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NAUTICAL
CHIC

ARCHITECTURE: JEAN-MICHEL WILMOTTE AND CHRISTOPHE DUCHARME

TEXT: TINA HØM

PHOTOGRAPHY: JEAN-MARC WULLSCHLEGER



ON ÎLE DE RÉ, A FRENCH ISLAND off the West Atlantic coast of La Rochelle, the charming village of Saint Martin is dotted with old boathouses. When the opportunity came to acquire one in an ideal location near the harbor, a French couple with two children knew that despite its many needs, it was the perfect project.

"Compared to the other villages on the island, Saint Martin is lively throughout the year, and architecturally more accomplished," says the owner. "We love the spirit of the village, its paved streets, the fishermen's boats entering and leaving the harbor—it's a very joyful atmosphere."

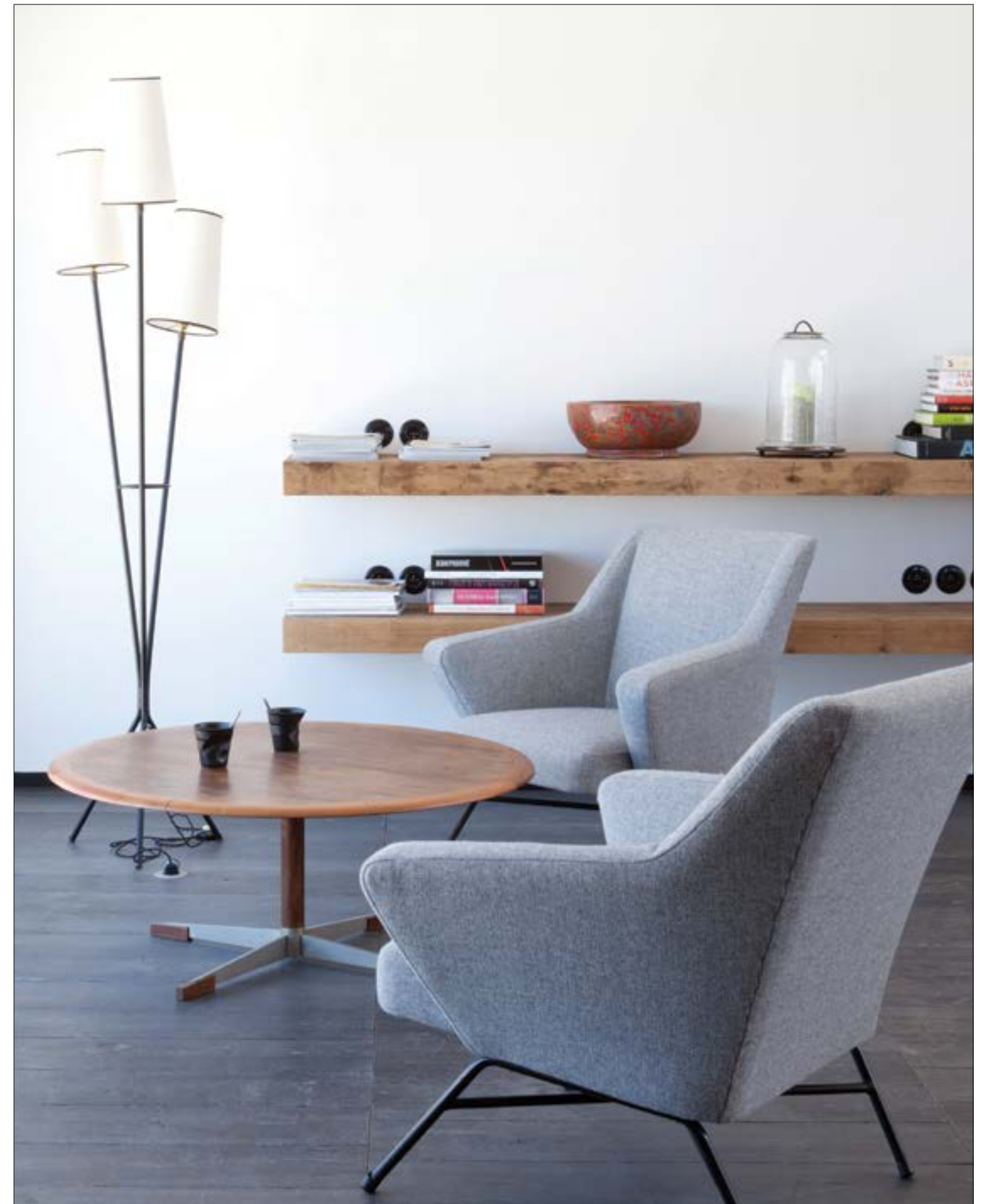
But due to the structure's dilapidated condition, renovating the boathouse and the adjoining residence would be challenging. The couple approached renowned French architect Jean-Michel Wilmotte for the initial project design and a well-known local architect, Christophe Ducharme, to help accomplish the renovation, which lasted almost three years.

The core idea was to retain a sense of the shipyard's past as a hub where boats were constructed, while bringing a contemporary and refined character to it. The boathouse and the residence would keep their traditional exteriors. (Île de Ré is listed by the Bâtiments de France, which means that the exterior of each house on the island must have a classic appearance.) "It was really important that we could feel at ease in our home, whether we were two, four, eight or 20, and not feel lonely or lost when it was just the two of us," says the owner. "We wanted real volumes, lofty ceilings, nice interior perspectives and a beautiful space."

Because the exterior would remain intact, "we worked within the envelope," Ducharme says. "We hollowed out the space completely and only kept the 'skin.' This allowed us to 'feel' the space and understand how the light was circulating before we started to rebuild the inside. However, hollowing out the building also weakened the structure tremendously, especially when the wind was blowing. Renovating the building was like performing a balancing act."

The main staircase, located under the glass skylight in the pitched roof, would serve as the backbone of the construction. Radiating from it, various levels were created through an interplay of corridors, walkways and stairs. All original openings were kept but rebuilt in a more contemporary way. Narrow slits were used cleverly, walls were lowered and openings were created to separate the spaces. Each facade allows light to spread throughout the entire house.

The architects not only kept the function of the boathouse but also used it as a transition space by using a hanging day boat as a link between the wharf and the dwelling. The boathouse includes a large upstairs living area highlighted by a floor-to-ceiling window wall—operated by a hydraulic system invented by the engineers who build the famous race catamarans at La Rochelle—that allows a panoramic view of the harbor and beyond. An airy corridor leads to the kitchen and the dining room, located under the skylight ceiling, and a second living area. The house is anchored by an oversize entrance hall leading to three bedrooms and three bathrooms on the first floor. Upstairs, the master bathroom is open to the master bedroom just below.







STEEL PLAYS A MAJOR ROLE IN THE LOFT; painted for the exterior joineries, doors and window frames, and raw and rusted for the stairs and walkways. Aged wood also dominates throughout, including 100-year-old red fir for the simple, modern shelf in the kitchen, specially designed by Wilmotte. Most of the beams were recycled from the original boat shed to keep the spaces inviting and warm. The entrance hall floor, polished concrete mixed with local sand, is continued in the living area, its shine employed as a sort of mirror to reflect the harbor. The original stone walls were retained and renovated by a skilled local mason.

The approach to the furnishings is consistent with the architecture: simple and elegant but infused with a sense of whimsy and richness. The architects and owners introduced an eclectic combination of modern furniture, iconic pieces and midcentury accents sourced from local markets. In the living area, two LC4 chaise longues—designed by Le Corbusier, Charlotte Perriand and Pierre Jeanneret—are oriented toward the views, as is an Antony day bed by Jean Prouvé. Small tables from Lalinde and an oversize white Italian sofa were found by the owners at Sentou, while the Chesterfield sofa is from Flamant. Just off the kitchen, a pair of red Lido deck chairs by Giudici purchased at auction are offset by a Wings bench by Pinar Yar and Tugrul Govsa, which is repeated in the master bedroom, there joined by Orange Slice armchairs by Pierre Paulin. The reading area off the kitchen hosts a pair of sleek lounge chairs by Geneviève Dangles and Christian de France. Throughout, the combination of minimalist architectural forms and eclectic decorative surprises results in an environment that feels simultaneously rich and spare. Says the owner, "This house is the perfect balcony from which to enjoy the village, especially during our holidays." ■ *Wilmotte & Associés*, +33 (0) 1 53 02 22 22, wilmotte.fr; *Christophe Ducharme Architecte*, +33(0)1 45 22 07 75, c-ducharme-architecte.com

