HOTEL BLOOM!

BLOSSOMING COLLABORATION

Brussels is boring; let's face it, that's the way popular legend would have it. Famous, these days, more for being the centre of *Euroocracy* and the home of complex NATO discussions, only the cognoscenti know that this is a hidden jewel of Europe. Deadpan, it hides some of the best examples of sixteenth century architecture, art treasures of international importance and the finest examples of Art Nouveau within a more hop, skip and a jump of each other. Even better for the louche trendy *Brusselaars* that their city avoids the obvious trappings of a cheap tourist destination.

⁄ Until very recently, the local *hotellerie* matched with the official version: dull multinational chains fit to serve any MEP's idea of wipe-clean luxury. But, at the heart of a new wave of boutique and design hotels to hit the city of Mannekan Pis, is Hotel Bloom! and the exclamation mark is all part of it, not so much a statement as a demand.

⁄ Once itself a rather frumpy chain hotel on a prime site besides the historical city-centre Botanical Gardens, Hotel Bloom! reemerged from the bud a couple of years ago on the basis of a new concept: revitalized and entirely unrecognisable. To be more accurate, it actually involves a number of concepts, some of which relate more specifically to the hotel's provision of accommodation and conference facilities and others of which are about dining, drinking and entertainment, irregardless of whether you've booked in or not.

⁄ In many ways, the concept that Hotel Bloom! has applied might even be said to be about taking negative clichés and turning them into positives. The same technocracy for which Brussels has come to stand – 'at the heart of Europe' – is one of the key ideas that it took when considering what it wanted to offer. Then it turned it on its head.

⁄ ELIA, for example, is exactly the kind of nebulous network of Europe-an academic institutions that usually has very little day-to-day meaning in the lives of Europeans. The stuff of official culture and official press releases – in all official European Community languages– it's a classic example of the kind of sprawling collaboration that is rarely believed to manifest in anything useful by Euro-skeptics. Yet, in the hands of Bloom! it has become something tangible; something real.

⁄ So what is it? Without going into all the details, it's basically a network of 350 European universities and higher education institutions offering education in art and design. And, it's to this rather administrative entity that Hotel Bloom! threw down the challenge of coming up with murals for its rooms to make it something other than the usual Brussels hotel.

⁄ The result is unique. Whether one recoils in distaste or marvels in admiration, is all part of the fun. Love them or hate them, you cannot argue with the reality that what ELIA has done with the rooms of Bloom! is to create a place to stay that is memorable. Drawing on the talents of students and graduates from Bratislava to the UK, Belgium to Belarus, over 280 rooms of Hotel Bloom! have been turned over to the visions of primarily young European talent. More specifically, each room features a unique mural created by one of the participants in the ELIA project.

⁄ The basic aspects of furniture and furnishings remain the unifying feature throughout. The cool whites and sleek lines of the moderne furniture offer a stylish three-dimensional canvas for the murals, painted onto the walls at the head of each bed. From the representational to the defiantly abstract, guests can spend hours comparing notes on each other's murals in the sleek chic of the reception area or over a fresh breakfast in the colourful breakfast dining room. Although it's not always possible, naturally Hotel Bloom! tries to accommodate guest's individual tastes: the website offers a da-tabase of images of the individual rooms from which one can make a preferred selection.

⁄ In effect, what Hotel Bloom! has done is to take a rather faceless organization – a bureaucratic structure for transnational educational cooperation- and turn it into a living manifestation; something in which we can literally see the impact of a far broader European collaboration. Each room has become a highly personal conversation between one artist from somewhere within the associated regions and the ever-changing roster of guests who might occupy the space temporarily. Furthermore, Hotel Bloom! has been meticulous in ensuring that the individual artists do not remain anonymous. Each of the rooms contains an elegantly presented statement about the artist and the work within it. Participation has, in various instances, resulted in further opportunities or commissions for the artists.

⁄ But, concurrent with these laudable aspects of the project, Bloom! is very much a functioning hotel. It has some of the coolest conference facilities in Brussels –that prove particularly popular with those in the fashion and design industries- and high-end health and fitness facilities, all managed by a polite and attentive staff. The street level is also home to Smoods, the resident bar and restaurant which takes on a clubby twist from each Thursday to Sunday.

⁄ As with the concept for the rooms, Smoods is something of a game with stereotypes. In this case, less a negative bureaucratic one and more of the city's reputation as a melting pot for different cultures and social groups. Within the single black spacious interior, one can find eight different 'islands', each representing a different mood. They range from the Middle-Eastern lanterns of 'Bazar' to the *haute bourgeois* parody of 'Library'; the riot of blooms of 'Flower Power' to the conspicuous consumption of 'Bling Bling'. The idea is that one picks an appropriate mood and then orders something from the menu to complement or contrast.

⁄ Naturally, the fusion menu, with a generally healthy and crisp feel to it, draws its inspiration from a range of cuisines, a number of them evoked by the represented 'islands'. For example, there are nods to light Japanese classics such as sashimi through to the ludicrous '24-carat gold tapenade of figs and olives with gold sprinkles, bread with orange perfume', no doubt inspired by 'Bling Bling'. But, there are also numerous options for those in search of more traditional fare such as sea bass, guinea fowl, veal or the perennial hamburger. Almost all, however, show a certain fusion flair for small touches that round off the references to the evocative moods on offer: the zest of lime; the tang of mint or the succulence of fresh mango.

⁄ Despite the sleek finishes of the entirely designed interior and a menu that shows equal thought and attention to detail, Smoods remains playful and welcoming, as much a venue for a relaxed cocktail as some serious digestion. In keeping with nurturing its reputation as a vibrant and fun haunt, appealing to locals and visitors alike, the music concept – and the Thursday to Sunday live sets- are overseen by DJ Mozzy, the resident of Brussels' hit underground club night 'Dirty Dancing'.

⁄ So, if like the ever-growing stream of Pretty Young Things visiting Brussels, you decide that 'Dirty Dancing' is reason enough in itself to visit the city, why not book into Hotel Bloom! and kick of the party early? ✕

www.hotelbloom.com
www.smoods.net

BY KEN PRATT