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*Facing page*  
Hotel de Pourtalès'  
Garden Duplex  
suite: the huge  
painting is by  
Redfield & Dattner

## A distinctive impression

The renovation of Paris' Hotel de Pourtalès has made architect Agathe Labaye a name to note

Her name may not trip from the tongues of the design literati just yet, but French architect Agathe Labaye is quietly building a following by putting her stamp on a growing portfolio of projects, both residential and commercial. Her recent renovation of Paris' Hotel de Pourtalès might mean that global recognition is only a few bookings away.

It's not so unusual, especially in the French architectural tradition, to find architects who can navigate multiple creative highways and expertly evade pigeonholes. Few, though, are quite so flexible in their approach as Labaye, who describes herself as architect, artist, designer, philosopher, anthropologist, interior decorator and 'gatherer'. "I am always gathering people," she says, and while she eschews social platforms, her face-to-face social skills make for successful amassing of creative companions. "Isn't that after all what a 'studio' is?"

Labaye's route into her metier began at an unusually young age. Born into a military family, she saw her childhood homes change every few years. She lived in big cities and small villages throughout France, in both houses and flats, and early on she developed a close bond to architecture, drawing houses, designing spaces and endlessly rearranging the furniture in her room. The itinerant lifestyle also gave her the distinctive approach that

filters through her work today – a philosophical fascination with how humans live and interact with the space in which they live.

"My early nomadism helped shape my thirst for human and social sciences," she explains. "Designing spaces doesn't begin with an object, but with how the humans live in the space." Her artistic maturity at 15 saw a prescient art collaboration with her peer, Florian Sumi. The teenage friends parted ways professionally, with Labaye taking up architectural studies and Sumi pursuing art – only to come together 15 or so years after their first joint artistic forays, to work on a collection of furniture entitled Le Salon with leather artist Dragovan.

While she was studying at L'École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture in Paris, Labaye worked to earn her way, assisting the artist and urbanist Françoise Schein, and taking time out to work on a project in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, which she later returned to as part of her studies. She gained a job at the architectural firm Abinal and Ropars, and she cites her first career break as working alongside Edouard Ropars on the Arthur Rimbaud Museum in Charleville-Mézières, renovated in 2014. She continued to immerse herself in a number of other creative studios, working for a time with the Belgian designer Xavier Lust and with the artist-designer Pierre Bonnefille.

Since opening her eponymous studio in 2018, Labaye's renovation of the Hotel de Pourtalès, completed between March and November last year, has been her largest project. Formerly the No Name Hotel, its owners turned to her to update the tired interior. It is made up of two buildings, an 1839 edifice designed by François Durban, architect of Paris' École des Beaux-Arts, and an adjoining 1960s structure, so the challenge was to unify the architecture and bring a sense of personality and homeliness to the equation, while working in some pieces from the owners' Chinese furniture collection.

Labaye found herself in her element, gathering carefully selected vintage pieces by the likes of Charlotte Perriand alongside work by her favourite contemporaries – Pool, Ariane Prin, Charlotte Jankowski. For one of the suites she commissioned a huge painting by Redfield & Dattner: "I wanted a vast landscape as a reference to the presence of large-format paintings in the interiors of the 19th century, when the Hotel de Pourtalès was built."

A collection of custom furniture, designed with her serial collaborator Florian Sumi and made with the help of marble specialists Van Den Weghe with bespoke finishes by Pierre Bonnefille, stitch the whole scheme together. Although it was more rational than Sumi and Labaye's first furniture collection, the approach was nevertheless similarly human-led and carries the same hallmarks. "Our work always keeps the elements that connect the different parts of a piece of furniture. We design each screw, each bolt and they in turn become stylistic elements," says Labaye. While each apartment has its own personality, coherence across the hotel is brought through harmonising light, sound and tonality.

Labaye has defied those who have urged her to focus her expertise in order to progress. Current work includes a social project in Paris for a single-parent association and a jewellery store on rue Saint-Honoré, the city's fashion superhighway. A project she is just launching herself into with palpable glee is a stud farm near Versailles. Labaye's studio is proving to be an ecumenical practice of polish and pedigree.



Diiane Arques

"Designing spaces doesn't begin with an object, but with how the humans live in the space"



Facing page  
Top to bottom: Architect Agathe Labaye; a table from the collection of furniture she custom-designed for the Hotel de Pourtalès with the help of collaborator Florian Sumi

Above  
The two rooms and nine suites are filled with classic pieces such as Cassina's Utrecht armchair, alongside work from Labaye's favourite contemporary makers