUEL

The city I admire the most for its architecture is Barcelona. Obviously, there's Gaudí, but there's something about the mix of urban straight lines and a seaside spirit that creates a very specific charm. If you walk around in the old city by the port, you see incredible faces, like you had just walked into a Pasolini film.

If I had a month free to travel, I'd go somewhere I've never been before—Australia or New Zealand, for the superb landscapes. Or I'd spend the entire time in New York and get to know the real soul of the city.

For me, true Parisian style is the ability to integrate the history of architecture and the fine arts with a contemporary solution. There should be a kind of tension between past and present.

The first thing I ever designed was a little hotel called Le Clos Medicis near the Luxembourg Gardens. I was straight out of school, and there I was, all alone managing a construction site where they were tearing down the whole building. I remember it as a traumatic experience. But since I was in charge of the entire project, I also created the hotel décor. Funnily enough, that launched my career in interior design, through I had trained to be an architect.

I'm not an avid collector, but I love going to the Paris flea market at St. Ouen to buy furniture. Every stall is unique, which is why I often bring my children to show them something that will probably disappear in the future. For lunch, we usually go to Starck's bistro, Ma Cocotte, inside the market.

The problem with contemporary showrooms these days—whether it's New York, Paris, Bangkok or Singapore—is that the furniture all looks the same.

The cinema is one of my sources of inspiration—when you step foot inside a hotel, it's like entering the opening shot of a film. I try to create an emotion that is something like watching the first scene of a movie. My all-time favorite is the beginning of Ridley Scott's "Blade Runner."



The lobby at Hôtel Dieu in Marseille, designed by Mr. Nuel PHOTO: CHRISTOPHE DUGIED

I've always been a great admirer of Le Corbusier and, more recently, the Japanese architect Kengo Kuma. I'm a bit of a minimalist at heart.

I named my dog Eames, after Charles Eames. Nothing surprising about that—I grew up in a family of architects and decorators, and my mother furnished our house with '50s and '60s classics.

My favorite boutique hotel is Le Dupleix, a restored old manor on the other side of the world, in Pondicherry, [India]. The interior design is a totally charming mix between Indian culture and a French-inspired colonial spirit.

I like getting up very early and having breakfast in a typical Parisian café. There's one near the Beaux-Arts, La Palette, which is still exactly as it was when I was a student—if you get there before the tourists arrive.

My favorite room to design is the bathroom. In my own home, I built a 5-square-meter shower that is like a separate room. Bathrooms should be a living space for relaxation, with lots of natural light.

My pet peeve is that there are too many projects centered on "the perfect photo" for the media. Hotels aren't just about beautiful décor—they should exude an atmosphere of well-being. The most magnificent hotels are often the hardest to photograph.

—Edited from an interview by Lanie Goodman