

French Connection

A look inside Philippe Maidenberg's approach to design in Paris

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Photos (clockwise from portrait): Stephen Keet Johnson, Gilles Trillard, Michel Maidenberg



Joyce Hotel



Hotel 123 Sebastopol

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Philippe Maidenberg's tour de force in Paris

By STEFANI C. O'CONNOR

Sometimes, the destiny gods find just the right family fit for an incipient talent. For Philippe Maidenberg, that meant growing up inspired by an uncle who was an architect and parents who owned a tour operator company and travel agencies, where their daily conversations dealt with exotica like hotels, airplanes and faraway places.

So, it's no surprise that, for the past 25 years, Maidenberg has cultivated what he absorbed growing up into a thriving architectural design business that has promulgated his influence on more than three dozen hotels in Paris. These include Hotel Bel Ami in Saint Germain des Prés for Bessé Group; music-centric Hotel du Triangle d'Or; and collaborations with Astotel Group on Hotel 34B, Joyce Hotel, Astoria Hotel, Joke Hotel and Hotel 123 Sebastopol, which won the 2015 World Luxury Boutique Award.

"I guess [design] was a part of my DNA," said Maidenberg, who founded his eponymous architecture firm in 1991, six months after receiving his architecture degree. "I had to be independent. So, as a beginner, I did apartments, offices, houses... anything I could," he recalled.

Although a newly minted architect, the young entrepreneur had gained significant experience previously as an intern with I.M. Pei and Partners on the Grand Louvre Pyramid.

"I was a student at the Beaux-Arts and had to do a report about a construction [project], so I chose the most important. I knocked on the door, and the team just opened it up to me in many ways. I spent a lot of time going there, making pictures—I have great ones—from the archaeological research until the grand opening. I learned a lot. I saw how a big team works, and I saw the humility and the kindness of an important architect, Ioh Ming Pei," said Maidenberg.

He also came to the U.S. as an intern during his studies to work at Murphy/Jahn (now renamed Jahn) where he did "a lot of drawings" and worked on his first hotel, a Hyatt near Paris Charles de Gaulle Airport.

"When I did my first hotel, everything was new in terms of techniques and organization, but I had an idea of how a hotel should look," said Maidenberg. "The standards and regulations of hotel design make you have to think differently; you have to deal with these all of the time. At the beginning, it can be frustrating, but I quickly integrated it in my way of thinking and discovered I really enjoyed the work."

Five years after founding Maidenberg Architecture, the designer's father suggested he connect with a friend, Serge Cachan, who—along with brothers Georges and Jean-Pierre—owned Astotel Group, at the time a six-hotel operator.

"Astotel is my oldest client," said Maidenberg. "After six months, they asked me to design a small



Hotel 34B



Joke Hotel



Hotel du Triangle d'Or

conference room in the Hotel 34B; amazingly, this is a property that I just renovated 20 years later. Then, we did a lobby and a hotel."

Since then, Astotel Group's Paris portfolio has grown to 16 hotels representing more than 1,000 rooms, most of it designed by Maidenberg.

Each boutique hotel project has its own design ethos. For example, Hotel Joyce is a Francophile's dream. The 44-room hotel features a wealth of Eiffel Tower images, from a montage at the entrance to its Eiffel-inspired glass atrium, along with repurposed car seats and trompe l'oeil furnishings.

"This one was very personal," said Maidenberg. "We had a lot of attention from the press and now, eight years later, I still like the project as much as I did the day it was completed."

The same is true of one of his latest projects. "Hotel 34B is about French clichés and the creative France: the one [that] created the great Citroën DS [my parents had one], the Concorde supercar, plane [my father [booked] the plane], etc. ... But also literature, wine, the beret, the three words—'liberté, égalité, fraternité'—those words have a different meaning now," said Maidenberg, adding with the 128-room 34B, "We painted the facade in blue/white/red in the courtyard. It was surprising, and it was funny to see so many pictures about it on Instagram. We did it before the terrorist attacks in Paris without knowing it would take such a meaning a few months after."

Maidenberg noted his firm, which has a team of seven architects and interior designers, is always looking to incorporate "something fresh and light" in its projects.

"But, above that, we always try to tell a story. Sometimes, we invent it; sometimes, it's the one of artists like musicians, actors, directors... that's how we did the 'On Tour' desk near a video wall with headphones to guestrooms with guitars and floating grand pianos painted on the walls."

Maidenberg considers the 63-room, award-winning Sebastopol project "a very special hotel for me. We did it with [international music and film celebrities] Jean-Paul Belmondo, Claude Leclerc, Ennio Morricone, Daniele Thompson, Agnès Jaoui, Jean-Pierre Bacri and Elsa Zylberstein.

"We recreated their universe with their collaboration," he continued. "Working with those people was just amazing. We treated subjects like boxing, theater and, of course, cinema with Belmondo, or speed with [film director] Leclerc, etc. Actually, we designed six hotels in one. This hotel was ranked in the number-one position [in Paris] for about nine months on TripAdvisor."

Similarly, the 47-room Hotel du Triangle d'Or is music-themed. Maidenberg's team worked in cooperation with international entertainers Rickie Lee Jones, Manu Katché, Jacques Higelin, Archie Shepp and MCS Solaire to create an atmosphere that immerses guests in a musical universe from check-in at the "On Tour" desk near a video wall with headphones to guestrooms with guitars and floating grand pianos painted on the walls.

Maidenberg recalled how Jones was living in Malibu, CA, and was on tour all the time. "We met in Paris, in Los Angeles and even at the jazz festival in Eliat [Israel]. We also had email exchanges.

Some of them were beautiful. She is a real poet, an amazing songwriter and such a good singer. She became a precious friend."

"With Jacques Higelin, who is our last important French songwriter to my eyes (and ears), we spent hours and hours talking about it. We spent so much time that he became one of my best friends, as well as his wonderful wife, Aziza. They are now like family. These projects brought me beautiful things I did not expect. Because design is not their job, they trusted me to do it, and I never did anything that didn't fit their vision," said Maidenberg.

The architect's own vision of his childhood experiences is played out in Hotel Joke. The recently redesigned 44-room hotel is a mélange of playful effects, including optical illusions, puzzles, toys, games, books, balloon lights, target tables and even a small, electric toy car for children to enjoy. "I played with funny things I had in mind. The [guest] can play and it seems that it works well," said Maidenberg, who also designs furniture.

"For each project, we design a lot of furniture, including chairs, lights, desks, tables, etc. We, at times, design fabrics; each project we create is different. We also designed a stool for the jazz legend Archie Shepp, the oldest manufacturer of pianos called Pleyel manufactured it."

His firm also is currently collaborating with influencer and singer/songwriter/musician Peter Gabriel on a project. "We already met, but are only really beginning the process now," said the architect.

Maidenberg said he likes to begin with a concept or a solid idea he can develop. "It is important to be able to explain your choices. Decoration for decoration's sake has a limit," he observed.

Key today in terms of boutique hotel design, he added, is that people want to be surprised and engaged. "It is a mix of design and management. Without a nice, welcoming smile and good service, a hotel can't be successful. You just do not want to come back. Then, design takes place. Lobbies have to be surprising: corridors, too. Nothing is more boring than a corridor without any surprise. Guestrooms, [however], should be quieter in many ways," he suggested.

He does consider one disrupter that's making noise as influencing hotel design.

"I think Airbnb is going to change things... Hotels do not play in the same court but, on the other hand, they have to deal with it, and I think it will change the way hotels are designed. I already see some clients asking me to design hotels that look like apartments," said Maidenberg.

Right now, Maidenberg Architecture is working on more than 10 projects—new constructions and renovations—all in and near Paris, but its founder is exploring expanding his horizon.

"Because I have done so many [projects] here, I want to export my work into different countries, because hotels are all over the world," he said. "The United States would be a great place to work on a project. I have family there, and I feel at home there."

And, why wouldn't he? There's that French lady in New York City carrying a torch for him, just waiting to welcome him back.