

INTERIORS

▲ REFURBISHED TGV TAKES ON EUROPE



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“MAKE US A EUROPEAN TGV” WAS THE SNCF’S BRIEF TO THE TEAM OF CREATIVES BROUGHT IN TO REVAMP 60 HIGH-SPEED TRAINS RUNNING ON THE LGV RHIN-RHÔNE. “THIS MEANT GOING BEYOND THE TRADITIONAL VALUES OF THE TGV – SPEED, PUNCTUALITY, STATE-OF-THE-ART TECHNOLOGY À LA FRANÇAISE – TO INTRODUCE INNOVATION CENTRED AROUND THE COMFORT AND WELL-BEING OF PASSENGERS,” SAYS RÉGINE CHARVOT-PELLO, CEO OF RCP DESIGN GLOBAL.

Bringing a touch of Europe to the TGV marks a new direction for the iconic high-speed train, so deeply rooted in French *savoir vivre*. One of the reasons is linked to the fast line on which this rolling stock, the so-called TGV Sud-Est, operates. Joining up the north and south of Europe (Lille, Paris, Strasbourg, Dijon, Lyon, Zurich, Mulhouse, Basel...) the LGV Rhin-Rhône is described

by SNCF president Guillaume Pépy as “a high-speed line unlike the others. [One that] prefigures the future of long-distance mobility between major, regional, and European metropolises.” Another factor: in today’s increasingly passenger-orientated rail market, and one now opening up to competition, embracing comfort and well-being on board is as good a place as any to market a 30-plus year-old product.

With the technological prowess of the TGV a given, the SNCF needs to focus elsewhere to refresh the brand, and maintain its appeal.

The refurbishment project for the 60 TGV Sud-Est trains, with an option for a further 47, was led by the Compin Group, together with RCP Design Global and its collaborators NIMOS Design and Crayon Rouge. Together they established

the fundamentals for the lighting, signage, acoustics, the design and personalisation of the interior spaces, as well as selecting the materials and colours.

LET THERE BE...

Described as “exceptional” by Ms Charvet-Pello, much research and reflection went into getting the lighting to do a good job, with the instal-



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lations positioned to deliver indirect light, distributed more or less evenly throughout the coaches to avoid oversaturation, and their temperature studied to establish the right balance between hot and cold.

With one of the project goals being to 'reassert the space,' bringing light relief to the interiors aims to give passengers a greater sense of volume. The idea is to create the effect of light streaming through bay windows – a soft, continuous "luminous basin" – rather than hard and punctuated spot lighting. But the process of bringing such an appealing vision down

to earth, into the realm of rolling stock reality, was no easy task. "When we presented our plans to the industrials, they said, 'Oh, that's not possible, it's too complicated,'" recalls Frédéric Simon, co-founder of NIMOS Design. "But when you are a designer, you get this kind of reaction all the time. So you just reply, 'oh yes it's possible, but there's work to be done.'"

Of interest too, while the signage has been refreshed to deliver information that is simple and easy to understand – pictograms preferred over worded messages – the designers have resisted the

temptation to change everything. For example, the traditional net on the backs of seats for storing newspapers and magazines (in its 2009 refurbishment programme, Thalys opted to replace this with a bar device). "The net works well and can be used to store many things, plus it looks good," says Ms Charvet-Pello. "When something works well, why change it?" A valid point: surely a good designer is one who resists the temptation of making big statements, instead employing their skills to serve the end-user – in the case of this particular project, the TGV passenger.

OPEN BAR

Design that shuns the limelight in favour of good functioning. On this score, the team is particularly proud of the new-look bar coach, which, it is convinced, passengers should appreciate. The overall objective here has been to create 'a European feel' so that everyone feels at home here. Hence when the counter is closed for service, no partition or shutters come down to shut it off from the rest of the bar. Such a 'no borders' design scheme is looking to capture the feeling of an open plan kitchen, a lounge, a place that remains friendly and



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The new 'portfolio' table & special grab bar for PRM (below) make for ease of movement

is conducive to interaction, one that remains functional and encourages passengers to stay. To further encourage this communal get-together, stools and seats have been replaced by curved bench-like structures. "The European vocation of the SNCF's brief strongly influenced our overall design decisions," explains Mr Simon, "and for the bar in particular, we wanted to bring everyone into greater proximity."

Colours & materials

Look and feel are also important aspects of the bar coach. The acid green, while quite striking, even electrifying, has been chosen to fall in line with the whole design concept, according to Christel Berthou-Brosse, specialist in

colours and textiles, Crayon Rouge: "This particular colour has been in fashion for the past 10 years or so, and is associated with change, rebirth, and the environment. So for

these TGV trains it is carrying new messages – a new way of travelling, a new SNCF, a new type of 'European' passenger." The soft, marbled grey was also chosen with function foremost

in mind. "The TGV is about travel, evasion, and landscapes," says Ms Berthou-Brosse. "We wanted to let these landscapes into train – hence the role of this grey is to provide room for them."

On the materials side, a stratified wood effect is punctuated with Corian – a composite that can be moulded and backlit, and one used by big-name architects for furniture and kitchen equipment. These 'natural' textures combined with the acid green delivers a mixture of hot and cold sensations, or, as Ms Berthou-Brosse describes it, an atmosphere that is "very gourmand and cosmetic. One that whets the appetite and is convivial and attractive."

Flooring for flow

In contrast to the poetics of its surroundings, the floor of the bar, in PVC with embedded par-



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ticles, is more down-to-earth, largely because of the constraints linked to fire standards and noise. Nevertheless the flooring is not something to be ignored, since the best possible use of colour and materials encourages passenger flow on board trains, as well as trams, and most particularly in buses. Throughout the rest of the refurbished TGV, one discovers variations in colour that create harmony, and communicate function. While picking up the turquoise used elsewhere in the interiors, the floor carpet is nevertheless nuanced to differentiate between the two travel classes: in 1st Class it is treated to give a feeling of serenity, calm and Zen, in 2nd to make for a warmer, more playful mood. “Colours speak and they have a story to tell,” adds Ms Berthou-Brosse.

TABLES – PORTFOLIO & GRAB BARS

In the coaches, subtle, yet significant improvements have been introduced to the traditional portfolio table, which has been redesigned to make manoeuvring easier. Instead of just folding up once horizontally, it folds up again vertically to liberate more space for passengers to move around between the table and seats. This innovation really fits in with the fundamental of making design functional – when needed, the table can be folded down to provide space for computers,



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The 'egg' seat by Lacroix

papers, coffee, and food; when this space is no longer needed, it is liberated.

The needs of Passengers with Reduced Mobility (PRM) in the seat/table area have not been ignored either, with a special grab bar integrated to help them get up and down.

SHORTER LASTING

The service life of the TGV interior is shorter than that of the rolling stock, lasting up to a maximum of 15 years. And Mr Simon expects the new look of the TGV Sud-Est to stay relevant for around a decade. He explains why: “Materials age and people don’t want,

“We have to work alongside the marketing department and handle all the questions they raise over the course of the project”

or like, to travel in an old train. Also, technology is constantly evolving. Today you have plugs, Internet connectivity, and different types of lighting wherever you go.”

Where society at large goes, rail is obliged (at some point) to follow, if it wants to stay in touch with the needs and expectations of passengers (e.g. real-time information, CCTV, mobile ticketing, accessibility for all...). This is even true when it comes to the colours shifting in and out of fashion.

“Today orange is no longer on trend, but in the 80s it suited the SNCF,” says Ms Berthou-Brosse. “Then the blue that followed represented evasion and Zen attitude, something passengers could all relate to at that particular time. And today we are into fresher, more contemporary colours.”[1]

Of course the SNCF, like all other operators, is probably unhappy about the lack of staying power of train interiors because of the upgrading costs

involved. But do they have a choice? If they want to keep passengers coming back, there comes a point when the interiors have a negative impact on the company's image. Today's market is increasingly competitive – not just within rail, but also with regards to other modes such as the car and plane. With such high stakes at play, the work of the designers brought on board also calls for people skills. "We have to work alongside the marketing department and handle all the questions they raise over the course of the project," says Mr Simon, "because you mustn't forget that between the moment they release the tender and the moment the train is rolled out, meanwhile, in the outside world, society is continually changing. People change. Things change. So we have to try and put ourselves 10 to 15 years in the future.

"And to try and have this future vision this is the work of a designer. We also bring an external perception to a project. The risk is to create a design that ages worse than others. That is less in advance of future trends. This kind of design ends up getting overtaken by trends. And that sums up all the difficulty that is design," he concludes.

THE INFLUENCE OF LACROIX

The refurbishment of these

60 TGVs has inevitably raised comparisons with the last high-profile makeover of the fast train, carried out under the aegis of Christian Lacroix and unveiled in 2005.

As well as the fact that the partnership with Mr Lacroix marked the first time the SNCF had worked with a designer, the brief itself was different from that given for the TGV Sud-Est. At the time, instead of looking for a European flavour, the SNCF wanted a "new perspective on mobility." Furthermore new seats formed part of the specifications, rather than renovating those existing.

So how did the relationship between the design team and Mr Lacroix pan out? According to Mr Simon, one of the designers involved, the whole experience started out quite surreal. A big meeting was held with the designer himself, whose role it was to "bring the trends." And he announced: "The future universe of this TGV will look this...."

To illustrate his ideas for the brand-new seats, the designer presented a collection of illustrations and a veritable *cabinet de curiosités* that included bones, vertebra in particular. He wanted the passenger to be "carried, in an egg or a cocoon, on a vertebral structure." So from this starting point – egg, vertebra, and bone – the design team created a struc-

ture in which they sketched in a seat; Mr Lacroix himself made jottings and notes. "This was how we worked," continues Mr Simon. "From this starting point the designers began out-



Source: www.calxibe.com

▲ The carpet is inspired by the "bottom of a swimming pool"

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lining, drawing, and integrating all the different elements. And little by little, using models too, we arrived at the final seat."

The design iceberg

Outside of the design clique, one cannot help but wonder if passengers are attuned to the nuances and details that give designers such a buzz. "There are lots of things to tell," Mr Simon told EURAILmag. "For the carpet, Mr Lacroix came to a meeting with a photo of the bottom of a swimming pool! And then there is the underside of the overhead luggage racks.

Their 'crumpled material' effect is really poetic, as well as being practical. This design came about because we noticed that with the existing mirrors on the underside, when passengers were in their seats and looked up they could see the reflection of their neighbours in front. It can be interesting, but it can be a bit intrusive. So this crumpled material effect gives a greater feeling of intimacy." [2]

One thing is for sure, what passengers do see on board the TGV is the tip of the iceberg that is design. Hidden under-

neath are the specifications, the meetings and sketches, the technical constraints, the expectations of the operator, the desires of the designer, the deadlines and budgets. All this and much more is what makes up the finished design the passenger experiences, for better or for worse.

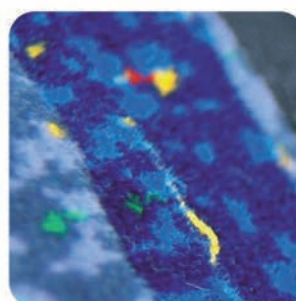
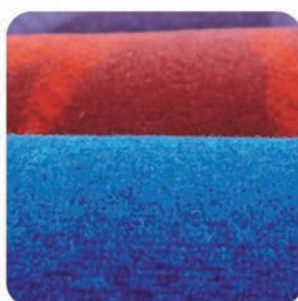
"Seat flying over water"

For the new seats, Christian Lacroix was also looking to create "a seat that flies over water." But as a more realistic Mr Simon points out, "this meant we were in the domain

of the plane or the cruise liner, because what else 'flies' over water?" And making the train a plane, which was the objective of the first TGV in 1981, is a mission impossible. Yet in the early days of high-speed rail, the idea was to try and mimic the plane, since people had a sense of this mode of mobility, but were totally unfamiliar with the idea of high-speed trains. This meant creating new codes, which were helped along by marketing and communications campaigns.

Colour versus monotony

Another challenge in the



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▼ *"Seats flying over water," TGV Lacroix*

Lacroix project was successfully implementing the colour scheme for the seats, with its punctuation or 'splashes' of different colours. "This was extremely difficult to do because, as you can imagine, we had to handle all these different coloured seats," admits Mr Simon. "It came to the point I was with Compin and we were looking at the plans together, and I said, 'hang on a minute, there are 80

different seat references!' And we realised this was simply impossible to handle. But Compin just said to me, "Frédéric, deal with it! We need 40 references, and no more."

To achieve the impossible, the designers had to find the exact positions for the seats to ensure the colour scheme worked according to plan. The aim being for passengers to enter the

coaches and to be really aware of the 'punctuation' effect. The effect sought by the designers, more than Lacroix, was to bring to life the monotonous rows of seats.

And this task raised the issue that all rail designers agree upon: when working on a refurbishment project, it is pretty high impossible to do exactly what you want. The creative

scope is limited by hard realities. How many passengers does the operator want to fit into each fixed-size coach? The operator wants bodies in seats – and as many as possible. Telling a story with colour is not high on their list of concerns. But, as Mr Simon points out, constraints such as these sometimes stimulate creativity. "Take the Citroën 2CV, for example," he told EURAILmag.



Design constraints can stimulate creativity

“Designers must have a much longer-term vision and anticipate what lies in the future”

“Why does it look the way it does? Because it was designed to accommodate a man wearing a hat, carrying a tray of eggs, driving over the fields without breaking them.[3] Now that’s a major constraint if ever there was one!”

LOVE IT OR HATE IT

Passengers themselves are also quite vocal about this ‘designer’ TGV. On the user-generated website www.imagnetgv.com, there is a full page of complaints (see selection below) for this train to get the chop: “Abolish these TGV or at least rethink them and make them user-friendly and comfortable! Why?

- because of the uncomfortable headrests in both 1st and 2nd Class
- because of the plastic bins that are invisible, inaccessible, or broken

- because of the stupid colour coding of the coaches (red for 1st Class; green for 2nd)
- because of the seat numbers that are so difficult to find
- because of the overall quality of the chosen materials, which makes the seats and claddings look over 10 years old!”

The female designers EURAILmag spoke to for this article also had something to add about the TGV *à la Lacroix*. “Our design approach for the Sud-Est trains is more subtle,” said Ms Charvot-Pello. And Ms Berthou-Brosse, while admitting the design delivers an “electro-shock first impression,” reckons the interiors have aged rapidly over the past few years. And she has her reasons. “A train is not necessarily fashion, which changes every six months,” she

explained. “Designers must have a much longer-term vision and anticipate what lies in the future. Roger Tallon had the right idea, the right vision. His design for the TGV lasted for 30 years because it wasn’t too centred on fashion but on a more global appeal and influences.”

As far as she is concerned, the Sud-Est refurbishment cannot be compared to Lacroix. “We aimed for a very modern, contemporary approach to the materials and colours, and their evolution. With more influences coming from design for the home, for example.”

DESIGNING THE WAY

Love it or hate it, take it or leave it, bringing Lacroix on board the TGV probably marked a turning point in the history of the train. The fashion designer dared to question what came before, i.e. Roger Tallon, much beloved by the French and so a tough act to follow, and brought a new vision, a new way of seeing and experiencing high-speed rail. As Ms Berthou-Brosse puts it: “A new vision that is being adopted by all new trains in Europe – the importance of offering a real service to make the journey pleasant for the passenger has taken hold.”

Will the fleet of new-look TGV Sud-Est receive as much attention? And for the better or worse? This year passengers will get the chance to taste: af-

ter the first train was unveiled in December 2011, they will be rolled out at the rate of 15 trains a year up to 2016 ■

Lesley Brown

References

[1]EURAILmag recommends reading ‘Blue: The History of a Colour’, by Michel Pastoureau

[2]at St Petersburg Pulkovo airport there are mirrors on the ceilings above the toilet cubicles

[3]in the original specifications from the 40s, Pierre-Jules Boulanger wrote: ‘[a car] with a suspension that would allow it to drive over a cultivated field with a tray of eggs without breaking a single one’