

# LEATHER AND LAVA

AFTER HE DESIGNED A NIGHTCLUB FOR DAVID LYNCH, EVERYONE WANTED A PIECE OF RAPHAEL NAVOT. HE NOW CHOOSES HIS PROJECTS CAREFULLY, USES THE INHERENT BEAUTY OF NATURAL MATERIALS, AND WORKS ON A SMALL SCALE – HE IS A ‘NON-INDUSTRIAL DESIGNER’.

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# I

In 2012, Paris-based Israeli designer Raphael Navot, who had reached cult status the year before as the interior-designer-slash-art-director behind David Lynch's concept-driven Paris nightclub Silencio, signed on to design hundreds and hundreds of individual projects. A confessed gun for hire, he covered everything from private homes to store fit-outs, to product design and even jewellery. No job too big or too small, the offers kept rolling in and he seemed incapable of saying no.

"I was thinking why not, why not, why not," the 39-year-old says over lunch one day in Paris. So, in 2013, Navot decided to hit the reset button. "I stopped working completely – I had a year of doing nothing. I had given a lot of myself, and I needed to realise that I didn't want to be directed by opportunities, which is what I was doing prior," he says thoughtfully, adding, "I think that can eat you alive."

The way Navot tells it now (with a trace of humour), his year-long sabbatical had a distinctly New Age bent to it: a journey of self-exploration that involved therapy, learning multiple types of meditation, research, reading and even clay-modelling classes. "It wasn't all happy lovey-dovey New Age vibe, it was also quite tough," he says, "but I had to do it – I'd had 10 years of really permitting myself to go in any possible direction, and I'd spread myself out completely, so it took me a while to find my values. It was only then that I started to see the common thread of what I related to best."

Being selective on projects and placing clear parameters on what he does agree to take on has defined

this second chapter of his career: "I would prefer not to do something if we have to compromise," he says. "My control, my sign-off, is more of a guarantee that I can do something I am proud of."

Throughout this period, his unique design language and artistic sensibility, grounded in raw materials and craftsmanship, has emerged. "I had a time when work stopped, and a time when it began again, differently," he says of the moment. "Now, it's all about *savoir faire*, all traditions that are almost gone but can be revisited in a contemporary way." He traces this back to his very first personal project without a client or a brief: a wooden object he called *POH (Patchwork Oval Hemisphere)*. The curved, boat-shaped sculpture was crafted from a 3D patchwork of walnut, eventually industrialised slightly differently by Milanese designer Giulio Cappellini. "This was the piece that proved that there is craft out there," says Navot.

This month in Paris, Navot will present three items at the AD Collections exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. The objects display his preoccupation with artisanal practices. There will be two lighting sculptures cast in bronze by Maison Charles and a chaise longue – a collaboration with iconic upholstery maisons Pierre Frey and Ateliers Jouffre. In the 2016 AD Collections exhibit, he hand-painted a silk screen for heritage brand De Gournay. With this approach, most of what Navot creates today is near impossible to reproduce in large quantities, which is why he calls himself a "non-industrial designer".

"It's the only self-definition I've come up with," he says. "Some people are motivated by making a new product that is very smart, that everybody wants to have ... but I've never felt like doing that." Further, Navot has always worked alone, with no permanent team or studio. He brings on various collaborators for each specific brief and is categorically against creating a studio under his name, with which he would take the credit for other people's work: "I don't believe in having 20 different architects and putting everything under my name. I find that morally problematic," he says with a shrug, adding, "Every item that is drawn [today], is drawn by me."

The designer, who has dark, close-cropped hair, kind, intelligent eyes and an easy smile, grew up in Jerusalem, a city he admits he finds unnerving today: "I find it difficult to be there – the energy is so charged." Tel Aviv is more on his frequency. With its contemporary mood, defined by a prominence of Bauhaus architecture, he's drawn to the beauty of its neglected buildings and the unique mix of its cultural heritage.

Navot left Israel at 21, after completing his military service, to study at the famed Design Academy



Clockwise, lobby of the Hotel National des Arts et Métiers, Moon Sofa for Domeau and Pérès, Story Telling table for Oscar Ono and the Arrows Library



Eindhoven, in Holland. Here, he showed great promise and not only skipped an entire year but caught the eye of Lidewij Edelkoort, the renowned trend forecaster and then university chair, with whom he remains close. After graduation in 2003, he came to Paris to intern for Edelkoort before launching his career as an independent designer some six months later.

The French capital is home now, and its historic tradition with *savoir faire* is something that feeds him constantly. "I come from a country that is temporary in construction. Europe is full of this kind of craft – out of this window alone I can see the most incredible ornaments," he says, gesturing to the busy street lined with decorative creamy façades fashioned from Lutetian limestone, the "stone of Paris" that has been mined from local quarries for centuries.

That same stone is at the heart of his latest and most ambitious endeavour: a new four-star hotel in Paris called the Hotel National des Arts et Métiers (arts and crafts), named for the neighbourhood in which it sits. Double-billed as the interior architect and art director, this is Navot's most evolved proposition to date. He conceived the entire project: from the limestone columns hand-chiselled by French artisans on site, to the furniture he developed with furniture designer Pieter Maes, right down to the fragrance brief for the custom line of organic toiletries. The hotel, still under construction and due to open in the northern spring, is elegantly brutalist. While the exterior of the building appears to be typically Parisian, the interiors were gutted to allow for the construction of a contemporary design hotel, assembled from a mix of striking raw materials, a refined alchemy of concrete, oak, terrazzo, limestone, and, in the bar alone, leather and volcanic lava.

The project embodies what Navot calls, lightheartedly, *The Natural Future* – a kind of unwritten manifesto. "It's about the presence of raw materials, genuine craft, materials (wood, concrete, the vegetation), and ecological considerations," he explains. The latter will pertain to the employment of geothermal heating, eco-friendly cleaning products and processes, and the sourcing of local food and produce for the restaurant.

This natural ethos extends to the colour palette of the interior, which are defined by the tones and textures of the raw materials: the subtle shades of different woods, the striking contrast of metals, the patterned terrazzo, and earthy leather. "There's a whole language of colour there, but the idea is to work with the materials so that there is no paint or applied colour," Navot says. "On the ground floor, there's a whole wall I want to do in oxidised copper." The oxidisation produces a brilliant green colour that will offer a contrast to the cooling tone of concrete throughout. "It's like the difference between blushing and putting blush on," he explains of the process, "I hope to provoke the natural materials to bring about colour."

In Navot's online portfolio (where he includes only his post-epiphanic works) his projects are clearly defined by their parts – they are listed as "Oak; brass; walnut; gold; lava; terrazzo; and concrete" – more than their sum. To date, this has accumulated most strikingly at Silencio, which remains, until the hotel opens, the jewel in his crown.

Conceived as a conceptual, cultural space, complete with a photo gallery, library, private cinema and concert stage, Silencio was a members' club that quickly became a celebrity haunt, thanks not only to Lynch's association but also to Navot's audacious design. Underground and with several rooms, nooks and crannies, the space is almost Lynchian in its disorienting effect, which peaks in the metallic gold corridor. Everything about the space is modern, slick and custom-made – right down to the ergonomic furniture. "It was a rare project, and the intentions of the space are fantastic," Navot says.

Still, despite the hype, the designer resists specialising in any one thing: "Silencio was the first club, this [Hotel National des Arts et Métiers] is the first hotel – everything is a first," he says. The most important thing, for him, is to recognise the right opportunity when it comes along. "It's not that I know what I want to do and that's it," he says, "It's more that I'm now closer to certain values. I'm learning, not necessarily to repel the wrong projects but to attract the right ones." **W**

