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The bar in Mama Shelter, a new hotel designed by Philippe Starck that recently opened in the eclectic 20th arrondissement of Paris. (Francis Amiard)

Far from the Eiffel Tower, a hip new hotel

PARIS: Gentrification takes many forms. A part of Pigalle has dubbed itself, perhaps not entirely happily, SoPig but, more interestingly, a savvy French group has opened a hotel in an offbeat part of Paris mingling casual trendiness with low rates. Open only a few weeks, it may give pause to such high-end New York hotel entrepreneurs as Robert De Niro of the very costly Greenwich or The Mercer's André Balazs. Rooms start at €79, or \$108, per night.

The first Paris hotel to be designed from scratch by Philippe Starck, it was built by Roland Castro, architect of low-cost housing projects, under the aegis of Serge Trigano, whose father was a co-founder of Club Med. It is called Mama Shelter.

The name was chosen by Starck and by one of Trigano's sons, Trigano explained. "It suggests the mother who welcomes us and the impression that one is sheltered from the aggressions of the city. We wanted to create a kind of cocoon."

Par Mary Blume

INTERNATIONAL HERALD TRIBUNE

8 OCTOBRE 2008

The cocoon is far from Paris's traditional center, in the northeastern 20th arrondissement, decidedly untouristic except for Père Lachaise cemetery. As part of the bobo movement to the city's low-cost east, the area is attracting a spillover from the now-overpriced Bastille, but it has a long way to go. "We are a quarter of an hour ahead of time," Trigano said.

The sprawling arrondissement combines charming mews houses and hideous housing projects, mama and papa shops and the restless young, an urgent need for renovation and such leafy pockets as La Campagne à Paris, a bunch of small villas built in 1906. The impression at times is almost of a mix of Chelsea in London and the South Bronx.

Mama Shelter is on a lot at 109 Rue de Bagnolet formerly occupied by a garage. It was discovered by an associate of Trigano's, Cyrille Aouizerate, who is a philosopher and real estate promoter, a combination possible only in France. He describes the hotel as a lay monastery or a modern kibbutz.

What Starck has wrought there is a fresh and welcoming mix of the hyper-modern and the cozy. Guests can check in at machines similar to those at airports (likewise taking a tip from the airlines, room rates vary according to how far in advance one books by credit card), but there is also a live staff to take bookings and dispense advice. At the end of the lobby is a small computer-equipped business center and along its side are vitrines variously decorated with Napoleon-style hats, backpackers' guides, telephone and computer accessories, Kiehl's lotions, DVDs, soft-porn books and pétanque balls to be used in an as-yet-unbuilt space.

The public rooms give onto a deck that overlooks disused railway tracks. They are cool and yet nestlike, with a huge eight-person foosball which encourages guests to mingle and a large video screen on which people can introduce themselves, Facebook-style, over a Caipirinha or a Coke. The bedrooms in Starck's usual black, gray and white are smoothly compact but not spare, with kitchenettes, quality linens, free Internet and showerheads as wide as dinner plates.

The impression is both laid back and solid. Trigano has recruited Alain Senderens of Lucas Carton to supervise the menu and Jean-Claude Elgaire, for 49 years concierge at the Plaza Athénée, to work with the staff, which is young, multinational and, Trigano said, for the most part inexperienced: "You may have to repeat your order a time or two but it doesn't matter. They are learning and they are very nice."

There is no fancy spa, though there will be a yoga room, and there is little of Starck's famous furniture in the public rooms because it is too costly. Trigano, who had not visited the 20th arrondissement before the project began, got the property cheap and figures his investment will be recouped in two or three years.

"The area is already moving - apartment space has nearly tripled in price since we began seven years ago, and it isn't as out of the way as it seems," he said. Mama Shelter is on the way in from Charles de Gaulle airport and from Villepinte, where immense trade shows are held, so it is attracting business people as well as tourists.

Right next to the hotel (which has a fashionably unmarked entrance), a médiathèque, also by Castro, will shortly open. Across the street is a popular nightspot called the Flèche d'Or, which Trigano's company owns so that if the racket from bands like Blackjoy or Apple Jelly or Ben'Bob is too loud for hotel guests the order will go out to cool it.

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