

The Turkish duo say their modernist hotels and restaurants have shaken up Istanbul social life. Now they are coming to London



Top: Gasper, a restaurant and club in Istanbul

Above: Seyhan Özdemir and Sefer Çağlar

Seyhan Özdemir and Sefer Çağlar, who founded Autoban in 2003, are probably the best known designers in Turkey. It's hard to visit Istanbul without passing through at least one of the establishments for which they're responsible. Schooled in the Bauhaus style, they have brought a modernistic aesthetic to Istanbul, creating numerous hotels, restaurants and luxury shops in the Condé Nast mould. When I visited the city, I stayed in a House Hotel, a brand for which they've designed several branches. With its subtle Nordic influences, plush carpet, low seats and bookcase that resembles Sou Fujimoto's 2013 Serpentine pavilion, you could be anywhere in Europe; only their instinctive use of tiles hints at an Ottoman influence. "We've changed Istanbul social life a lot with our projects, which creates some expectation from consumers," says Özdemir.

I was taken on a walking tour of Nişantaşı, where Autoban are responsible for six schemes on the block surrounding the hotel. These >

include: two department stores, one furnished in art deco lacquered wood, the other, for a more youthful brand, in rough, blackened timber; two cafes that mix modernist pieces with their own designs; and two restaurants, including the recently completed Noba, finished in grey Turkish marble and boasting a covered garden room with retractable roof and lush green-planted walls. We meet for dinner in another of their establishments, Gasper, which occupies an old print works in Karaköy. With its many layers of overlapping plywood, the interior is reminiscent of Frank Gehry's Signature Theatre in New York. "The city has had enough of us," jokes Caglar of this saturation of projects.

However, the duo are now establishing an international reputation. They have just finished the cavernous interior of Baku airport in Azerbaijan, which resembles a boutique hotel crossed with a transit hub. "We were told to create an enormous VIP lounge, which would be open to all," explains Ozdemir. "It was essentially a hospitality project, to give people a warm ambience." Their work spans four levels of the triangular terminal building designed by Arup. On the upper level are wooden cocoons – which create more intimate spaces for cafes, bars and shops – that are clad in shingles covered in oak veneer (reminiscent of the pods in Will Alsop's Peckham Library from 2000). Surrounded by a forest of manicured trees, these organic, womb-like forms contrast with the strict geometry of the rest of the airport.

Ozdemir and Caglar are now designing two new restaurants in central London for Wagamama founder Alan Yau. In their office, which occupies the first floor of a marble-floored townhouse, are neatly arranged material tables, displaying the natural palette with which the restaurants will be furnished. Also on view are furniture prototypes, such as the distinctive Nest Chair, which they sell through De La Espada. However, these small projects lag behind their ambition to do more large-scale transport work. On the wall of the studio is the silhouette of an airplane, for which they have styled an interior, and a summary from Wink Creative, the London branding agency helping to launch them further on to the global stage. Autoban is not, it reminds us: "Prescriptive, design for design's sake, elitist, frivolous, eccentric, old world Turkey." It is: "Story-driven, considered, premium, witty, idiosyncratic, timeless ... modern Istanbul." **X**



