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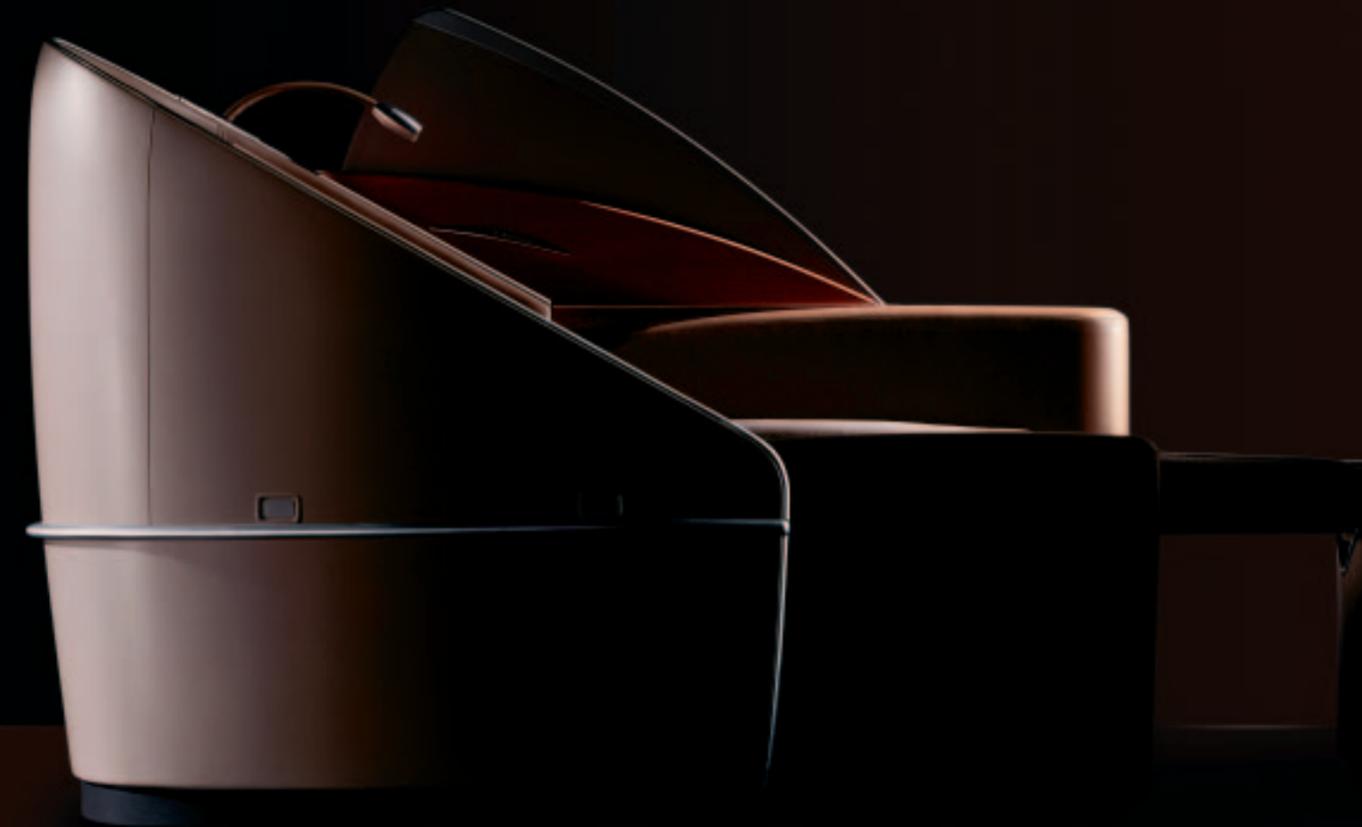
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FUSING DOMESTIC FURNITURE INFLUENCES WITH AN INNATE SENSE OF FRENCH STYLE, AIR FRANCE'S NEW 'L'ESPACE PREMIERE' CLASS OOZES CONTEMPORARY CHIC

Introduced by Air France in 1995, the original 'Espace' seat was one of the first that could be loosely described as a 'bed transformable seat', providing as it did a reclined sleeping surface and additional privacy and convenience in the form of a fixed back shell and improved stowage. However the seat was soon dramatically overtaken by a new generation of bed products that took advantage of more innovative cabin layouts. Although it could be argued that the Espace seat acted as the catalyst for the development of these more sophisticated products, it received only minor functional and ergonomic upgrades in response. To reinstate its first class at the forefront of the industry, Air France decided it was time to go back to the drawing board and start over again.

The current trend in the airline business to use big names and national design heroes to reinforce the brand and regional character of an airline's onboard product can make a lot of sense from a marketing point of view, especially as such designers enjoy international recognition and a wider customer base. You'd be forgiven for thinking then that if the French national carrier was looking to revamp its premium interior product, there would be only one person it could turn to... a 'stark' choice perhaps?

Not so in this case. The desire to paint one person's signature on its product was the last thing on Air France's mind. Instead its priority was to create an atmosphere in the premium cabin that had a great deal of cultural depth, but that was expressed with a level of discreetness and anonymity that might be difficult to achieve with a recognisable design





PERHAPS THE STRONGEST DIRECTION THAT CAME OUT OF THE AIR FRANCE/ABSOLUT RESEARCH WAS THE NOTION OF ZEN AMBIENCE



1. The seat extends into a real bed two metres in length
2. Stylish cushions and blankets help dress the seat and provide a contemporary domestic feel

personality. At the point that Acumen became involved, two Paris-based creative agencies had already been appointed to oversee Air France's new design language: Desgrippes Gobé, which was responsible for the overall identity in terms of communication and interior image; and Absolut Reality, which worked to establish the primary guidelines and police the hard product's styling.

Acumen's involvement began when asked by Britax Aircraft Seating (now Contour Premium Aircraft Seating) to support its response to a very detailed brief, which included specific visual imagery as a reference, prepared by Air France and Absolut Reality back in July 2001. Even though our first presentation was very different from the product Air France has today, the creativity shown, along with our understanding of premium seating products, persuaded the carrier that Acumen's involvement in the Première project would be very beneficial. Eventually Acumen was appointed as the concept designer for the Première bed, with Absolut Reality keeping a watchful eye to ensure aesthetic compatibility.

Different direction: It was obvious from the start of the programme that the ground rules were going to be different. The team, Britax and Acumen, had already worked on some very high profile projects together: British Airways First, American First, United First, Cathay Pacific Business Class, to name but a few. After BA, each customer had wanted to surpass the competition in terms of functionality, offering passengers something extra: more table space, more ability to dine with a friend or colleague, more privacy, more flexibility, flatter beds,

wider beds – more, more and more! Wherever there was an opportunity for marketing one-upmanship, it had to be maximised, with business-class products constantly snapping at the heels of first.

The need for the product to reflect in some way the character of the client had been present in each previous programme, but we were about to take this to a different level with Air France. Perhaps the strongest direction that came out of the Air France/Absolut research was the notion of Zen ambience – to create an atmosphere of inner peace and tranquillity that supported the construction of “a cocoon or personal perimeter of well-being” around the passenger. This would allow the passenger to create their own boundaries: “a plane for me” and “a plane with others”.

Affairs of the heart: After wading through pages of brand positioning and rationalisation, there was no doubt in our minds that the unwritten brief for the project was – and this is something of an over simplification – ‘very French and very sexy’. This was never mentioned directly by our client, but at every stage of the project we were convinced that if it were to be anything less, we would have failed.

There were many things along the way that reinforced this view. Take the passenger-based research carried out during the project, which included focus groups, customer profiling and ergonomic trials. Normally the locational ambience of the facilities used for such work is a pretty low priority. Factory units and lock-up offices in the middle of nowhere are the norm. In fact I have even worked on one project where the





AN ALMOST OBSESSIVE APPROACH TO HIDING, RATHER THAN INTEGRATING, ANYTHING THAT LOOKED REMOTELY 'AIRCRAFT-LIKE' WAS THE PRIORITY



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- 3. The design includes a foot stool, which provides a seat for a companion, as well as housing a sizeable storage drawer
- 4. A large table adds to the pleasure of a French inflight dining experience

boiler room of a university was chosen – hot claustrophobic and noisy, surely the ideal place for long-term sleep trials simulating an aircraft environment!

Not in France though. The beautiful, classical Paris offices of Added Value, the carrier's research company, just a stones' throw from the Louvre, squeezed between the offices of major cosmetics brands and fashion houses, and staffed with people that personified style, was the preferred location for this particular project. One couldn't help but be swept along and finally caught up within the inherent qualities that this product had to embrace. Even the name of the chosen ergonomics organisation, 'Laboratoire d'Anthropologie Appliquée de Paris', gave a sense of the poetic.

Home from home: Our first approach to the environment was to create a very 'domestic' feel. Large, fixed, oval tables, free-standing, permanent TV monitors and home-style occasional lighting all being very much in evidence. Having them 'on display' all the time would allow both size and style to be less compromised than when having to fold them away into a small space. We even considered branding some of the items, the TV monitors for example, to help reinforce the domestic feel. This would also have the benefit of vastly simplifying the engineering of these often over-complicated items.

Unfortunately, passenger research indicated that we needed to rethink some of our initial ideas. Although the overall aesthetic direction was liked, passengers expressed a preference for a more minimal, uncluttered look. In fact, as the concept developed, an almost obsessive approach to hiding,

rather than integrating, anything that looked remotely 'aircraft-like' was the priority: no exposed plugs, sockets or switches; no overt locks and latches; a hiding place for headphones and amenities; and even a self-closing door to conceal the TV monitor when stowed away. Everything was to be concealed under the main table surfaces with great attention being paid to cable routing and access from the seated and sleeping positions.

Combining this level of discreetness with the highest levels of ergonomic performance and bespoke furniture craftsmanship pushed the engineering of the product very hard indeed. The product package and internal mechanisms had to grow out of the aesthetic, rather than the other way round.

Early concepts also took on quite an architectural approach with high privacy screens working in tandem with class dividers, sidewalls and bulkheads. Many of these ideas were liked in essence, but felt to be too overpowering in the cabin and costly to implement. Instead, we had somehow to infer a similar level of integration with the aircraft architecture – without actually building on to it. The high cost of changing sidewalls and overhead bin profiles was deemed too prohibitive; so the way forward in creating a "totally unified", look was found by integrating the new front seats with the forward closets.

The careful profiling and materials choice of the two curvaceous forward closets ties in with the overhead bins and gives an impression to the primarily forward-facing passenger that more changes have been made to the cabin than actually have. This is helped in the first B777 installation by the fact that the cabin is wider than it is long, removing the tube-like impression so dominant in other front cabins.



Espace Première at a glance:

- 33 Air France aircraft – 23 Boeing 777-200s already in operation and 10 new Boeing 777-300s – will be fitted out with the new l'Espace Première cabin between April 2004 and Summer 2005
- Instead of the previous 12 seats, the new first class provides eight seats in a chevron layout, providing 50 per cent more personal space
- The 60.5cm-wide shell flat seat folds out completely into a real bed two metres long, featuring adjustable lower-back support and a massage function
- Facing the seat is a banquette featuring a grey-beige cushion, a large storage drawer and a seat belt, which can be used to seat a companion for dining or conversation
- Each of the eight seats comprises a large, electronically deployable table, PC power outlet, a 10.4-inch video screen, a personal telephone, indirect lighting and an individual fibre-optic reading light



5. A stylish seat control unit
6. Reading light detail
7. 'Bags of room' is provided by the foot stool's drawer

Store wars: During previous premium product programmes, one of the issues that has never failed to cause problems in the latter stages of the project is personal stowage. Other features such as office space, an additional table or an occasional seat or a more flexible location for the IFE equipment always seemed to take precedent. With this programme, the inclusion of seriously voluminous private stowage was one of the first considerations and subsequently became one of the main visual clues to the domestic aesthetic. The foot stool drawer, along with stowage for valuables in the side console, gives each passenger ample space for their own treasures. It actually became a pivotal element in the layout of the cabin. Trying to keep commonality of the drawer assembly in all eight seat locations, as well as maintaining a symmetrical backshell to the seat, was a considerable challenge during the concept engineering phase.

Final analysis: The final product creates an open airy cabin. Privacy, except in the full 'bed-down' position, is inferred rather than actual, each passenger's space being denoted by their own red carpet. The wrap around cocoon is 'just enough' to feel safe and secure, without the feeling that you are sliding down into a seat mechanism, and with the side arm lowered, access is totally uncompromised.

The simplicity and attention to detail of the separate wood-finished furniture elements reinforces the feeling of 'home' and the Zen comfort that brings, whilst the style of the whole product integrates with the aesthetic of the aircraft cabin lining, helping promote a sense of belonging within the aircraft.

Air France's choice of materials – plain wood, pale tan leather with contrasted top stitching, a mix of wool and cashmere fabrics in a range of beige and camel, accessorized with contrasting cushions and blankets – complete an elegant and contemporary feel.

From the very start of the project, our discussions with Air France revolved around specific phrases like 'up-to-date Frenchness' and 'built on French values and the origins of Air France'. In conclusion, there is no doubt in my mind that the final product does, however hard we strived to the contrary, embrace a small element of 'Starckness', which I suppose just underlines how quickly design styles can enter the popular culture of a nation; and that perhaps we have answered the brief pretty accurately.

Overall, I think all those involved have succeeded in creating a unique artefact unlike any other traditional passenger seat. The spirit is resolutely that of the lounge – so much so, in fact, that the seat would not look out of place in a luxury hotel lobby.

As a final note, I would like to suggest that you attempt to read this article with a strong, preferably feminine, French accent, as I'm sure this will help transport you into the unique atmosphere of the new Espace Première cabin far more effectively! **END**

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