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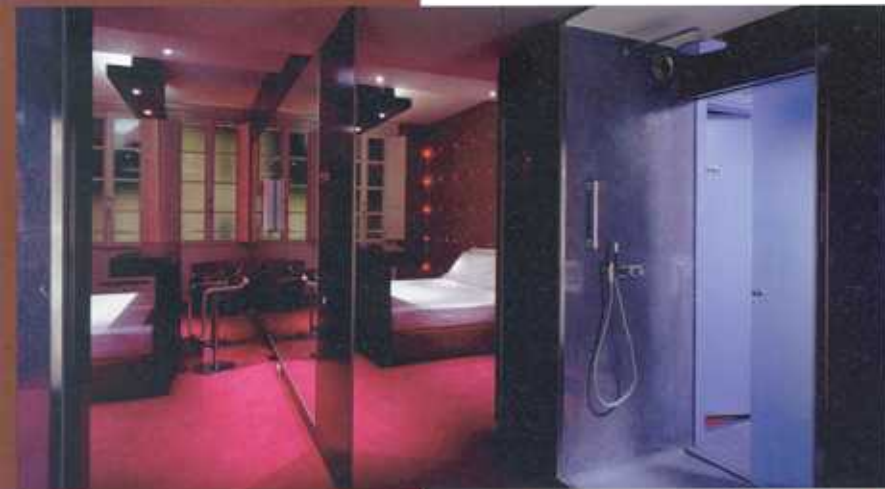
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Magazine minimalism was the last thing on Fabio Novembre's mind as he delved into the darker side of Florence at the UNA Hotel Vittoria.

The Filmic Hotel

Text by Matt Stewart. Photography by Alberto Ferrero



The recently opened UNA Hotel Vittoria in Florence may have a lavish new look crafted by a big-name interior designer, and it may be racking up mentions in hip travel publications as the hottest place to stay in the Tuscan capital, but make no mistake: Whatever this hotel may be, it is not a 'design hotel'. Or so says Fabio Novembre, the man selected to create UNA's Florentine branch, the most significant addition to the Italian chain thus far. 'With all these design hotels comes a flood of interiors in the "international style". They all look like one another and like the magazine culture adopted by the designers. It's something I despise,' he offers. From the outset, Novembre wanted the Hotel Vittoria to be different, a place bearing the distinctive marks of both its maker and its Tuscan location.

Located *di là d'Arno*, the Italian phrase for the area on the *other* side of the Arno River, the hotel is close to many trendy new bars and restaurants in a so-called 'up and coming' area. According to

UNA's Sales and Marketing Director Daniele Giovenali, 'It's part of the old Florence' – not a bad place to be, though without much tourist foot traffic. To attract customers, Giovenali says that UNA 'needed to do something really new and something specific to Florence'. When they came across Novembre, and particularly his work in Milan (both the disco Divina and the restaurant L'Atlantique made a big impression), it was 'love at first sight'.

Both parties believed that the success of the design would hinge on its relationship with the location. Novembre likes to think that in some sense the role of the hotel is to encapsulate the overall experience of a visit to Florence. Or, in his words, 'The hotel is a trailer for the movie that the city is going to show you, and' – with a wink – 'some trailers are better than the movies themselves.' Thus, in contrast to bigger hotel chains that may seek to provide the same experience at every location on every continent, here the



idea is that hotels should evolve organically from their settings.

Proceeding from this point of view, Novembre was excited by the chance to engage with the city of Florence, to do something 'totally related to the Florentine tradition'. A city of many faces and immersed in history, Florence has a collective memory and a closet full of skeletons that clamoured for Novembre's attention. He largely dismissed the typical vision of Renaissance Florence in favour of the city 'as it was in the Medici times. Lucrezia Borgia preparing poisons, Machiavelli's violent conspiracies, with a strong *noir*

Foyer of UNA Hotel Vittoria, Florence. A broad band of mosaic (Opus Romano by Bisazza) frames the entrance, sweeps across the floor, and climbs the reception desk and wall behind. To the left is the bar area.

Next spread left: The bar area, with AND sofa by Cappellini and ceiling-mounted spots by Modular. Next spread right: Restaurant. Tables, chairs and stools by Lensvelt. Stained-glass light covering by Zella.

feeling.' Perhaps, then, it's no coincidence that Giovenali believes the hotel is at its best after dark.

Set off the street in a small courtyard, Hotel Vittoria is a listed building, a designation that prevented the designer from altering the exterior. But inside, things get cooking quickly. Passing through the doors, guests are confronted with a patterned mosaic strip that references the mosaics that adorn regal villas dotting the surrounding countryside. Both motif and form are traditional; but in a theme that he repeats throughout the hotel, Novembre quite literally turns that tradition on its head within steps of the entrance. The mosaic loops up, over and down again before racing up the opposite wall, where it encases the reception desk. 'It's like a magic carpet,' he says.

'Immediately this up-and-down line reappears in the bar area,' notes Giovenali, referring to the loop the loop as well as to



Novembre-designed sofas by Cappellini, here packed into tight coils and studded at the ends with black Love occasional tables, an homage to Robert Indiana manufactured by Tino Sana. Without disregarding the importance of aesthetics, Novembre emphasizes the functional aspect of this area: 'Architecture should be a social stage, and this is something that mixes people together.' The stage metaphor also hints at UNA's concept of the hotel as a 'theatre of life', a space that not only accommodates various human activities, but also throws them into a curious relief of novelty and mystery. It's no coincidence that Novembre approached the project with a social agenda, so to speak, for he believes that hotels 'represent what spaces for fashion and entertainment have represented until now. Hotels are research labs for the new architecture.' His was not so much a piecemeal strategy for designing hotel functions, but rather a plan for arriving at the right combination of elements.

As he explains it, 'Hotels are a good metaphor for the world to come. The mobility on the planet leads us to consider hotels as communal houses for the new nomads. I don't have the recipe for a well-designed hotel, but I know that you feel it when a space is seducing you. That's when you can relax and be yourself.'

In the case of Hotel Vittoria, the game of seduction continues in the restaurant, which, like the bar area, experiments with the dramaturgy of mixing actors and stage. Featuring elements inspired by a Tuscan monastery, the restaurant revolves around a curving table known as a *fratino* ('little monk'). Realized by Atelier van Lieshout, the table can seat scores of guests side by side. Following the sinuous curves, the ceiling lowers to form a stained-glass light in a fractal design. Novembre describes the scene as 'all this tradition and modernity mixed up in the same moment'.

Unlike many hotels, Vittoria greets guests with an interior design







that continues beyond public areas (restaurant, lounge, reception) to embrace the corridors and rooms upstairs. Novembre singles out corridors, in particular, as an oft-overlooked element: 'Corridors are often the weak point of a hotel design. Think of Kubrick's *The Shining*, where actors get lost running around the corridors.' Novembre adapted the idea of getting lost by imagining hotel guests wandering the hallways of Florence's Uffizi Gallery. To create the desired effect, he obtained licences to display reproductions of 84 portraits (matching the number of hotel rooms) from the museum

The mosaic floor curves up to form a series of rounded tables that protrude from one restaurant wall. MDF wall covering by Marotte.
Next spread: Corridor with doors to hotel suites. Reproductions of Florentine portraits adorn the painted, laminated doors to the rooms. Doorframes of gold-painted MDF by Tino Sana resemble ornate picture frames. Lights by iGuzzini and Modular are concealed between Tino Sana's MDF ceiling fins. Stoneware floor by Cotto D'Este.

of Florentine gentilefolk from the 16th to the 19th centuries.

Passing through the paintings, guests arrive at the doors to their cosy, plush rooms. Novembre 'tried not to think of the room as one main area. Instead it is three small rooms: bathroom, closet and bedroom. More like an apartment.' The sleeping area is set on a platform that, along with the adjoining side table and a bar-like counter at the foot of the bed, is covered in rosewood or wengé panelling. Squares of black leather cover the walls and ceilings of some rooms, while fuchsia felt clads these surfaces in others. Adjustable fibre-optic lights at wall-ceiling intersections give guests a feeling of sleeping under the moon and stars. Luxurious bathrooms in a range of colours feature Arne Jacobsen's sleek Vola fixtures, and flat-screen televisions are standard in every room. Dark, serious and romantic, a room at the Vittoria hints at Novembre's playfulness only in laminate cabinets printed with



images of hanging garments and rows of designer shoes.

Portraits, starry lights, leather and felt – used in a highly specific way, these are good examples of the ingredients that reveal the unmistakable hand of Fabio Novembre. 'Sure, people recognize my touch, but it's because my life and my work are the same,' he claims. 'I like the real authors, the authentic people.' His words indicate the tenacious few who stand against a growing number of 'magazine style' designers, products of 'a world with people like Berlusconi and Bush leading their countries'. Somehow, substance has succumbed to appearance. 'I think it has a lot to do with wanting to be accepted,' he says, 'and with getting acceptance by doing what other people expect you to do. Magazine-style design started in fashion, where you can clearly see that styling is more important than design itself. Duchamp's revenge, maybe? This kind of thinking is a dangerous influence on design magazines. A sort of homogene-

ous production is generating a self-referential vortex. But, worse than anything, the capacity to criticize seems to have disappeared.

Novembre makes a connection between this type of thinking with regard to both design and the way in which many of us approach life in general. 'Life is a challenge. Living with a capital L is the hardest thing to do, as well as the most beautiful. And for me, being authentic is the only possible option.' Consequently, to design with the kind of magazine minimalism so prevalent at the moment would be a betrayal of Novembre's own disposition. 'It's impossible to be minimalist and young,' he says. 'There's too much energy to control. Though I hate to admit it, deep inside I'm very baroque. I could never be *droog* [Dutch for 'dry'] like the Dutch; my work will always be unavoidably Italian.' UNA could have made no better choice in selecting a designer for the Hotel Vittoria, a uniquely Italian venue craving the touch of a native son.



