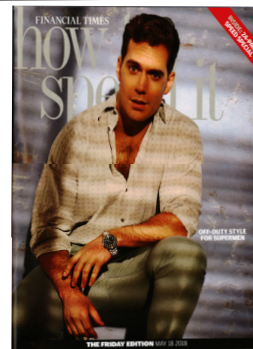




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LAFFANOUR GALERIE DOWNTOWN/PARIS



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FT HOW TO SPEND IT

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Kasia Maciejowska



Hubert Bonnet, in Fondation CAB in Brussels, sits on a c1954 LIT SCAL chaise longue by Jean Prouvé, while François Laffanour is next to a c1950 Standard chair.

also by Prouvé. Behind them is Bonnet's 1944 Demountable House by Prouvé. Far left: a c1950 Peau de Veau armchair by Charlotte Perriand

FINDERS KEEPERS

architect-designed furniture

The purchase of a cult Prouvé house proved pivotal to a property developer's collection of midcentury modern design, which was built on years of passionate conversation with a gallerist friend. Kasia Maciejowska reports. Portrait by Léa Crespi

Living between London, Brussels and Verbier, property developer and financier Hubert Bonnet visits Paris at least 10 times a year. Every trip, he drops by Galerie Downtown to keep a casual eye on its latest pieces of 20th-century architect-designed furniture and to see owner François Laffanour, his friend of 15 years. "Hubert's speciality is to let me know he's visiting right at the last minute," says Laffanour with a smile. "He messages me at 11pm to tell me he's landing at 8am the next day and can we have coffee at 9!"

Warm and charming, Laffanour is highly regarded in the international gallery world and well established on the Left Bank design destination Rue de Seine. "Hubert and I met through

our shared circle," he explains. "The group of people buying and selling art and design at this level is really quite small. We got to know each other more personally in Maastricht, looking at pieces by Pierre Jeanneret and Jean Prouvé." Bonnet confesses that until he met Laffanour he didn't think design was worth collecting in the same way as art. "It was only through many conversations with François that I changed my perspective. Previously it would have been inconceivable for me to buy a large installation piece like the Demountable House [pictured above]. But then he was always going on about this guy Prouvé and..." He looks over at Laffanour and they laugh.

Such modernist design perfectly suits the 1930s goods-yard building containing

Bonnet's non-profit Fondation CAB, established in 2012 to open minimalist artworks up to, initially, a Belgian audience, and now an international one. As a result of Laffanour's influence, architectural design "converses" with those artworks in a peaceful, focused atmosphere. "For me, the connecting thread between the pieces I love, both at home and at CAB, is their purity and simplicity," says Bonnet. In CAB's current arrangement, a painting by Swiss artist Olivier Mosset (*Untitled*, 1968) hangs above a pair of 1940s walnut chairs (all pictured overleaf) by the revered woodworker George Nakashima in a combination that Bonnet especially enjoys.

For Laffanour, Bonnet is an example of how the gap between people who collect art and those who collect design

is closing. "These days, even leading galleries such as the Gagosian are exhibiting furniture. And once you get into the spirit of the way these designers were thinking you become obsessed – it's like a virus!" he says.

Stellar works to have passed between them include those by Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier; the 1930 table *Maison de la Suisse* and 1940 engraving *Ozon* (pictured overleaf) head up Bonnet's collection. The 1955 piece *Salon* (pictured overleaf) by Le Corbusier's cousin and collaborator Jeanneret was the first work Bonnet bought from Laffanour 12 years ago: a teak sofa and armchairs that charmed him for being "warm and comfortable" (a pair of *Salon* armchairs recently went for around \$13,000 at Wright



Clockwise from top left:
1955 Salon sofa, armchairs
and table by Pierre Jeanneret.
1968 *Untitled* by Olivier
Mosset and c1940s chairs
by George Nakashima.
1940 *Ozon* engraving by
Le Corbusier. c1950 Table
Cafétéria by Jean Prouvé

auction house). Prouvé's c1950 *Cafétéria* table (pictured above) and Standard chairs and Charlotte Perriand's c1950 armchair *Peau de Veau* (both pictured on previous page) were also sourced through Laffanour.

The irrefutable centrepiece of Bonnet's collection, however, is Prouvé's widely revered *Demountable House* from 1944 (a *Demountable House* from 1944/45 sold through Phillips auctioneers in 2015 for £602,500; other fans include hotelier André Balazs and property developer Patrick McKillen). Prouvé's design – a large, slatted prefabricated house – is today considered a cult classic, in part thanks to its continued relevance in an age of overpopulation. Bonnet sees himself as a conservator of this ahead-of-its-time piece of design

The Demountable House feels, in the space, like the voice of reason

history. "It's an honour to take care of this house," he says – and Laffanour chips in, "It's no easy thing to look after it". According to Phillips, of the 400 originally produced only a few survived; Bonnet's is considered an early original.

The house now lives permanently at CAB, where it sits partially deconstructed to reveal the adaptability of its modular design – the central reason for it being considered a fundamental milestone in the development of modern architecture.

The plan is for it to be used as a library and salon space to discuss art and design.

In the context of CAB, Prouvé's exercise in functionality is a down-to-earth and accessible counterpoint to the frosty hauteur of minimalism. Heavy in wood and metal and humble in scale, the house feels, in the space, like the grounded voice of reason in a whirl of highfalutin conceptualism – Prouvé worked from the premise that there was no structural difference between a piece of furniture and a building. But those familiar with architectural history will know this unassuming-looking construction is a wolf in sheep's clothing: a meticulously theorised design, it is as idealistic and puritanical as the fine-art pieces surrounding it. And that's why Bonnet likes it. "The

house and the art share a dedication to clarity and authenticity," he says.

Besides exhibitions, the Fondation hosts artist residencies and commissions new works, all in dialogue with the design and art that's part of the permanent collection. The first exhibition of the year opened in March. Dubbed *The Brutal Play* (in reference to brutalism), it brings together sculptural works by 10 artists spanning the constructivist era, 1960s minimalism and the present day. Donald Judd, Carl Andre and Alexander Rodchenko are among those on display. Charlotte Posenenske's well-known *Square Tubes* series, a set of six hollow forms made from galvanised sheet steel, sits inside the Prouvé house as part of the exhibit, and it is these intimate juxtapositions that are so pleasing to Bonnet; he says they offer something of the personal encounters with art that are important to him.

With each of his homes having its own character, Bonnet remains attached to the calm delivered by his favourite minimalist art: "No matter where I'm living I try to have certain pieces that I love around me." And accompanying each tends to be an influential example of midcentury modern design, usually French. "The first piece I bought from François, the Jeanneret Salon, is a favourite at home – it's so comfortable you can fall asleep on it." Laffanour seconds, "It's the design!" ♦ *Galerie Downtown*, 18 Rue de Seine, 75006 Paris (+331-4633 8241; galeriedowntown.com). *The Brutal Play runs until May 26 at Fondation CAB*, 32-34 Rue Borrens, 1050 Brussels (+322-644 3432; fondationcab.com).