



Images by Luc Boegly

# Gare de L'est Hotel

**R**enowned architects and designers, **Axel Schoenert Architectes**, were commissioned by Paris Inn Group to refurbish the hotel, Paris-Gare de l'Est, a four-star hotel covering an area of 9,000m<sup>2</sup>. The hotel is based in Paris' 10th arrondissement, opposite the station, Gare de l'Est and a few minute' walk from the Gare du Nord. It is situated in an "up-and-coming" neighbourhood, at what is referred to as the crossroads of Europe. Designer **Zsafia Varnagy**, on behalf of Axel Schoenert Architectes, has redesigned the entire hotel, from the architectural reconfiguration of the spaces to the interior design.

The hotel's 200 bedrooms have been increased to 206 and decorated in four different tones, turquoise, yellow, blue and violet. The new lobby design focuses on optimising spaces in order to create an open and welcoming environment. The tones of the interior design help to create a more spacious and luminous environment. The hotel bar, which is open to the public, is unusually furnished with a collection of warm and colourful curved chairs and sofas specially designed by Zsafia Varnagy. The hotel officially re-opened in July and we are grateful to Zsafia who has taken time out of a busy schedule to talk to GS Magazine about the concept and the inspiration behind this project.

"When we started work on this project,

we didn't know that it was to be branded as a Holiday Inn and of course this detail is important. Holiday Inn have a 'book' which informs designers what can and cannot be included within the design so there were some restrictions". Surely no hotel project will be restriction-free? If not for the sake of a hotel brand, there will be financial restraints or spatial restrictions. Compromises are inevitable. "This is true" continues Zsafia "But with Holiday Inn the requirements can sometimes be a little stifling to a designer. And there were a few ideas I had that needed to be taken out, but fortunately they were small things, like a floral decoration on some of the mirrors for example." Did Holiday Inn compromise at all? "Yes they did, although I think some of that was at the insistence of the owner. We had bedroom carpets specially designed with a parquet flooring pattern. I don't think that Holiday Inn were keen on that but the owner said 'keep it'. And I think some of our colour schemes were considered a little too bright, although we did compromise by adding some tones of grey."

Zsafia is the wife of Axel Schoenert and helped to set up the business but works on many projects independently. She has her own design philosophy which is applied to all her work. "I believe that anything can work, as long as it's well done. From 16th century to modern design, even a mixing of different periods can work

together sometimes, but only if there is attention to detail. Of course there are rules - avoid fragile materials in commercial interiors for example and always respect the size of a room. But most of all I think a space should have a sense of harmony."

There is a strong concept and theme to the design of the Paris-Gare de l'Est hotel. It has been influenced by the inspirations of the surrounding area, which are as yet unfulfilled. Zsafia explains, "There are plans for the regeneration of the area but at the moment it is grey. It's unexciting and a little sad. So the idea of the hotel is to introduce the colours and freshness of Spring. To help inspire people and bring in the energy of new growth. So the colours were chosen deliberately to represent this. And we designed furniture using the reference of a flower. When you sit, the furniture wraps around you like the petals of a flower and makes you feel warm and comfortable." There is evidence of this concept throughout the hotel. The shapes and forms of flowers and petals are integrated into much of the interior. Fret-cut mirror frames resemble petals, bathroom basins are tulip shaped - these were designed by Zsafia, realised by a French company and manufactured in Serbia using a Corian-like resin material - and edges of tables, including the impressive reception desk, have been rounded and given a 'natural' feel. "At the train station (Gare de l'Est) there is a





large half circle glass window at the front that is designed to resemble the petals of a flower, so the theme in the hotel also takes reference from that” concludes Zsofia. That window could also be a reference to a rising sun; a significant, if unintended, symbol for the area’s regeneration.

For Holiday Inn this hotel might represent something of a turning point. The brand has always offered a reassuring sameness, based on the premise that they know exactly what their customers want and they deliver exactly that. But of course things change and so do the needs and aspirations of travellers. According to Zsofia Vargany “Today, people want to be surprised, to feel like they are in an elegant place”. There is no question that today’s traveller is happier to stay in places that provide a sense of place. They may expect international standards of quality, which can be ably provided by hotel brands, but they also like a touch of individuality and a feeling that they are experiencing their location. The overall design intention for this hotel is to encapsulate all the energy and vigour of Spring, not to replicate interiors that can be found in Holiday Inns around the world. Assuming it proves to be popular and successful it might lead IHG to relax some of their strict design rules and give local interior designers a freer rein to create new and fresher designs.

Paris-Gare de l'Est Hotel, 5 rue du 8 Mai 1945, Paris, France.  
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