



A COLLECTOR'S SENSIBILITY

Celebrated for blending rigorous architectural discipline with a collector's eye for art and design, French architect and designer CHARLES ZANA showcases his eclectic vision in a new exhibition in Paris.

Words: Y-JEAN MUN-DELSALLE

Charles Zana has spent more than three decades quietly shaping some of the most refined interiors – from private residences and cultural foundations to hotels and boutiques – in Venice, London, New York, St Barts and Monaco. Yet, for Zana, architecture and design are never just about beautiful spaces – they are about orchestrating conversations between art, history and human experience.

Born in Sousse, Tunisia, in 1960, he moved with his family to Paris at the age of two. His father worked in publishing and his mother ran a gynaecology clinic, but it was



*Charles Zana
Opposite: Zana's In Situ
exhibition is held in a 19th-
century Rue de Rivoli apartment.*

his parents' lives as collectors that truly set the course for his future. "Their home in the 1970s was a typical collectors' home, with a lot of architect-designed furniture," he recalls. His father, who brought him to exhibitions and auctions, had a particular eye – self-taught and voraciously curious, he mixed Picasso ceramics with Jean Royère, Gae Aulenti and Pierre Paulin alongside 18th-century treasures. From him, Zana inherited what he describes as "a taste for eclecticism: not being a man of one style, but pursuing several passions at once", embracing all eras and aesthetics.

At the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, Zana found the perfect outlet for his twin passions for art and architecture. "I wanted to be an architect from a very young age because I thought it was a profession that brought the two together," he reflects. His formative years were steeped in the lessons of 20th-century Italian masters. Gio Ponti, Ettore Sottsass, Andrea Branzi, Enzo Mari and Carlo Scarpa remain constant touchstones. "Ponti inspires me with his elegance and holistic vision of a project," he says. "Scarpa is a master of materials and detail, an architect-poet. Sottsass taught me to dare with colour,

humour and exuberance and not to be afraid of breaking codes, while Branzi was the first to bring nature into design."

DISCIPLINE AND IMAGINATION

This duality – rigour and freedom, memory and invention – has become the DNA of Zana's work. His interiors are layered yet precise in structure, where comfort, circulation, light and volume meet vintage icons, modern classics and bespoke creations. It is the tension between discipline and imagination that defines what he calls "the Charles Zana style". He explains, "I



always start a project with a dual reflection between gesture and concept. I draw by hand to capture the intuition and fluidity of an idea, then anchor it with historical, cultural and contextual references.” In Paris, he infused 1930’s Art Deco codes into Hotel Kimpton; in Miami, he installed a colourful mirror wall reflecting the city’s festive spirit in the Yann Couvreur Café.

Taking an all-encompassing approach, Zana designs everything in a project – from the exterior to the interior and furniture – as one continuum. “All our furniture is born out of reflection on the projects themselves,” he notes. “Each piece is therefore the result of a dialogue, both functional and poetic, which extends the architecture into the furniture.” His oft-repeated maxim that furniture is “small architectural elements” goes back to Branzi’s notion of objects as entities that transcend function. The protagonist of a space, “each piece is conceived as an anchor point, capable of redefining the way we move, sit and breathe in a place,” he states. Initially created exclusively for private commissions, his



This image and left: Exteriors of the Foundation CAB Saint Paul de Vence.

furniture collections gradually found a wider audience, and are today available to the general public at his Paris showroom, which opened in 2022.

Collaboration is central to Zana, who works with some of France’s finest artisans, some for over 30 years: upholsterer Charles Jouffre in Lyon, or Maison Charlois in the Nièvre, whose oak barrels inspired a series of wooden stools. “For me, true luxury is handmade – the unique gesture that gives each piece a soul,” he asserts. “What moves me in the tradition of French decorative arts is the idea that a piece of furniture is the

fruit of collective work, of intersecting perspectives and expert hands.”

AN AMBITIOUS SHOWCASE

This October, Zana unveils *In Situ*, his most ambitious exhibition to date. Set in a grand 19th-century Rue de Rivoli apartment during the Art Basel Paris art fair, it brings together over 30 new or reconfigured works in a domestic yet theatrical scenography. The centrepiece is Sara, a monumental six-metre-long version of his iconic Julie sofa, crafted in polished stainless steel and conceived as a piece of “small independent architecture”



The interiors of the Kimpton St Honoré Paris hotel's suites, designed by Zana. Above: The Visitation house in Paris, designed by Zana in 2018, blends classicism and modernity.



that anchors the setup. There is a bronze bench, oval brass mirrors, plaster or travertine sconces, and a bronze chandelier that he labels an “illuminating sculpture”.

For the first time, Zana introduces pewter and ceramic, but the main innovation is his use of urushi lacquer in three colours – sepia brown, saffron yellow and sage green – inspired by nature and the Greek islands. Following in the footsteps of Eileen Gray and Pierre Legrain, the lacquer has been applied to a set of oversized collector’s tables created with Pierre Bonnefille. “I like the idea of seeking inspiration in the ancient techniques of the French decorative arts,” he shares. “Our creations are always contemporary, but rooted in classical materials.”

Following his earlier furniture exhibitions – Ithaque, in 2021, and Iter, in 2024 – In Situ is Zana’s most personal yet. Alongside his new creations, he will show his private art and design collection for the first time, which includes antiques, paintings by Eugène Carrière, Carlo Mollino Polaroids, Ettore Sottsass ceramics and plaster monoliths by Andrea Branzi.

“In Situ embodies this blend of creation and collection, classic and modern, intimate and universal,” Zana says. And the journey won’t end in Paris. Plans are underway to bring the collection to New York, Dubai and India. Meanwhile, he is transforming a 12th-century church in Arles into the Bustamante Foundation for French artist Jean-Marc Bustamante to house his works and archives and host art exhibitions, opening in 2026. He is also designing a Hong Kong apartment overlooking a wooded park for a major collector, conceived around “two ideas: nature and music”.

At 65, Zana’s drive remains robust. “Each project is like a new beginning: a chance to start again, to rediscover the energy that drives creativity,” he concludes. “There is still so much to explore and create: Every project becomes a territory where architecture, furniture and emotion meet, where each detail tells a story, and where beauty and the unexpected coexist.” 📍