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A LIFE IN DESIGN

AUTOBAN

Seyhan Özdemir, co-founder of the Turkish design studio, on the influence of Istanbul and what brings the company to London

Interview – Charlotte Luxford



CLOCKWISE FROM INSET: Autoban founders Sefer Çağlar and Seyhan Özdemir; a hallway in The House Hotel Galatasaray, Istanbul – the duo renovated the hotel's interior; and Sledge Blind-Tufted oiled ash and leather chair, £1,410, Autoban at De La Espada

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Autoban is easily the most influential design studio to emerge from Turkey in the past decade. Since meeting in the Nineties while studying architecture and design at Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University, founders Seyhan Özdemir and Sefer Çağlar's portfolio now extends from hotels to airports. But the duo have always had a global vision, so it's no surprise to find they're debuting in London, having just completed two unique projects for restaurateur Alan Yau.

Where did the name Autoban come from?

Our secret motto, '*Otobana çikelim*', means, 'Let's escape' and a friend suggested we call ourselves Otoban, which we merged with the German '*Autobahn*' to create Autoban – we felt that name would be more universally recognisable.

What's your design method?

We approach every project as storytellers and begin by

seeking to understand the context and characters. We tell these stories in materials, space and form, with the projects being rooted in the present, hinting at the future and referencing their past.

Does your heritage influence your projects?

I believe design isn't local, it's global. Having said that, it's good to add some spice from your own environs and Istanbul's culture has shaped our personalities and our habits, so it naturally finds a way into our work.

How?

We tend to choose natural materials and we're often influenced by local craftsmanship, such as traditional tiling. When we first started out, there was no real design culture in Turkey. We had to use artisans to create our furniture prototypes as there weren't any factories to do it. We still use local businesses, but we also mix their work with new technologies and materials.

What makes a house a home?

Your home should relate to your own real-life



experiences, not be a made-up life that's been created for you. It's a home, not a theatre set! Picking personal items such as art and books is key, as they are what add the client's story to the bare bones of the building. We'll often commission artists specifically for our projects to pull the whole space together.

What's your own home like?

I live in a very old apartment in Beyoğlu, part of old Istanbul. It's an industrial space and I wanted to leave the building's structure exposed, including all the cables and little details that are part of its history. There is a mix of materials, with marble worktops and aluminium chairs in the kitchen and softer touches in the living area. The furniture is mainly a collection of our prototypes which, being rare and unfinished, are very special to me.

Do you collect anything?

I don't like to decorate my walls with paint or wallpaper, so I collect architectural drawings and graphic prints to add a decorative element and tell my own story.

Pattern is big in your culture – what are your tips for using it at home?

I don't feel it's the most important element of our work, but it's certainly part of it. Using pattern on a large scale can be a bit dangerous, as it's so difficult to change if you tire of it. If you want to use it merely as a decoration, it's risky – we believe it should have a relevance to your life or the building, stemming from your art collection or the existing structure.

What influences your furniture designs?

Daily rituals, memories, things we interact with, cultural influences and, of course, our own lives. The Deco sofa from our collection is inspired by Ottoman divans, but is a contemporary adaptation. It's low-level lounge seating, where the wooden panels seem to be there just to hold the cushions together.

Which other product designs do you admire?

I love the Eames lounge chair – the Eameses created a new reason for product design, so I'm a big fan of their work. We used Eames airport seating for our latest project, the [Baku] Heydar Aliyev International Airport in Azerbaijan. I've always loved Jasper Morrison's Thinking Man's chair, which I actually own, and the work of Italian architect and designer Carlo Scarpa.

What's your career highlight?

Probably the Baku airport, as we had a huge area to work with and we didn't want it to be an open, vacant space. So we used the concept of micro-architecture to bring things back to a more human scale, with a series of cocoons. They were designed to be fluid, multifunctional zones where passengers could feel they were always moving, discovering something new, not just passing through.

What are you working on now?

We've been working on two central London restaurants for Wagamama founder Alan Yau – a Chinese-style gastropub called Duck & Rice and a traditional Turkish pide [pizza] restaurant, Babaji Pide. They both have a strong story that's connected to the menus, so each material we use is a reflection of that. We've also just launched a new collection with De La Espada at Maison et Objet: a table, a sofa and a bed. Our products have traditionally been designed for public spaces, but these pieces are more for the home, but still have a sculptural feel.

For more info, visit autoban212.com

1 Seyhan's apartment in Tünel House, Beyoğlu, Istanbul. Once filled with artists' studios, Autoban renovated the building, retouching original features and keeping brick walls exposed to embrace strong new colours and textures
2 Deco oiled oak and wool large sofa, from £6,546, Autoban at De La Espada



'Your home should relate to your own real-life experiences, not be a made-up life that's been created for you'



3 Beyoglu House, Beyoğlu, Istanbul – Autoban designed a custom-made 'hidden' kitchenette for the busy owner of this flat, housed in a historic apartment block **4** Flying Spider gold-plated-steel pendant lamp, £906; **5** Pumpkin painted-steel table, £1,830; **6** Nest painted high-density fibreboard lounge chair, £4,278; and **7** Poly stained-ash and painted-steel side table, £786, all Autoban at De La Espada

8 Beyoglu House – Autoban enhanced the high ceilings with papier-mâché reliefs and renovated the original parquet floor