



How a pair of Parisian designers learned to feel at home in the in-between.

## Is It Architecture or Is It Art?

By Kurt Soller Photographs by Yvan Moreau

THE FIRST TIME the 40-year-old French designers Agathe Labaye and Florian Sumi met, they were in high school in Dijon, forced to work together in art class on an amateurish painting of a dead fish that they still have in storage. They had crushes on each other, Labaye says on a dreary March morning while the couple sit at an oval black glass dining table in their third-floor apartment in Paris's Haut Marais. But they didn't reconnect for another 18 years, after finishing what Labaye calls "first life" — full of 20-something relationships, homes and jobs — and then deciding to co-create a line of industrial wood, leather and steel furniture (sold at London's Charles Burnand gallery), a collaboration that established their professional and romantic partnership. The next year, in 2019, they completed their debut full-scale project, the renovation of Hotel de Pourtalès, a pale-toned Eighth Arrondissement refuge that, as Labaye explains, needed a fresh sense of calm. Three years before, it had been where Kim Kardashian was held up at gunpoint.

Back then, Sumi considered himself an artist who produced steampunkish metallic furniture meant less for sitting on than for looking at. Labaye was an architect who worked with French designers like Pierre Bonnefille. As their company, Labaye-Sumi, grew to seven people and took on commissions, the pair decided they were neither of those things — and both, too. In each of their independent practices, they had long been interested in exposing handmade techniques and artisanship, whether joinery, wiring or literal nuts and bolts, which often resulted in objects and rooms that,

In the Paris kitchen of the designers Florian Sumi and Agathe Labaye, who run the firm Labaye-Sumi, a pendant lamp of their own design hangs over a 1970 Gastone Rinaldi table and vintage upholstered armchairs. The two photographs on the wall are by Pierre Liebaert.

almost like theatrical set pieces, could be disassembled and reassembled in various ways. So, not long after they started making spaces together, they invented a shared philosophy of sorts: "Furniture makes architecture." As she explains

this, Labaye points above to the bespoke oak railing that borders much of the mezzanine-like loft of the 1,290-square-foot, three-bedroom apartment: "A friend recently asked whether that balustrade was architecture or design, and I couldn't answer," she says. "With the ceiling lamps and lecterns [attached to it], it creates architecture because the shape fills the void."





THEIRS, INDEED, IS a world of in-betweens: He likes to stand and work all day, she prefers to be horizontal in bed; he likes sofas, she forbids them; he's most interested in form and materials, she obsesses over light and colors (which in this home alternate between moody jewel tones and soft beiges, all lit in buttery hues by custom LED bulbs they manufacture themselves). As they're brainstorming, one will sketch, the other will make 3-D renderings from those

Left: in the upstairs bedroom of Sumi and Labaye's oldest child, a vintage sconce over an architectural vessel by Célia Picard and Hannes Schreckensberger, and a black cherry stool crafted by Loïc Martin and Simone Ellero. Below: in the living room are a daybed, a chair and side tables by Labaye-Sumi made from stainless steel, leather and onyx, as well as a candlestick by Xavier Lust for Driade. The photographs of Afghan dogs and breasts are by Philippe Jarrigeon.

drawings and then they'll bring the results to their atelier outside the city in Saint-Denis, where they manufacture most elements for this and other projects. When they host dinner parties, often several times a week, Sumi does the cooking while Labaye refills drinks and smokes cigarettes with friends, all of them leaning out the window.

Most of the home, in fact, is oriented around having people over for hours, the space adjusted as needed: The middle of the residence is the kitchen and dining room, where in lieu of rigid wooden seating they've placed four vintage burgundy velvet armchairs that encourage visitors to stay and relax. For extra guests, they'll pull squat stools from the rest of the dwelling, which unfurls down a snaking 55-foot window-lined corridor through a cavernous central sitting area, the primary suite and up to the interior balcony, with a semi-exposed study and rooms for their two young children. Everywhere you look, there's contemporary portraiture on the walls, and chaises and divans that inspire crouching and conversation beneath dramatic hanging pendants. "We are not against the typical Parisian apartment," says Labaye. "But this kind of place gave us the ability to really push hard —"

"To *invent* something," Sumi adds, finishing her thought.

Perhaps it makes sense, then, that just as they never intended to design





apartments, this was never meant to be an apartment in the first place. It was built in the 1870s as the chapel of a convent, and they've maintained this vernacular by delineating rooms, some with beamed 15-foot ceilings, across three distinct naves, with the living area occupying the middle. Until the couple renovated the place in 2023, a single woman had lived here for four decades, growing old among her collection of ashtrays and vintage Le Corbusier chairs. Long before she



Right: in the lofted office area, Labaye-Sumi designed the pendant light and the striped sofa, which is next to a Tizio standing lamp by Richard Sapper for Artemide. Below: the hallway connecting the kitchen and dining room to the living area behind them.

before she

arrived, the upstairs level had been a church attic where Jews hid after the Nazis invaded.

The duo wanted to pay tribute to the house's architectural legacy however they could — for example, by hanging rough jute curtains they felt were humble and vaguely magisterial. They also installed curved sliding wood-and-glass doors along the corridor that allow each downstairs space to be cloistered or opened up, exposing it to the original arched windows opposite the hall. "Our flat is a big diorama for the neighbors," says Sumi, gesturing to the many who live around the building's courtyard. "It's a real stage. So we just play." ■



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MARKET REPORT

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Clockwise from top left: Emmanuel Gallina Orbis armchair, \$4,534, poliform.it. Hannes Peer Emmi chair, \$15,400, minotti.com. Carlo Scarpa Cornaro armchair, \$8,205, cassina.com. Adrian Pearsall Taite swivel chair, \$4,395, rh.com. Gilbert Rohde easy chair, \$5,595, hermanmiller.com. Piero Lissoni Echoo armchair, \$4,270, livingdivani.it. Saba Italia Geo armchair, \$4,495, abchome.com. Sarah Ellison Tubo chair, \$2,495, dwr.com. Faye Toogood Squash armchair, \$7,140, poltronafrau.com. Jiang Qiong Er Bamboo Mood armchair, \$4,950, roche-bobois.com.