



## PRESS RELEASE - OPENING OF HÔTEL LE BERGER

Following 18 months of work, the re-opening of the legendary Hôtel Le Berger is scheduled for January 2012. Built in 1935 as a *hotel de rendez-vous*, the Hôtel Le Berger will be re-opening after a complete restoration and with new hostelry prospects. Decorated in art deco style, in an intimate atmosphere, the hotel retained all of its décor up to the time it closed on 31 December 2009. It had been run with quiet professionalism over a period of forty years by M. Freddy Martens, who is the living memory of the property.

The Hôtel Le Berger was purchased at the start of 2010 by Jean Michel André for the hotel group that also owns TheWhiteHotel in Brussels ([www.thewhitehotel.be](http://www.thewhitehotel.be)) and the Château de la Poste in Maillen ([www.chateaudelaposte.be](http://www.chateaudelaposte.be)). This Belgian group has seven private shareholders. The renovation work began several months later. The architect in charge of the renovation was Olivia Gustot ([www.oliviagustot.com](http://www.oliviagustot.com)). The interior architecture was placed in the hands of Zurich designer Martina Nievergelt ([www.m-nievergelt.ch](http://www.m-nievergelt.ch)). The spirit of the renovation was to retain as many of the typical elements as possible in order to reconstitute the almost film-like atmosphere of the 1930s decoration. The characteristics of a *hôtel de rendez-vous* are being preserved: double lifts so that guests do not inadvertently run into each other, open bathrooms, suggestive decoration, mirrors on the edge of the bath, etc. The hotel was totally renovated to meet the requirements of the XXI century in terms of comfort and safety (Wi-Fi, private bathrooms, high-quality linen, soundproofing, televisions, etc.). Jean Michel André's objective was to offer visitors a stay in the legendary ambience of the past while having the contemporary comfort standards.

The Hôtel Le Berger is a truly unique property in Brussels, where there are a thousand repetitions of standard, antiseptic decors offered by chain hotels using contemporary designs. The hotel has 50 rooms, which is the same number of rooms as it had in the past, and each one has a unique decor. The size of the rooms has not been changed, and some of the period furniture has also been preserved. There is a 60-seat restaurant on the ground floor. The restaurant is operated in collaboration with Nicolas Hamaide (of La Cuisine restaurant in Rue Lesbroussart, in Ixelles). As a nod and a wink to the past, the hotel bar has several intimate alcoves. There is also a patio and a winter garden. The menu is being designed to respect the traditions of this ancient quarter of Brussels. Jean Michel André and Nicolas Hamaide want to offer a menu that presents simple bistro fare. The focus is on the traditional *plats du jour*. A room at the hotel costs between €120 and €150 per night.

Work is currently underway on the publication of a photo book *Le Berger, memories of a house of rendez-vous*, scheduled for release in April 2012. In 2009, when the hotel was threatened with demolition after it closed, Isabelle Léonard, a consultant in cultural projects, fell under the charm of the hotel and went into action. Her intervention and contact with Jean Michel André to persuade him to buy the hotel made it possible to save the building. The book will be illustrated with photographs by Marie-Françoise Plissart.

#### A RENOVATION WITH RESPECT FOR THE PAST

It is without a shadow of a doubt...the soul and the spirit of the Hôtel Le Berger are feminine. To preserve them, Jean Michel André decided to entrust the renovation to a female team. That was a good decision, and the collaboration of architect Olivia Gustot and designer Martina Nievergelt was easy, effective and enriching. For two years, everything ran smoothly and the result clearly matches the original intent. Nevertheless, Olivia Gustot's task was difficult and delicate. Changing the general structure of the hotel or the dimensions of the rooms were out of the question. Having been very well conceived in their day, they haven't aged at all, offering perfect ergonomics and fluid traffic flows. On the other hand, it was vital to adapt the rooms to modern safety standards and to integrate current needs (generalised detection, electricity up to code, Wi-Fi on every floor, technical conduits, etc.) in the 1930s decor.

#### THE IDENTITY OF THE PROPERTY

Martina Nievergelt is both an interior designer and active in set design. Having already participated in a hotel renovation project, she accepted this challenge with pleasure and enthusiasm, and threw herself into it for two years. Rediscovering and reawakening the spirit of an ancient property so rich in history pleased her immensely. With authenticity being the common thread of this renovation, Martina strove to give it a new interpretation. "In the course of my professional experience, I have noticed that people are increasingly searching for an identity," she says. "That is also true for the identity of properties. That is why I think that the Hôtel Le Berger project is so exciting. It will give the visitors the opportunity to live an experience that is different and authentic in comparison to what they are accustomed to." Martina Nievergelt's task consisted of giving the 50 rooms on 5 floors – 10 rooms per floor – a new look. After having made an in-depth study of the existing layout, she proposed a concept of ten universes, each repeated on all 5 floors. Each universe bears a woman's name that evokes the period: Chloé, Matilde, Elodie, Lola, Camille, Manon, Antoinette, Ambre, Blanche and Jeanne. And each name is repeated 5 times. Chloé, for example, is the name of rooms 101, 201, 301, 401 and 501.

#### PRESERVE THE SPIRIT

The decoration of the rooms reflects the tastes of bourgeois apartments in the 1930s. During that period, people liked rooms that were intimate, tasteful and colourful, that had reassuring wainscoting and were warmed up by thick and lively wallpaper fabrics in intricate and rich patterns. During the renovation, it was decided to retain that heritage as much as possible. The hotel guests will therefore be able to appreciate the doors (some of which are curved), the bed frames, woodwork and heads in their period flavour. Much of the furniture is in good condition, and only required minor restoration. The chairs and the easy chairs were recovered or reupholstered. Martina Nievergelt carried out a major study on wallpapers. Madame Priem of Ghent, a leading specialist in the subject, still had a stock of dozens of rolls of wallpaper from the 1940s to the 1970s, which matched the ambience of the hotel perfectly. All of the rooms (including the ceilings, which was the fashion during the 1920s and 1930s!) have been recovered to the highest standard. The rooms have been papered in floral, abstract or geometric patterns.

## EYE FOR DETAIL

Art deco also dominates in the bathrooms. Only few period elements have survived to the present day. Most of the baths and the sinks were remade in the old style, the walls were retiled with 10 cm x 10 cm tiles with decorative friezes, scrupulously respecting the spirit of 1920. All of the beds are new, with pillows and mattresses that meet the needs of modern comfort. A bedspread with a skirt recalls the charm of yore. The same attention to detail is found wherever one looks. Some examples, perhaps? Just like at the start of the XXth century, the light switches work by turning them like a dial. The televisions are hidden in boxes covered in the same wallpaper as the walls and ceiling. Discretion guaranteed. To turn out the reading lamps, you just have to pull on a wire decorate at the end with a tassel. The lighting, which is soft and intimate, reproduces perfectly the light atmosphere of the 1930s. Some of the chandeliers, standing lamps and wall lamps could be recovered; others were found in antique shops. There are also some new ones, but only copies of period lighting fixtures.

## A TOUCH OF MYSTERY

Each room recreates the ambience that recalls the beauty and the history of the property. Martina Nievergelt's work, subtle and elegant, is distinguished by a unity and a harmony that is remarkable, with not a hair out of place. The integration of the new elements in the existing decor has been both perfectly successful and virtually imperceptible. Inspired by the history of the hotel, the stylist has tried to infuse it with a bit of mystery accented with eroticism. "One should try to surprise the hotel guests and invite them to make some discoveries. The many winks and nods at the past suggest the history and the logic of the building."

## A PROPERTY FOR ALL OF THE PEOPLE OF BRUSSELS

The Hôtel Le Berger is a property that is resolutely original, and clearly off the beaten path. "In taking on this project," Jean Michel André says, "I have tried to respect the past, the history of the area and the heritage of our forebears. Hence the interest for this property as opposed to the design, very warm and reassuring, where one immediately feels at home with an impression of *déjà connu*". Although the hotel may not be fashionable at the moment, it could be the start of a new trend. The public is searching for added value, properties with authenticity and a reassuring identity. The Hôtel Le Berger also has a restaurant, located on the ground floor that opens onto the lobby and the bar.

Nicolas Hamaide has created a menu that is both simple and tasty and combines the traditional *brasserie* fare (rocket salad with common shrimp; mozzarella balls, cherry tomatoes; cod grilled on the skin, tartar sauce), high-quality fast food (fish & chips, Berger burger) and refined French cuisine (*terrines de fois gras*, *jams de saison*; duck grilled with *fleur de sel*). Market cuisine will be very important: Daily and evening specials always have pride of place. Every day, the restaurant will also offer a breakfast buffet that is open to everyone. Every weekend, both Saturday and Sunday, there will also be a brunch. Provision has also been made for the children during the brunch. There is a period games room for the children so the parents can relax. Three evenings per week (Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday), there will be entertainment in the spirit of the property. On the other evenings, there will be a high-quality musical programme. A non-stop welcome which makes it possible to have a coffee while reading the newspaper, lunch or dinner with friends or family, an afternoon of surfing the World Wide Web or talking business with colleagues. In short, this is the future 'place to be', an oasis of conviviality and intimacy where one can escape from the dominant timidity.

## A DYNAMIC AND INNOVATIVE GROUP OF INVESTORS

The Hôtel Le Berger is the third project of a hotel group that already counts TheWhiteHotel in Brussels and the Hôtel de la Poste in Maillen in its portfolio. The uniqueness of its philosophy is found in an approach that is both open and original. The hotel group prefers projects that are eclectic, unique and off the beaten path. It's not a matter of developing a chain of hotels, all of which have been built according to the same concept. Each new project is built to reflect the interests of the building, its history, spirit and environment. Although the activities of the group are limited to Belgium at the moment, international expansion has not been ruled out. A lawyer by training, and with solid hospitality expertise (seven years of experience with the Hilton group and seven years with the Accor group), Jean Michel André is the project manager for the group and is also responsible for the commercial operations.

## THE BOOK

A book, *Le Berger, memories of a house of rendez-vous*, is to be published soon (April 2012). The book will contain the splendidly illustrated, minutely researched history and histories of The Berger, which will reveal the mysterious charms of this very special property. The work is the result of a collaboration between the photographer Marie-Françoise Plissart and Isabelle Léonard, the woman who saved Le Berger from demolition.

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50 rooms (from €120 to €150)

Bar, restaurant, wi-fi