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YOVANOVITCH

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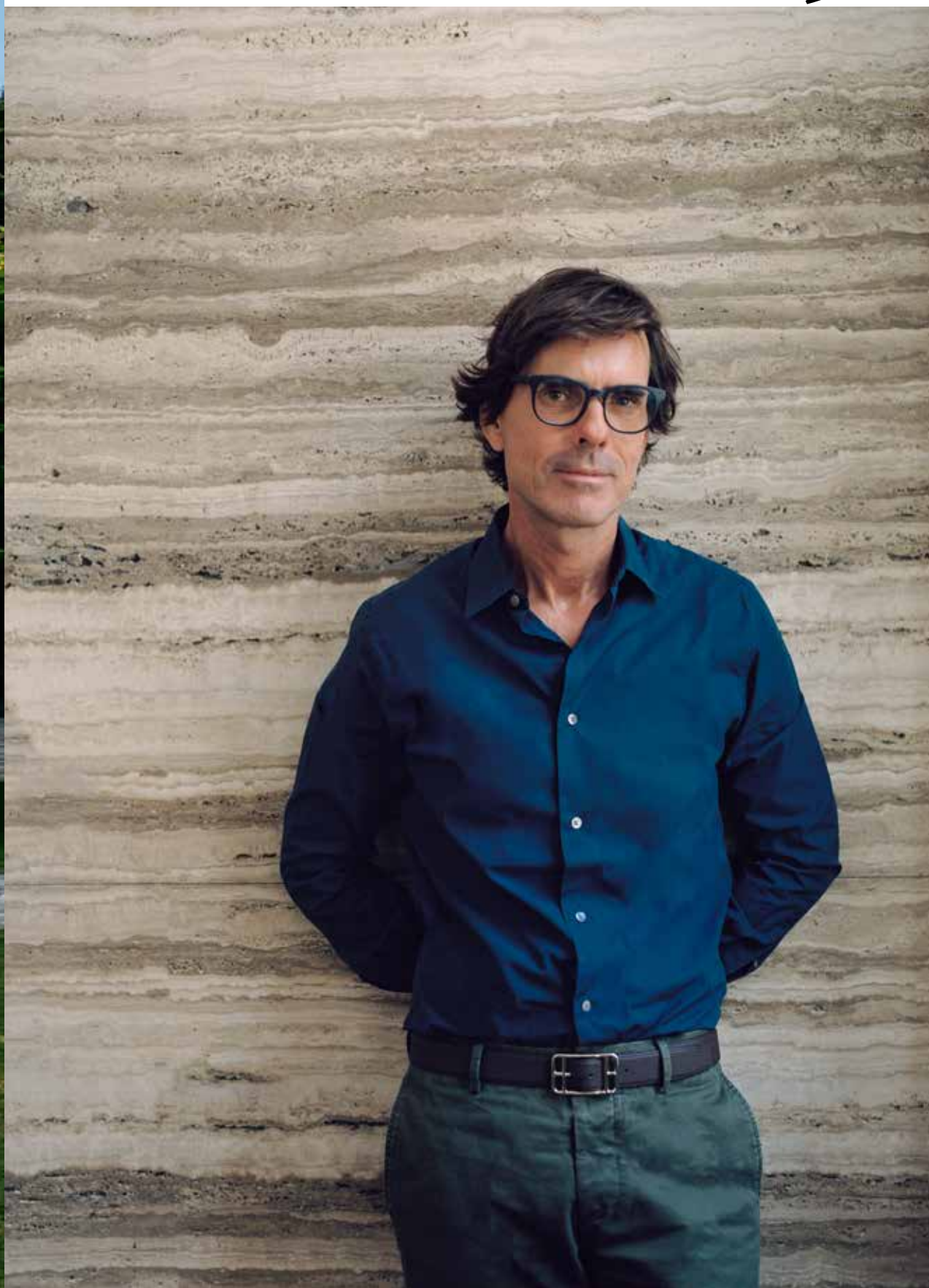
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Splendid isolation

A self-taught polymath who once worked for Pierre Cardin, Pierre Yovanovitch is now the most sought-after French interior designer of his generation. But mostly he just wants to be alone

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When Pierre Yovanovitch was a small boy in Provence, he dreamed of a beautiful home in the countryside, far from urban noise and sprawl and immersed in nature. "Isolated" was the word he once chose to describe its fundamental appeal. Decades later, as a man in his 50s with half a lifetime of international professional success to his name, he finally realised his dream: a 17th-century chateau deep in the old, old forests of the Haut-Var region, less than an hour from the town where his mother was born.

The chateau marries bespoke furniture of his own design with collectible 20th-century pieces from Sweden and Denmark and the US, meticulously curated to enhance each space's individual volume and light. Artworks, commissioned and collected by Yovanovitch expressly for specific places in the chateau, capture and hold the gaze, conferring a deeper and more nuanced meaning to each room. The bones of the building have been coaxied back to their elementary values, a warm but spare backdrop for the layering of colours and textures and finishes.

The chateau is a masterclass in couture craftsmanship and aesthetic refinement. It is simultaneously, and rather magically, the very house Yovanovitch longed for as a boy – serene in its manifest solitude, enjoyed and appreciated mostly by, besides the designer himself, the sun, the wind and the elements.

Actually, many thousands of people across the world have admired this house – they've just done so in the pages of glossy design magazines rather than in person. The Château de Fabrègues, completed in 2017 after a near decade-long restoration process, was one of the most photographed design projects in Europe of the past two years, praised as the *ne plus ultra* of evolved, contemporary French chic in publications from the US to the Middle East. It's no surprise, given that Yovanovitch has emerged as one of the most original and engaging designers of residences, cultural spaces and handcrafted furniture that his country has seen in the last two decades. His name tops published talent lists the world over, and his clients range from winemakers in Portugal's Douro valley to The Connaught in London (where he recently reimaged the restaurant manned by uberchef Helene Darroze) to Francois Pinault, for whom he designed the Paris headquarters of luxury conglomerate Kering.

An autodidact and a dedicated polymath, Yovanovitch is both very accessible and very articulate, devoid of apparent snobbery and deeply thoughtful in explaining both the strictly formal and the more organic, ineffable elements of his work. Warmth, surprise, craft, and texture are cornerstones of his vocabulary. Also: narrative.

“There’s always a story,” he tells me one mild winter afternoon over coffee in his Paris office, which is housed in a stunning *hotel particulier* in the 2nd arrondissement. “Every space has one, its own storyline.” How, I ask, does that story reveal itself to him? “Oh, I can see it immediately,” he says. “It is that intuition, that first impression, that I always work from.”

It’s not an uncommon assertion in the interior design world. But Yovanovitch’s intuition is unusually expansive. He will presage how, for instance, a particular cottage-industry metal or tile artisan, possibly almost unknown to his peers or the larger industry, is the perfect person to craft a stair railing or decorative floor (sometimes thereby anointing a new talent, quickly engaged by others in the design world). He will know that a sought-after painter is best enlisted not to create site-specific canvases, but a whole narrative fresco series – as was the case with Los Angeles-based French artist Claire Tabouret, who covered the walls of a small chapel at the Château de Fabrègues in beautiful, whimsical stories. In a private residence in Paris, he felt from the moment he walked into the top-floor bedroom that its panoramic views of Les Invalides absolutely required the talents of Japanese sculptor/installation artist Tadashi Kawamata, who clad the room in an extraordinary nest-like cocoon of warm wood.

Art and craft are the alpha and omega of Yovanovitch’s design ethos. It’s a value system that, as he will readily point out, derives from his own professional roots, which were not in the world he inhabits now but in fashion. In 1990, aged 25, he began working for Pierre Cardin, first in the licensing department in Brussels and then as a menswear designer in Paris. He has attributed his appreciation of the finest hand workmanship, whether of kidskin upholstery in a Manhattan residence or the particular layering of poly fillers in his Baby Bear armchair, to the rigour that prevailed in Cardin’s atelier. During those years, so the anecdotes go, he developed his reputation as an interior designer, doing up a few of his friends’ and acquaintances’ apartments (his own neat mansard space landed him a handful of magazine accolades). In 2001, he left the venerable French house to open his own interior architecture studio, with a staff of one.

Today, Yovanovitch has 50 employees – with many architects among the interior decorators – and offices in Paris and New York (both, like his chateau, stunning, much-photographed spaces). His transatlantic teams might be working on up to 30 or more projects at any one time – residences in California and Tel Aviv, Manhattan penthouses, a museum and a townhouse in Belgium, an outrageously cool chalet hotel in Meribel (called Le Coucou, it opened weeks ago). Last November, he published his first monograph, with Rizzoli. *Pierre Yovanovitch: Interior Architecture* chronicles more than a decade of his work, neatly and glossily synthesising his projects and illustrating the depth and breadth of his talent.

Residences appear to be Yovanovitch’s sweet spot. His notably restrained style (he “likes angles”, furnishes volumes sparsely and tends to eschew pattern) coexists with a skill – remarkable, given that restraint and his penchant for museum-quality furniture by the likes of Axel Einar Hjorth, Paul Laszlo and Robert Mallet-Stevens – at conveying a sense of warmth. “This I can do because my design is quite material-centric,” he says. Exquisite hand-planned woods abound in his furniture designs and spaces; likewise highly textured surfaces. “With wood and ceramic in particular, you really feel the imperfections,” he says. “That is what I want – you feel the humanity, the hand at work, which is beautiful. You know, that hand is



Rooms in Yovanovitch’s own residence, Château de Fabrègues, praised as the *ne plus ultra* of contemporary French chic

incredibly significant in everything. Once at the chateau I needed some drywall work done, and I approached two local artisans and sent them the exact same brief, very clear and meticulous. And the execution was *completely* different. You wouldn’t have believed how different one man’s hand can be from another’s! And it was great. Because that’s a big part of the joy, for me, of the process – discovering individual talents brings me a lot of pleasure.”

Even his hotel projects convey this sense of home. For Le Coucou in Meribel, each of whose 55 rooms are unique, his studio created 140 site-specific furniture and lighting pieces for the hotel alone, and Yovanovitch himself selected 160 works of original art. For the guest rooms at Quinta da Corte, the winery in the Douro River valley he renovated and designed for Belgian healthcare magnate (and repeat client) Philippe Austruy, the rich tones and rough textures – of wood and rattan furniture, of *cotto* floors and plaster walls – pay homage to the humble farm vernacular of the surrounding countryside, but with the spare rigour that is Yovanovitch’s calling card evident throughout. He cites it as one of the most gratifying projects he has recently

worked on. “When my client bought the Quinta, both the house and the winery were abandoned for years. This was the first time I was asked to do it all for a hotel – the design, the furniture. To me, a really successful project is when a client comes in with total trust in you and says ‘Here’s the place; nothing has been done to it.’ And then you are able to just go ... It was like this with this client, whom I now know very well, and it was fantastic.”

During our conversation, Yovanovitch repeatedly makes reference to the idea of scenography – of setting a scene. It’s a revealing tic: the narratives that are a rich figurative seam of his *modus operandi* are also, sometimes, literal narratives in his mind. For a show in 2018 of some of his new furniture designs at Design Parade Toulon, he commandeered a floor of the city’s bishop’s palace and created the “apartment” of an imaginary character he called Mademoiselle Oops (named after OOPS, one of his furniture collections). Here, the “incident” played out as a romantic plotline between Mlle Oops and a love interest; neither is anywhere to be found, so visitors take cues from the configurations of furniture, lighting and



Clockwise from top left: Le Coucou; Rue Beauregard office; the Connaught; Quinta da Corte kitchen and guestroom; Yovanovitch’s New York office; restaurant at Le Coucou

colour. Yovanovitch even produced a short video in which he himself narrates the (admittedly elliptical) story.

Does he one day aspire to design an actual set or two? “Yes. Yes! Opera and music have always been obsessions of mine,” he says, as has the way the famous works of their respective canons are staged. Château de Fabrègues has fulfilled this desire to a degree, he allows. “It has allowed me creative freedom in that way, while it’s also served as a sort of residency space for all the artists I’ve commissioned to create site-specific works” that also freely respond to the stories he’s telling.

Though he has worked internationally for many years, it was only in late 2018 that Yovanovitch opened his second office, on Madison Avenue in New York. At present, just five full-time employees are based there. The only French designer on *Architectural Digest’s* AD100 list for many years, Yovanovitch is alive to the cultural differences that inform how he works in New York or California versus in Europe. “My American clients are so enthusiastic,” he says. “You know, the French can be quite blasé, given how strong and continuous the presence of

art and artisanship and culture is for us. Americans maybe don’t have that as much – they are looking for that culture of craftsmanship with French design, with our design; that’s their expectation of us. But they are so positive.”

In Paris, meanwhile, Yovanovitch has recently been joined by Cedric Morisset, former global director of art-design dealers Carpenters Workshop Gallery, who is embarking on new and exciting furniture design projects. “Pierre has an eye for furniture, but also a taste for and understanding of comfort, of colours, of textures,” Morisset says. “Which isn’t the case with ‘collectible’ furniture designers, who are more interested in the relationship between function and dysfunction, not comfort.” Morisset is in the process of selecting a catalogue of “beautiful pieces Pierre has designed over the years” and looking for craftsmen to match them with for eventual limited-edition reproduction. While Morisset brings his own roster of names to the studio, Yovanovitch, he notes, “has some very interesting collaborators. Some of them work with wood in incredibly specific ways – so many different types of planed wood, which needs to dry for 20 years before it can be worked

... very few people do this. To find it is one challenge, to find people who can work it another. It’s the same with upholstery – it can be done in a cheap, thoughtless version or a very, very carefully developed and sourced version.”

A daunting remit; but necessary, when quality and craftsmanship of the kind with which Yovanovitch has made his name is the order of the day. Château de Fabrègues took him 10 years to complete, the designer says. “It was me, for every single thing. The architecture and restoration of all the buildings, the décor, the furniture, commissioning the artists. I ask myself sometimes if it was, in the end, a little too grand.” He laughs; “I’m not as rich as my clients, you know?”

Then he describes his excitement at the prospect of being there for the coming weekend, after many weeks of not visiting. “There’s a long drive – it’s two kilometres long – from the road to the house, so it is really alone in the middle of the forest. When I turn into the drive, I put down the window and listen to the quiet and smell the trees, and I’m happy. My heart just blooms when I’m there.” Splendid isolation, indeed. ☺