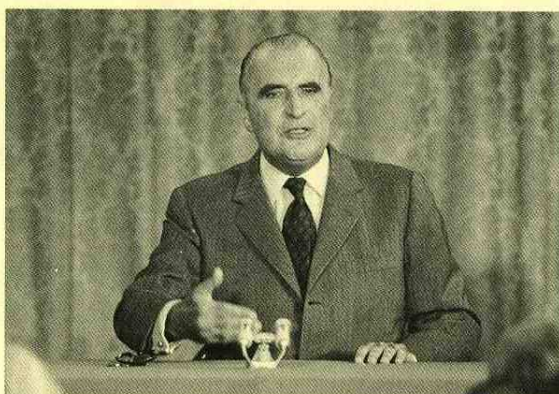


Tracing an ARC

Is government sponsorship of design a recipe for mediocrity? Not in France, where the Atelier de Recherche et de Création has produced 42 years of innovative design and helped revive the French furniture industry. Who says big government is bad?



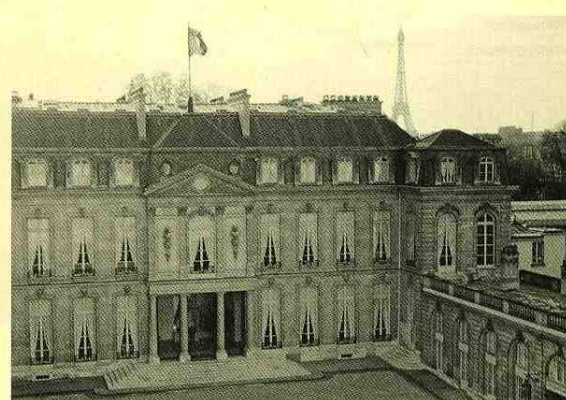
In 1964, Minister of Culture André Malraux (left)—a distinguished novelist with a lively interest in contemporary culture—proposed the ARC to Jean Coural, director of the Mobilier National, the institution that commissions France's official furnishings. President Georges Pompidou (center) loved the idea, and called upon the ARC's services to design his apartment in the Élysée Palace (right).



It was 1964, and André Malraux, the French minister of culture, had an idea.

Jean Coural, director of the Mobilier National—the institution that conserves and commissions furniture for some 600 public buildings in France and abroad—had just led the nation to a grand prize at the Milan Triennale, where he'd presented strikingly modern design work. In that heady moment, Malraux proposed that Coural create a special workshop that would infuse the Mobilier National's historic mission with new vitality by bringing in France's most innovative designers and encouraging them to experiment freely. He also suggested that these creations be made available to furniture companies, which could market them commercially.

Such a workshop, Malraux believed, would reinvigorate both French style and the country's design industry, which, according to Paris furniture dealer Stephane Danant, had been in the doldrums since the end of World War II. "Mostly, we were importing a lot of Scandinavian and American furniture," he says. "We didn't have big



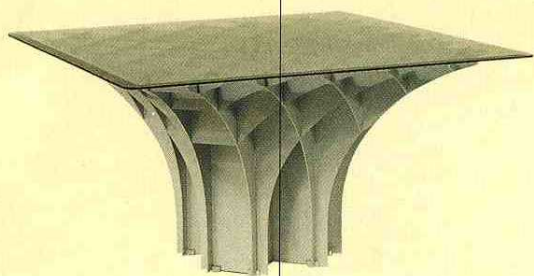
companies like Herman Miller or Knoll, and there was no policy for export."

So Malraux's proposal was smart—and not a little audacious. The Mobilier National was begun by Jean-Baptiste Colbert, Louis XIV's finance minister, and in many ways is about preserving the past. It holds roughly 200,000 furnishings, all meticulously maintained in seven restoration studios and, although available for use by government officials, the exclusive property of the state. The notion of placing this august institution at the service of the avant-garde—and mass-producing the results—was, at the least, counterintuitive.

Yet Malraux was simply updating what Colbert had done, which was to bestow royal patronage on the state's design houses, thereby increasing their business and establishing France at the center of international style. Coural embraced the idea, and the Atelier de Recherche et de Création (ARC)—the workshop of research and creation—was born.

The result, in the words of designer Mattia Bonetti, ►

Context



Cathédrale dining table, 1980
designed by Pierre Paulin

Fauteuil, 1971
designed by Pierre Paulin
for the apartment of Georges
Pompidou, Élysée Palace



Chauffeuse, 1994
designed by Christophe Pillet
for the French consulate,
Ho Chi Minh City

Desserte (sideboard), 1971
designed by Pierre Paulin
for the apartment of Georges
Pompidou, Élysée Palace



Though the furniture can be edgy, the ARC development process remains traditional: A designer is selected by committee; technical drawings are submitted; the materials and production methods are agreed upon; and artist and artisans create a prototype.

"is an incredible legacy—not only for France, but for the world." The ARC has completed some 550 commissions across 42 years, furnishing presidential residences, embassies, and ministries, producing projects for lesser official settings, and using design for social benefit. It has encouraged the application of new forms, techniques, and materials—including polyurethane foam, carbon fiber, and industrial glass—to the art of furniture-making. And the atelier has given incomparable creative opportunities to over 100 designers, architects, and artists—a virtual Who's Who of postwar French style.

What's more, the ARC does it the old-fashioned way, producing approximately 12 pieces a year, with a staff of nine craftspeople, in a workshop within the Mobilier National's Paris compound. "It's quite traditional," says Erwan Bouroullec, who with his brother Ronan designed furnishings for use at international summits. "Except that you don't have to think about selling it."

That, of course, is a big exception—especially as it's combined with unlimited financial support and com-

plete creative carte blanche. "I know it sounds shocking, but the Mobilier National, the only thing they have to do is to spend money," Bonetti says. "You can do all the fantasies and research you want." Even institutional vanity plays its part. "These craftsmen are the best in France," Bouroullec observes. "They have the ego, if they make something new, to find the right way to do it, to spend a long time if they need to." This unique mix of unrestrained innovation and *la belle ouvrage*—old-fashioned excellence—has been deeply beneficial. "It's morally and artistically rewarding," Bonetti says. "We are very lucky."

The designers have repaid the favor by shaping the look and life of France. A very partial project list includes the furnishing of embassies in Moscow, Washington, and Berlin and expositions in Osaka and Montreal; designs for the SNCF Corail train; a hospital bed, modular apartments for low-income housing, a prototype prison cell, vitrines for the Louvre, and, most famously, Pierre Paulin's 1971 Élysée Palace apartment for Georges Pompidou, a trippy fantasia of rooms within rooms ►

Context

A partial list of ARC designers and projects includes:

Édouard Albert

Baseball chair, 1968

Francesco Binfaré

Minotaure table, 2004

Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec

Furniture for international summits, 1998

Jacques Carchon

Modular bathroom, 1978–1979

César

Daybed, 1968

Marie-Christine Dörner

Furniture, Ministry of Social Affairs and Solidarity, 1991

Sylvain Dubuisson

Furniture, Ministry of Culture, 1991–1992

Étienne Fermigier

Chair (prototype), 1968

Olivier Gagnère

Furniture for a ministry, 1997–1999

Elizabeth Garouste and Mattia Bonetti

Furniture, International Exposition, Lisbon, 1996–1998

Kristian Gavaille

Transformable table, 1993

Pierre Guariche

Dagobert chair, 1968; Furniture, prefecture, Essonne, 1969

Kim Hamisky

Table nappe, 1978

Isabelle Hebey

Furniture, Ministry of Finance, 1987

Marc-Henri Hecht and Jean-Claude Dumas

Floral Silène chair, 1968

Axel Kufus

Furniture for an office, 2003

Claude and François-Xavier Lalanne

Transformable table, 1967

Roger Legrand

Furniture for a ministry or embassy, 1964

Serge Manzoni

Secretary, 1978

Bernard Moïse

Prototype furniture for a prison cell, 1994

Lionel Morgaine

Escargot chair, 1968

Joseph-André Motte

Furniture, Val d'Oise, 1967

Olivier Mourgue

Furniture, International Exposition, Montreal, 1967; Caddy chair, Maison de la Culture, Rennes, 1968; Modular apartment project, 1969–1971

Pierre Paulin

Furniture, International Exposition, Osaka, 1970; Furniture/interior design, Élysée Palace, 1971

Richard Peduzzi

Furniture, Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, 1989; Library chair, Opéra Garnier, 1990

Christophe Pillet

Furniture, embassy, Ho Chi Minh City, 1994

Elizabeth de Portzamparc

Furniture/interior design, embassy, Berlin, 2002

Andrée Putman

Furniture, Ministry of Finance, 1988

Alain Richard

U 86 chair, table with cigar humidor, 1968; Furniture/interior design, embassy, Moscow, 1979

Frédéric Ruyant

Desk and organizer, 2004

Martin Székely

Furniture for international conferences, 1999–2000

Roger Tallon

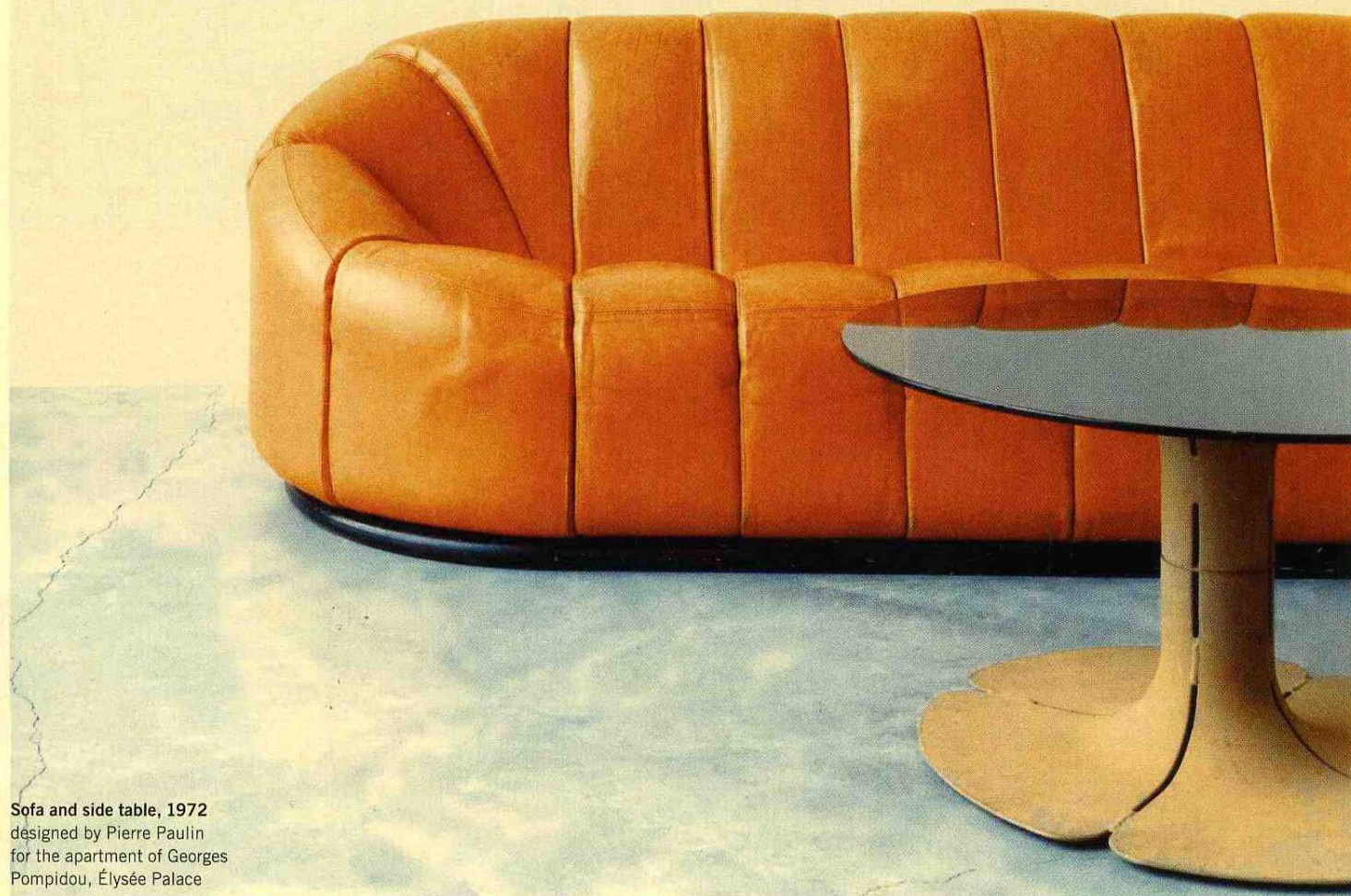
Cryptogamme furniture, Grand Palais, 1968

Olivier Védrine

Furniture for a reception room, 1993; Vianing table, 1993

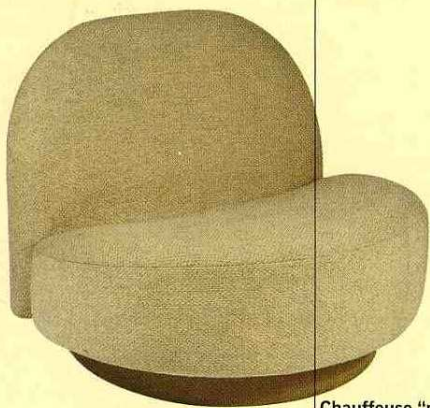
Jean-Michel Wilmette

Vitrines, Louvre Museum, 1998



Sofa and side table, 1972
designed by Pierre Paulin
for the apartment of Georges
Pompidou, Élysée Palace

Context

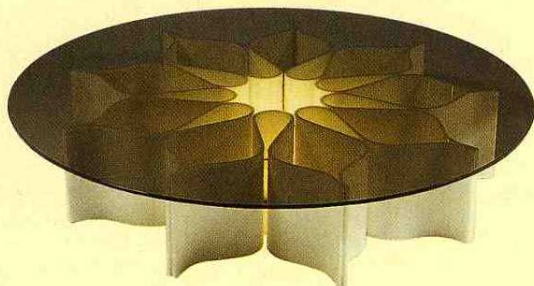


Chaufeuse "pouf à dossier," 1971
designed by Pierre Paulin
for Georges Pompidou

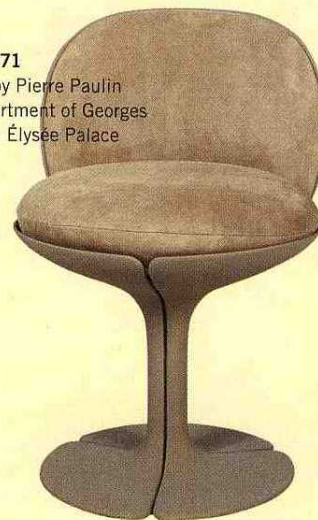


Desserte, 1971
designed by Pierre Paulin
for Georges Pompidou

Table basse lumineuse, 1971
designed by Pierre Paulin
for Georges Pompidou



Chaise, 1971
designed by Pierre Paulin
for the apartment of Georges
Pompidou, Élysée Palace



The French tradition of official patronage, says designer Mattia Bonetti, "leaves artists a bit sleepy, because they are not so confronted by economic reality." Yet according to Danant's partner, Suzanne Demisch, "Furniture companies couldn't afford to develop prototypes, and the designers would not have been able to do this work on their own."

furnished with Paulin's high-style take on the beanbag chair, which the president commissioned by saying, "There is no reason to allow the Italians a monopoly on innovation."

To be sure, the insouciant, revolutionary ARC of the '60s—wherein designers like Paulin and Olivier Mourgue investigated new materials, production techniques, and modes of living—has passed. "That was the most creative period," Danant says. "It was about creating models for people and industry, not furnishing an embassy's living room." Later, he believes, "the utopian goal of the atelier was lost"—a point reinforced by Bonetti when he says, of the elegant pieces he designed with Elizabeth Garouste in the '80s, "Our furniture was meant to represent power." Nor did the industry connection really take hold. Some ARC designs, notably by Paulin, Mourgue, Étienne Fermigier, and Joseph-André Motte, were issued commercially, but—no surprise—they were too costly to produce in quantity. And, says Danant, "The group of people who wanted modern, expensive design was very limited."

But popular taste caught up—and that is due, in some measure, to the influence of the ARC oeuvre. "You can't go directly from the Mobilier National to IKEA," observes New York furniture dealer Charles Fuller. "It takes two generations before these concepts become viable. But the seed is there, and ultimately new ideas and forms get incorporated into life." Indeed they do: Forty-two years after Milan, French design is once again preeminent, and its influence is comprehensive. Malraux—and Colbert—would be pleased.

Could an ARC happen here? It's unlikely, given that the arts in the U.S. are largely supported by private money. As for official taste, well, Frank Gehry won't be lining the Oval Office with titanium anytime soon. Still, one dreams of what an alliance between a home-grown atelier and American industry might produce. After all, observes Danant, "the Mobilier National helped two generations of designers move forward, to do things they wouldn't have been able to do. And," he adds reasonably, "these are not utopian projects—you can sit on them!" ■