

MASTERS & MUSES

## The Interview: Charles Zana

Interview by Camilla Frances

Images from François Halard, Matthieu Salvaing, Adrian Gaut, Olivia Haudry,  
Gaspard Hermach and Jean-Pierre Vaillancourt

THE INTERVIEW | MASTERS & MUSES | WORLD OF CABANA

*French architect, Charles Zana, is renowned for his refined interiors, elegant contemporary furniture, and influential aesthetic, which is inextricably linked with his beloved Paris. Charles sits down with Cabana to talk design, collecting and travel, while generously sharing his dream (and nightmare) interiors, guilty pleasures, greatest challenges and favorite dinner guests.*

INTERVIEW BY CAMILLA FRANCES | MASTERS & MUSES | 27  
FEBRUARY 2024



*An apartment in Saint Germain, Paris, by Charles Zana © François Halard*

### ***The most memorable trip I've taken:***

I think the most memorable trip I've taken is on the border between Egypt and Libya, an oasis in the desert called Siwa. I really discovered the feeling of being at the end of the world, in a very beautiful, very quiet and confidential place. This spot is not easy to reach! We discovered it after a long journey, more than 10 hours on the trail, along seas of sand in the middle of the Sahara and huge dunes which follow one another. In the middle of this Oasis, two large salt lakes are fed by drainage water of agricultural origin. This very salty water has ancestral virtues. I really enjoyed getting lost for a few days in this isolated place without electricity, in complete serenity.

***The best party I've ever been to:***

I remember big parties organized at the Tedeschi foundation in Venice by Pinault. It was extraordinary to arrive in the evening by boat at a party with more than 1000 guests. All these people were from the art world, very talented people and incredible artists. It's truly one of the celebrations that remains ingrained in my memory, there was truly an incomparable welcome.

***A moment that defined or changed my career:***

In the 2000s, new clients entrusted me with a large house in Switzerland by the lake. It was a key moment because I had not carried out a project of this scope at that time. I had a double feeling; I was both very happy to have this project, which far exceeded anything I had done and at the same time very anxious about knowing if we were going to take on this challenge. For this project, we collaborated with the landscaper, Jacques Wirtz, who designed the garden. It was a really great experience. I truly enjoyed working for this incredible family who trusted us with this beautiful 2,000m<sup>2</sup> house in a huge estate. I am quite proud to have been able to convince these people at that moment with my drawings, it was really the experience that changed my career.

***The greatest challenge I've overcome:***

My biggest challenge is having succeeded in developing furniture outside of the agency's architectural projects. We have always incorporated furniture design into our projects. In 2021, we decided to launch the furniture collection independent of architectural projects. It was a challenge for me to see our furniture displayed, breaking away from the usual image I had on my projects.

***My proudest achievement:***

First of all, my children for sure. Professionally, it was Ithaque exhibition, my first furniture exhibition. Why Ithaque? This name known thanks to Homer's *Odyssey* where the island marks the outcome of the epic adventure in which Ulysses is subject to the whims of the gods. But Ithaque is not just a myth, the island does exist, off the coast of Greece, in the archipelago of the Ionian Islands. The Greek islands have always inspired me, I particularly enjoy traveling and spending time there. It was also this idea of a return to my first love: furniture. I came to architecture through furniture, I had never isolated the furniture, I had never thought about making just pieces. This collection allowed us to show furniture in an old setting that we had not done, without decoration, really staged like objects, like small independent architectures in a space.





*Terrace in Saint Germain, Paris, designed by Charles Zana © François Halard*

***An object I would never part with:***

The object I will never part with is a box of pencils. This is the drawing box that my father gave me, which was his drawing box that he had in Tunisia when he was young, when he worked as a designer at the *Pont des Chausées*. It's a walnut box which is both not much and at the same time unique to me because I remember that as a child I loved to the smell of pastels and pencils when I opened and closed it. Today, it is on my desk with more iPad and phone charger cables because customs have changed. But this box hasn't left



me, I had to reinforce it because at one point it was a little broken. It's my favorite object and I think I will never be able to work without it or live without it.

***The best gift I've ever received:***

I think the best gift I've ever received is a gift that is in the studio. Thirty years ago, an ironworker designed a metal staircase for me because he wanted to show me the importance of stringer. The stringer is a part into which the steps, risers, balusters and banister bars fit. And so he made me a metal model with an additional welding point to my design, to prove to me that the structure needed to be reformed a little. This model, which weighs 15kg, is a model of a staircase a bit like the *Compagnons* in the 19th-century, models that were called *Chefs-d'oeuvre des Compagnons du Devoir*. It's a modern version of these objects, and is placed at the entrance to the studio. It has not left my side, since then I have seen it every day. Finally, we built the staircase and he was right, there was indeed flexibility in the stringer and we reinforced it as he had advised me. He came to see me with this model, he took it out of a gray moving cover and he saw in my eyes that I found this object so unique, so beautiful, so inspired, that he couldn't not give it to me. It's funny because he admitted to me three years later that he had made one again too, so there are two copies of this superb little model.



*Hotel Lou Pinet, designed by Charles Zana © Matthieu Salvaing*

***My guiltiest pleasure or greatest extravagance:***

It's the collection. I think my guilty pleasure is collecting, I am a collector. I have changed over time but as soon as I tell myself that an object is unattainable, that a work of art cannot be found, it actually calls out something very strong in me and I tell myself that I want this work of art. I'm always looking for something.

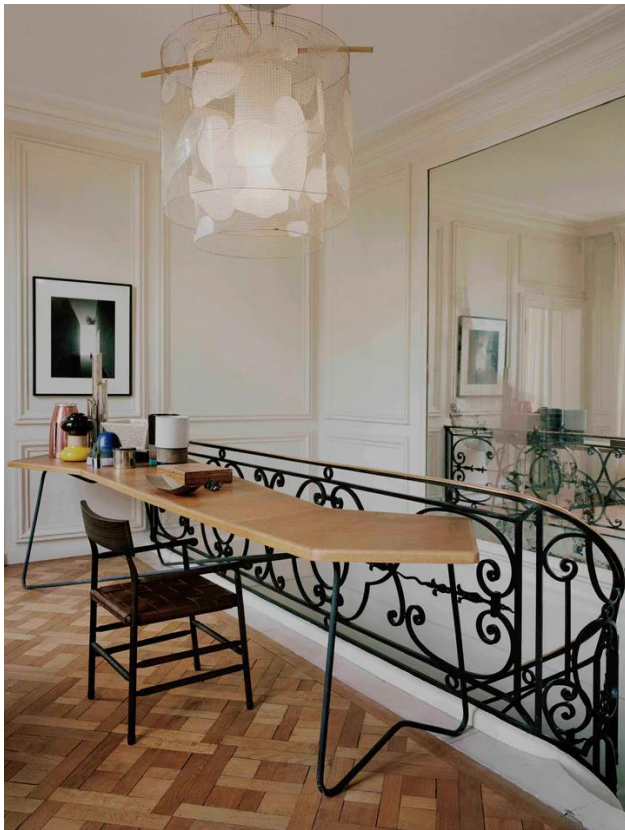


*Apartment in St Germain by Charles Zana © François Halard*



*Campo St Stefano, Venice, by Charles Zana © Matthieu Salvaing*





*Apartment in St Germain by Charles Zana © François Halard*



*Campo St Stefano, Venice, by Charles Zana © Matthieu Salvaing*



*Apartment in St Germain by Charles Zana © François Halard*



*Hotel Lou Pinet, Charles Zana © Matthieu Salvaing*

***My next weekend-away destination:***

Venice is a city I always return to. I had the chance to have an exhibition there in the Olivetti space. I'm going back to Venice in a month. It's truly a legendary destination, both I know the city very well and at the same time I always rediscover it at the turn of a street, at the turn of a canal I should say. I always end up discovering a new palace, a new perspective, a new corner of the sky. This is my next destination and also my eternal destination.

***I would describe my childhood as:***

My childhood was growing up in an artistic environment, immersed in architecture and art thanks to a collector father. We used to do a lot of exhibitions and go to Drouot together. My first decorating memory is my apple green childhood bedroom decorated by a decorator discovered at the *Salon des artistes décorateurs*, which was called the SAD at the time. My childhood also meant growing up with contemporary furniture and a lot of art, but above all it was the freedom to follow the studies I wanted surrounded by parents who loved each other.

***My favourite flea market or antiques fair:***

Paul Bert Serpette, that's for sure. I go there every Friday morning for the atmosphere, the people, the discoveries even if there are fewer. Fleas are a world apart; they are a real society. I buy for myself, for people. Precisely for Yann Nury's project in New York, that's where we found the Banque de France tables. We also bought a lot there for the Goyard boutiques. I buy but I also take a lot of inspiration photos. Paul Bert Serpette is the largest antiques market in the world, it is truly a place not to be missed.

***I feel most confident when wearing:***

I feel comfortable when I wear jeans, a t-shirt and a jacket. I like it but I'm very exacting. In fact, I don't really like fashion, I like clothes. I like Japanese jeans from R45, James Perse t-shirts and Maison Bonnet glasses. I usually say that I have dressed the same way since I was 20. And it's true. I also have around forty Alden pairs. In my closet, I have 30 blue t-shirts. It's simple, I always wear the same outfit, so I have the same thing 30 times.





*La Résidence New York, Charles Zana © Adrian Gaut*



*La Résidence New York, Charles Zana © Adrian Gaut*



*La Résidence New York, Charles Zana © Adrian Gaut*

***My signature scent:***

“L’Instant” by Guerlain. My go-to recipe: Alle Vongole pasta, I like to go shopping and buy good fresh clams and good spaghetti. This is one of my favorite recipes! My all-time favourite fabric: Today the fabric I love is Bouratino from Dédar, especially for the colors and the Italian 70s feel.

***The person I call for good advice:***

Richard Massol, we met 33 years ago, and he always gives me advice in life and work.

***The person I call for a good time:***

That’s easy, Daphné with whom I have shared my life for 4 years. We met on Hydra, in Greece, on the port at 8am. I was having a coffee, and she was going for a swim.

***My dream dinner party companion:***

Yann Nury at *La Résidence* in New York for sure. It was Bénédicte Fournier of Bureau Betak who introduced him to me. Yann is definitely the best chef I know. He is generous and inventive. He has the most beautiful collection of silver cutlery and crystal glasses. And above all he knows how to party at dinners.



***An artwork or exhibition that took my breath away:***

Mark Rothko at the Louis Vuitton Foundation in 2023. I was invited to a cocktail party at the foundation and had the chance to visit the exhibition alone because everyone was at the party. It was incredible to see the very figurative beginnings of the painter, then his different periods up to absolute darkness, notably the paintings in the chapel. This small octagonal space invites contemplation and meditation. On the walls, Rothko's dark canvases echo each other. What fascinated me in this exhibition is really the darkness of Rothko that we do not imagine when we see his paintings; we always imagine a joyful Rothko, a colorful Rothko, and that's not really the case. We see him living in the dark. I really liked a sentence from Max Richter: "If Rothko's work is so powerful and touches so directly, it is because it is absolutely not abstract. In a certain way its functioning is similar to that of music, it is beyond language." This sentence from Max Richter, a composer I adore, made me think. It's true that when I was in the exhibition, I stood 10 meters from the paintings and I walked towards them, and there was this form of fascination, of music. I think this idea of musicality is completely true. I also really enjoyed discovering the painter behind the work, with all his photos.

***Ideal interiors in three words:***

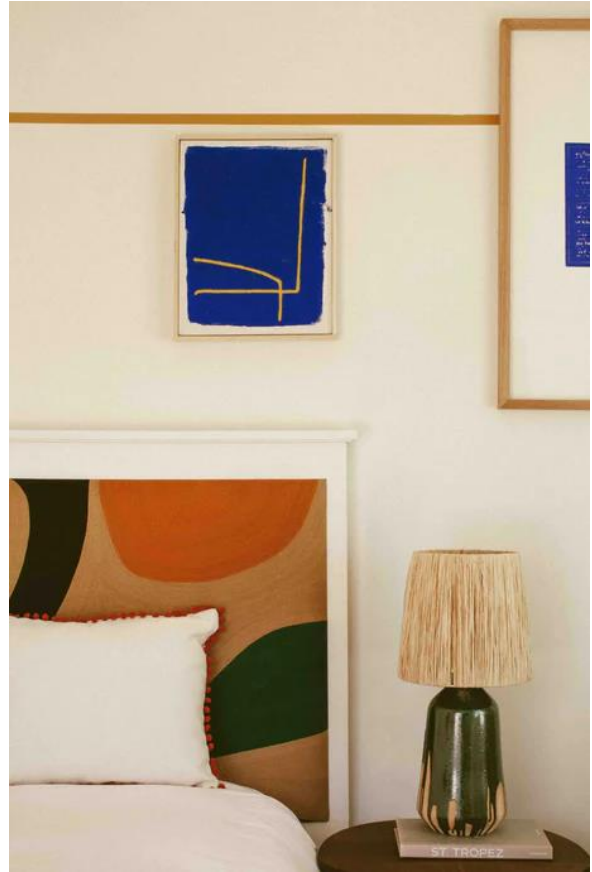
An old palace, architectural furniture from the 60s and contemporary art. For me this is the true ideal definition of luxury. And also a very detached attitude from decoration, very aristocratic, almost as if things are posed, respond and dialogue without an obvious aesthetic search.

***Distasteful interiors in three words:***

I don't like overly decorated houses. I don't like interiors that have no interest, no life because they are too affected, too studied.



*Architect Charles Zana © Olivia Haudry*



*Hotel Lou Pinet © Matthieu Salvaing*



*Franck Easy chair, Charles Zana © Gaspard Hermach*



*Chios Cedar Lamp, Charles Zana © Jean-Pierre Vaillancourt*



***A new artist or designer whose work excites me:***

I really like the Formafantasma collective that I have been following for 10 years. I really like the dialogue that was created between its two creators. Firstly, because they refer to an Italy that I love by mixing lava and brass at times or by looking into the tradition of master glassmakers and then, because they have a reflection that goes beyond ecology in design. I really like this intellectual side that they have where the drawing is the fruit of their research, of their intellectual foresight. In that sense, they remind me of a combination of Sencela and Bramesi.

***Just One More Thing***

***One master:*** Carlo Scarpa

***One muse:*** Tina Modotti

***One city:*** Paris

***One artwork:*** *Nu descendant un escalier*, Marcel Duchamp

***One book:*** *Avec Bacon* by Franck Maubert

***One museum:*** Musée National Picasso, Paris

***One shop:*** Colette

***One song:*** *All Along the Watchtower*, by Bob Dylan

***One color:*** Sage green

***One flower:*** Jasmine

***One word to describe your style:*** Elegant and intemporal

***One word to describe Cabana:*** "OTTIMO"



*La Résidence, New York, designed by Charles Zana © Adrian Gaut*