

ISTANBUL TALKS SEYHAN ÖZDEMİR

Form, function, experience – over ten years ago, Seyhan Özdemir and Sefer Çağlar established their Istanbul design studio Autoban, which combines western design traditions with eastern elegance. Seyhan Özdemir explains how they go about creating individual concepts that perfectly encapsulate the essence of interior and product design.

SEYHAN ÖZDEMİR

Seyhan Özdemir, born in 1975, grew up and went to school in Istanbul's Ortaköy district. She then studied architecture at the Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University in Istanbul, where she met Sefer Çağlar, with whom she founded the Autoban design studio. Today Özdemir lives with her partner and her little daughter in Istanbul's Beyoğlu district, very close to the Autoban studio.

How did you come up with the idea of calling your design studio 'Autoban'?

It was originally an insider joke between Sefer and me. I've known Sefer Çağlar, with whom I founded Autoban, since we studied together. I was studying architecture and he was studying interior design. Whenever it all got too much for us, one of us always said: Come on, let's head for the Otoban! 'Otoban' is the Turkish word for 'motorway' – and we thought it sounded good in other languages too, like 'Autobahn' in German. That's where you go to embark on a journey, to collect new experiences, to meet people. And it's also somewhere you travel at high speeds. We just thought that sort of inspiration suits the message that we wanted to convey with the name Autoban. Incidentally, the fact that we decided to swap the 'O' for 'Au' is a little homage to the German band Kraftwerk.

Since you founded the company in 2003 you've attained huge success in a relatively short time. Why do you think that is?

Sefer and I were already working

on small projects when we were still at university. A few years later we were ready for our own studio and exactly one year later we travelled to Paris to a small tradeshow to present our little portfolio there. That's the first time we came into contact with the international design world and met press representatives and other designers. Six months later Wallpaper magazine voted us 'Best Young Designers' of 2004. And things really started happening quickly after that.

We noticed that almost every other hip restaurant or café here in Istanbul has been designed by Autoban, as well as exclusive hotels.

Yes, of course we had a bit of luck with the fact that at the same time as we were growing in popularity, Istanbul was also turning into a real centre for art and culture in Turkey. People were suddenly looking for interesting hotspots and places to meet, to talk, exchange ideas and hang out. And the international design scene also started taking an interest in Turkish design. This allowed us to fulfil our artistic

ambitions whilst also staying in Istanbul, our hometown. After that an increasing number of projects abroad followed in cities such as Hong Kong, Madrid and Baku. Meanwhile our design objects, such as lamps and furniture, can be purchased at 50 different sales outlets in around 30 countries.

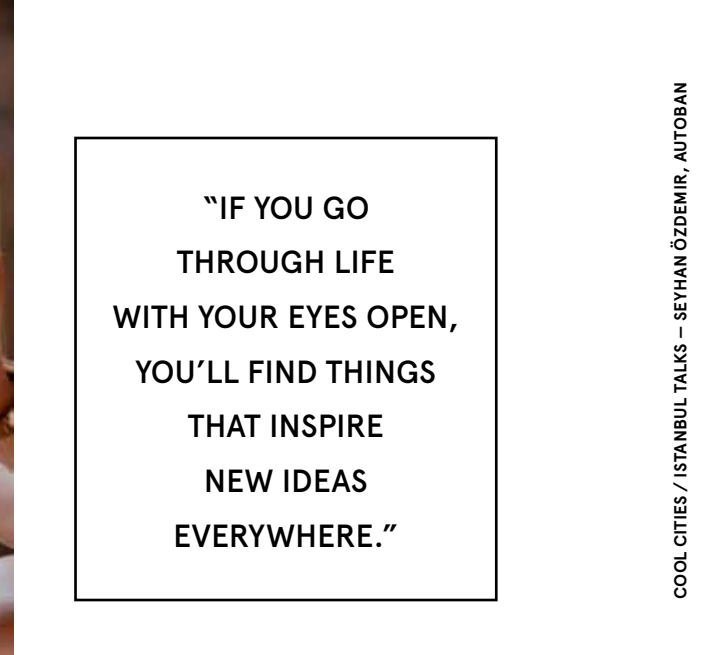
Has Baku's airport terminal been your biggest project to date?

Oh yes, and it was a massive challenge. Heydar Aliyev International Airport in the capital of Azerbaijan covers around 60,000 m² and is an international hub. We knew that we had to retain the highest functionality whilst creating a feel-good experience for the people spending time here. Luckily, tailor-made furniture and unique lighting concepts are our speciality. Materials like wood, stone and textiles are softly lit, and with various 'cocoon' we created an inviting landscape, which perfectly combines architecture and art.

Where did the inspiration for this and your other smaller projects come from?



Seyhan Özdemir



AUTOBAN

Design studio Autoban was founded in 2003 by Seyhan Özdemir and Sefer Çağlar. The dynamic duo met at Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University, whose architecture department is oriented on Classic Modernism. Just one year later in 2014 they were presented with the 'Best Young Designers Award'. Since then they have participated in trade-shows all over the world.

In addition to many projects in Istanbul they completed their first international commission in 2010 in Hong Kong, followed by others in Madrid and Baku.

Today Autoban employs a staff of 35 and sells its product design from 50 sales outlets in around 30 countries.

Autoban offers architecture, interior design and product design concepts for restaurants, hotels and larger projects, like Baku Airport.

In January 2014 the Gestalten Verlag published a 320-page, linen-bound book about Autoban, which documents their many different projects with photographs and architectural plans.

Inspiration is everywhere! If you go through life with your eyes open, you'll find things that inspire new ideas everywhere. We travel a lot, to meet our clients, and we're constantly having interesting conversations. But also here in Istanbul we experience a certain energy and an exciting cosmopolitan mix on a daily basis, which of course often also includes a fair bit of chaos. But that's a good thing, as only imperfection is what challenges us to keep creating something new. There's no recipe for creativity; it has to come from within. And you should never say to an artist: do this, do that!

What is the biggest difference between working as an artist and working as an architect?

Architects have a much bigger responsibility towards their client. They have to take in everything that could be relevant. At the beginning of a project we let all of that sink in first: who is the client, what is the space like, and the culture, what is our instinct telling us? We reflect on all of this in depth before we set to work.

Autoban meanwhile employs a staff of 35. Do you always all agree on everything?

That would be terrible! Fortunately Sefer and I have very similar tastes, but agreeing all the time doesn't get you very far either. We're able to push each other in an effective way, enabling us to move forward.

In 2014 the German publishing house Gestalten published a book presenting the best of Autoban. How did that come about?

After around ten years we had already worked on hundreds of projects, designed the most diverse of spaces and created décor and interior accessories so we really wanted a summary of it all. Like a sort of archive of our ideas. We then came across Gestalten and were quickly on the same page as them. The book allowed us to leave a lot of the things behind us that in retrospect were still on our minds and to concentrate more on the future. After ten years you assess where you are and where else you want to go.

And?

We are meanwhile a big team and have already achieved a lot. In the next few years we want to work more internationally. It's something that really appeals to us.

Anyone who works a lot also needs their havens of peace and tranquillity. Do you have a place like that?

Absolutely! I love to spend my free time in my 30 m² bathroom. Quite some time ago we moved into an apartment really close by and completely renovated it. I mainly used genuine, authentic materials like wood, marble and cast iron which look good and also feel good too. My bathroom, which is my favourite place to relax after a long day at work, features lots of black and white marble, but also quite a few playful details that make it look like a luxury bathroom from the turn of the century. It's a wonderful place to relax – and also come up with new ideas!

Thank you very much for the interview!