

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 *Eureaucracy* 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 mere hop, skip and a jump of each other. Even better for the louche trendy *Brusselsaars* 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 Manneken 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 unrecognizable. 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-

