

# Philippe Starck's mansion in the sky

France | The star designer's latest hotel dials

whimsy to the max, finds *Edwin Heathcote*

Hotels are always a bit of a fantasy. A good hotel is as much theatre and performance as it is residence, a carefully constructed image. But one new place to stay takes that fantasy to another extreme. Standing in a rather generic new quarter of Metz in northeastern France, surrounded by malls, parking garages and chain restaurants, is a banal-looking nine-storey block — crowned with what appears to be a 19th-century mansion.

This is Maison Heler, the latest hotel by French designer Philippe Starck, a bizarre gothic house atop a tower, as if some strange Franco-German Addams Family had landed on an office block. It is hard to believe and also, I'd suggest, funny. And architecture, and frankly hotels too, are rarely funny.

Starck used to be one of the rare designers whose name people knew. His Juicy Salif lemon squeezer (a striated teardrop on spidery *War of the Worlds* legs) and his transparent acrylic Louis Ghost chair became ubiquitous ciphers for taste in that 1990s/early 2000s moment when design was cool. Starck also blasted through the world of hotels, his interiors for Ian Schrager's 1988 relaunch of the Royalton in New York delivering a mighty postmodern kick up the backside to the staid world of grand hotels.

He followed it up with the self-consciously cool Sanderson in London (which looked astonishing when it opened in 2000 in a city still then entirely lacking in cool hotels). It was all a little silly and playful, mostly in a good way. "My architectural projects always start with a story, an emotion," Starck

tells me. "I place myself in the position of a movie director, and each project unfolds like the scenario of a film. I invent a setting, a narrative, a unique atmosphere. When I design a hotel, I approach it in the same way — as a living story that guests can inhabit."

Maison Heler looks like a very personal dreamscape. Starck's family has roots in this part of France and his father was an aeronautical engineer (who designed a number of experimental aircraft including an unconventional 1970s biplane with staggered wings). These two facets of his own past loom large in this intriguing project, marinated in Wes Anderson levels of whimsy.

"I imagined the fantastical story of Manfred Heler," Starck tells me. "He is an orphan who inherits his parents' house and park, and in his solitude, begins to invent endlessly. One spring day, as he dreams in his garden, fuelled by a romantic passion for a young woman named Rose, the ground suddenly shakes and his house, park and chair are lifted high into the sky."

Starck wrote a novella about his fictional inventor, "The Meticulous Life of Manfred Heler", and used that to inspire the hotel. "Thus," says Starck, "the object is no longer covered by fiction; fiction itself becomes the object. Maison Heler is the first hotel born from and preceded by a novel."

Starck's book describes the fateful moment Manfred realises "he's going up in the air, along with his park, his house and his armchair. He climbs and climbs and climbs, until the shaking stops. Then there's silence. Manfred is high

above the city. His house has been extruded.”

That, then, explains that. I had initially thought it was a repurposed office block with an odd, retrofitted hat. But no, this is all new, the banal tower as well as the fantasy topping (loosely based on an actual Metz house, the 1904 Villa Salomon). It makes for a very strange experience.

To suggest that the hotel really has been extruded from the earth, the main block is clad in rough-cut slabs of stone, which gives it a hint of climbing wall. The door is dumbly corporate but the vitrines in the lobby, rather than displaying the usual gifts and jewellery, are filled with enigmatic objects. There's a hammer made from crystal, for example, a nod to Jacques Carelman, a surrealist inventor and author of the “Catalogue of Unfindable Objects” (a 1969 parody of commercial mail order catalogues).

To get to the 104 bedrooms you pass through “La Cuisine de Rose”, the all-day brasserie named after Heler’s imaginary milkmaid love, where everything is shaded subtly pink. At its centre is a bar with a pair of theatrically mixing barmen and above them an unlikely-looking model plane, surely a nod to Starck’s father. The cocktails are delicate and zingy, the food is very good indeed, the menu strong on local, seasonal ingredients.

Halfway down the dining room are the elevators that whizz you up to dark corridors, relieved by black-and-white photos of bizarre inventions from the 1940s. You might imagine they were AI-generated but in fact these are real designs, taken from France’s National Archives and its National Centre for Scientific Research.

Once inside the bedrooms, thankfully the eccentricity fades into the background. They are a blend of the austere and sensuous: a stripped-back leather sofa, woolly curtains, a raw concrete ceiling and lampshades that would look at home in a *fin de siècle* Viennese villa. The bathroom is lined in richly veined

marble with a rough-cut edge recalling the rugged stone facade. It is comfortable and elegant but the commercial strip windows ensure it still looks a little too much like the 1970s office block I initially mistook it for.

On the ninth floor is “La Maison de Manfred”, the hotel’s main attraction, a grand restaurant in the mad faux mansion. It centres around a long U-shaped central bar beneath a vaulted ceiling, with leather banquettes all around. Above these are vivid panels of stained glass, designed by Starck’s daughter Ara in a vaguely 1920s style. An absolute delight, they wash the room in colour. It’s a convivial space, with a prix-fixe menu at lunch and, at dinner, a range of “meticulous dishes” from grilled octopus and red tuna tacos to a 1kg tomahawk steak for two.

Outside is a large terrace, from which you look over the empty lots and modern buildings of the Amphitheatre neighbourhood, past the billowing, inelegant roof of Shigeru Ban’s Centre Pompidou Metz, to the gothic spires of the old town, poking up in the middle distance. Starck describes Metz as “a city on the threshold – geographically, culturally and emotionally”.

If Starck’s story suggests that the tower spontaneously appeared through some kind of seismic faultline, the reality was different. Originally announced in 2017 and due to open in 2019, this was a troubled build, delayed by Covid and financing. It finally launched in March this year, by which time it had become a kind of local urban myth. It’s perfectly appropriate in its own way that a building conceived as a literary folly should provoke an archly raised eyebrow from locals when you mention you’re staying there.

I had to ask Starck, is he Heler? “I am not Manfred Heler, but it is true that we are somewhat alike,” he responds. “I have been diagnosed as neurodivergent, and my brain, always in a state of gravity defiance and constant overdrive, functions solely to create.”

It is a ridiculous place in almost every

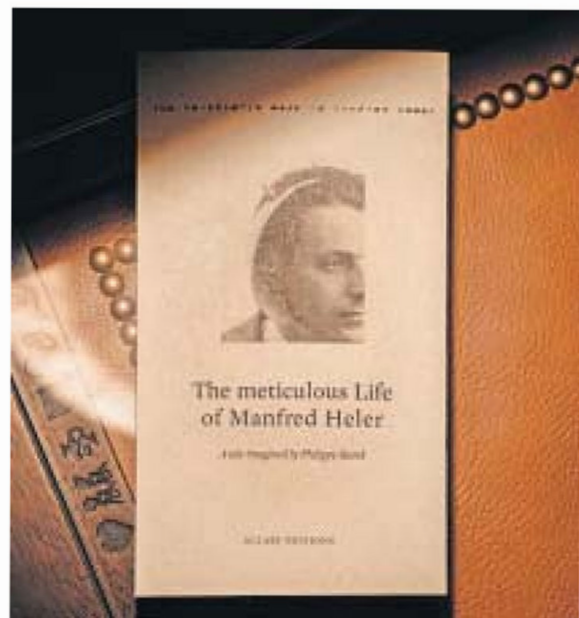


way. But when reality is increasingly hard to separate from fiction, perhaps it is also rather of its moment.

*Edwin Heathcote is the FT's architecture and design critic*

**i** / DETAILS

Edwin Heathcote was a guest of Maison Heler ([maisonhelermetz.com](http://maisonhelermetz.com)). Double rooms cost from about €170 per night; breakfast adds €29 per person. For more on visiting the city, see [tourisme-metz.com](http://tourisme-metz.com)





**Clockwise from main: Maison Heler in Metz; designer Philippe Starck; the top-floor Maison de Manfred restaurant; the novella written by Starck in order to inspire his design for the hotel — Julius Hirtzberger**

