

The Resurrection

The French designer Pierre Paulin never stopped dreaming of a range of modular furniture that he wasn't able to have manufactured in his lifetime. Now, his son and daughter-in-law have brought it to fruition at her parents' Rem Koolhaas-designed Bordeaux villa.

By Nancy Hass
Photographs by Thibault Montamat



A 10-foot-square platform, with Pierre Paulin's Ensemble Dune, raises and lowers through the three floors of Villa Lemoine. Paulin conceptualized the piece in the early 1970s for the American furniture manufacturer Herman Miller, but it wasn't realized until 2019.

ALICE LEMOINE WAS a moody adolescent in 1997 when her parents moved her and her two siblings from an 18th-century house in Bordeaux's center to a newly constructed Modernist villa designed by the celebrated Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas in a nearby suburb. Too young to appreciate the Brutalist allure of the building, a cantilevered rusted steel box with poured-concrete walls and floors of pale green resin and aluminum, she hated how sound carried between the kids' upstairs bedrooms. And then there were the passing tour buses, loaded with gawkers trying to catch sight of the architectural masterpiece, which is among the only residential structures that Koolhaas, 75, has ever built.

But her youthful protestations hardly took priority at the time: A couple of years prior, her father, Jean-François Lemoine, a newspaper publisher who had fostered the local contemporary arts scene

in Bordeaux, had been in a car accident that left him paraplegic. Koolhaas's goal was to create a house that was not merely aesthetically outré but also entirely accessible — likely the first Modernist dwelling conceived around a wheelchair. The architect's central innovation was a 10-foot-square open steel platform that moves hydraulically between the three floors; it was set up as Lemoine's office, with a custom-made desk by the Belgian furniture designer Maarten van Severen, allowing the publisher to transport himself and his work environment vertically through the 5,400-square-foot hillside mansion. With the push of a button, he could move from the ground-level kitchen and vast Japanese-inflected courtyard to the glassed-in middle floor with views of the city on all sides to the top level containing the bedrooms, their round windows punched through the metal facade like

portholes. A three-story bookshelf runs along one side of the house; Lemoine was able to raise and lower the platform to reach any volume at will. "The accident didn't make my parents more cautious in design," Alice says. "It made them go even further."

Back then, the house was sparsely furnished, with little more than a few elegant chairs. But now, nearly two decades after Alice's father's death in 2001 at the age of 58, her 72-year-old mother, Hélène, who still occupies the house, has allowed it to be transformed. Late last year, it became the site where Alice, 34, and her husband, Benjamin, 41, realized a never-executed project of his father, Pierre Paulin, the legendary 20th-century designer. Paulin — whose sinuous, stretched-fabric chairs in supersaturated colors had nicknames like the Slice, the Tongue and the Mushroom — embodied not merely a sculptural revolution in shape, material and hue but defined



Left: when the platform is flush with the living-room floor, the Ensemble Dune sits among other works by Paulin, including a half-dozen Tapis-Sièges — modular squares upholstered in the same off-white bouclé — and the Elysée bookshelf. Below: a red resin U Module shelving system and the fiberglass Miami table sit below the cantilevered steel-clad structure.

To see Villa Lemoine's hydraulic platform in action, visit tmagazine.com.

1970s-era French aesthetics: His furniture was chosen to decorate President Georges Pompidou's private apartment and, after that, the office of President François Mitterrand. By the late 1990s, Paulin's work had fallen out of favor in France, but in subsequent decades, fashion designers such as Nicolas Ghesbrière and Azzedine Alaïa rediscovered his midcentury creations, amassing vast collections. In 2016, the Centre Pompidou staged a major retrospective of his work. Both Alice, who previously designed a knitwear line, and Benjamin, who pursued an early career as a rapper, wanted people to understand the designer beyond his most iconic pieces. (Their joint dedication is perhaps unsurprising considering that their lives have been intertwined since childhood: Alice's mother had, as a young woman, worked as a fabric colorist for Paulin. Alice and Benjamin began dating after meeting by chance at a party in Paris in 2004.)

With the help of Koolhaas's firm, OMA, the couple spent several years meticulously reimagining the villa, outfitting it with 16 pieces from a modular 26-piece grid-based residential system for seating, sleeping and storage, which Paulin conceptualized in the early 1970s for the American furniture manufacturer Herman Miller (the company, ultimately scared off by its scale, never produced it). Paulin believed that his foam, resin and fiberglass system might entirely replace traditional furniture; 50 years later, this multifaceted range, which he called Le Programme, feels distinctly contemporary, a prescient response to nomadic lifestyles and a harbinger of the streamlined minimalism that dominated the late 20th century. But the designer's inability to bring it to fruition haunted him: In a 2009 interview with Koolhaas and the Swiss curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist months before his death at the age of 81, Paulin cited this as his sole professional regret. "I knew when I heard that interview that I wanted to make it happen," says Benjamin, his only child. "It was a way for me to have a conversation with my father, to fully understand how he thought and how he worked."

Koolhaas, a pioneering champion of modularity, embraced the project as well. He recognized

immediately, he says, that Paulin's system might "solve the question that we did not answer back then — how to furnish a house that was built as pure architecture." The architect was also sensitive to the designer's late-life frustrations: Paulin's work for politicians across the ideological spectrum (he himself was a leftist) had caused a backlash in fashionable French circles, and he always believed, his son says, that "he wasn't given some of the chances he should have gotten," even though he was creating prototypes into the 2000s. (Most of his early designs are owned and produced by Artifort, the Dutch company with which he had a decades-long relationship.) By the mid-1990s, angry with how he was treated by some of the Parisian intelligentsia and unable to get his newer work manufactured, he retreated with his wife, Maia, Benjamin's mother, to the house where she still resides, in the Cévennes, a remote mountain range in the South of France.

TODAY, THE HYDRAULIC platform has been transformed into a conversation pit furnished with Paulin's Ensemble Dune, a low-slung seating

configuration constructed with the hidden wooden armature he invented and upholstered in nubby neutral wool and linen; its 12 sections, which follow the lines of the semi-recumbent human form, fit together seamlessly. As the platform rises smoothly from the kitchen level to the living area, becoming flush with the aluminum floor, it's lost in an undulating sea of components from Le Programme, including a half-dozen iterations of Tapis-Sièges, wool- and linen-upholstered modular squares that seem inspired by origami, with edges that fold up gently to create backrests. Along one glass wall is a head-to-toe row of armless pale green Declivé chaise longues in Paulin's signature style of stretched fabric over foam atop a hidden armature; they resemble caterpillars, with segments bent to different angles to accommodate a variety of seating positions. Beyond, in the outdoor extension of the living space, beneath the massive cantilevered box that holds the five upstairs bedrooms, undulating dividers of a stacked cherry-resin U Module shelving system zag past another of Le Programme's key pieces: a bright white fiberglass structure called Miami that resembles a futuristic picnic table with integrated seating.

Resurrecting such archival designs has become an obsession for Alice and Benjamin, though they have no interest in manufacturing them at scale. They operate Paulin Paulin Paulin, the company they founded in 2008 with Maia, now 77, to preserve the designer's legacy, maintain his sketches and explore new prototypes from their apartment in Paris's Ninth Arrondissement, where they live with two young daughters (another is on the way). Select architects and clients have sought out certain elements of Le Programme, as well as other archival pieces the Paulins have reproduced, including the 1981 glass-topped Cathedral table, with a yellow powder-coated aluminum base that evokes the soaring struts of Notre Dame. But there is no marketing plan or strategic scheme to create a new Paulin empire; the family's evangelism seems to come from someplace deeper. "My father was all about modernizing existing ideas, and I know this is where he would have wanted to go," Benjamin says. "We're just on the road, wherever it takes us." ■

