

# ADPRO



# Charles Zana Receives One of France's Most Prestigious Honors

Today, the architect receives the Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres—and celebrates his birthday

By Madeleine Luckel

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"The frontier between the two was very rigid," Charles Zana says to AD PRO about the distinction between architecture and design when he was in school. Today, his firm employs a host of talented individuals across the full spectrum of the intersecting fields. Here, Zana photographed on the day of the ceremony.

Photo: David Atlan

Today, AD100 architect [Charles Zana](#) is receiving the Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres—one of France's highest honors. To Americans unfamiliar with France's system of national awards, it is the Légion d'Honneur that likely rings the strongest bell of recognition. But where the Legion of Honor is given to individuals in recognition of acts that have directly benefited the country itself, the Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres pays homage to those who have made significant achievements in the various fields of the humanities, as decided by the nation's Ministry of Culture.

Like all other recipients, [Zana](#) was notified of the fact that he was to receive the award by letter. But when asked when exactly he would like his ceremony to take place, [Zana's](#) choice took a serendipitous turn. The architect responded that he wanted to have the ceremony in June, so that he could throw a subsequent soiree to thank his various family members and friends during the less-busy—and therefore more convenient—summer months. (It's just "more my character," he tells AD PRO.) The ministry obliged, and responded that June 18—Zana's birthday—was one of two possible options.



The Chevalier des Arts et Lettres badge of honor.

Photo: David Atlan

After that, the choice being a *fait accompli*, Zana began to notify his nearest and dearest acquaintances. Speaking to AD PRO about the personal significance of the award, he emphasizes, "This is something that is very important to me, that I was honored by the the French." Zana, who was born in Tunisia, received his given name in honor of an important date in French history—and in recognition of another Charles. During World War II, Zana recounts, a then-exiled Charles de Gaulle made a brave and risky radio broadcast to Nazi-occupied France, in order to encourage hope and instill further bravery in the French people. Twenty years later, Zana's parents decided to name their son Charles in honor of that very story.



Zana's guests mingle at the Institut Culturel Italien.

Photo: David Atlan

French history, and specifically its rich art-historical roots, has inspired Zana throughout his career. The architect specifically cites Gallic architecture of the 18th century and the Art Deco period as continuously fertile areas from which he draws inspiration. He believes that for all architects, "culture is so important to us," but that, specifically in his creative practice, "I really trust the link between the heart and the design."

As for that personal body of work, Zana views a home he completed on [Switzerland's Lake Geneva](#) as a particularly potent turning point. That project, in his opinion, helped put him on the map. Now, it's clear that the commission was one important step out of many in a path of many thoughtful moves made by Zana. But today, he'll be sharing his honor with all those who helped him along the way. In addition to celebrating with his various clients of his firm's architecture, interior architecture, and interior design projects, Zana will have the honor of receiving toasts from both Jean de Loisy, director of the *École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts*, and David Caméo, director general of *Les Arts Décoratifs* (whose [lounge](#) is a Zana creation)—further tying him to the artistic history of France, of which he is such an ardent and sincere fan.