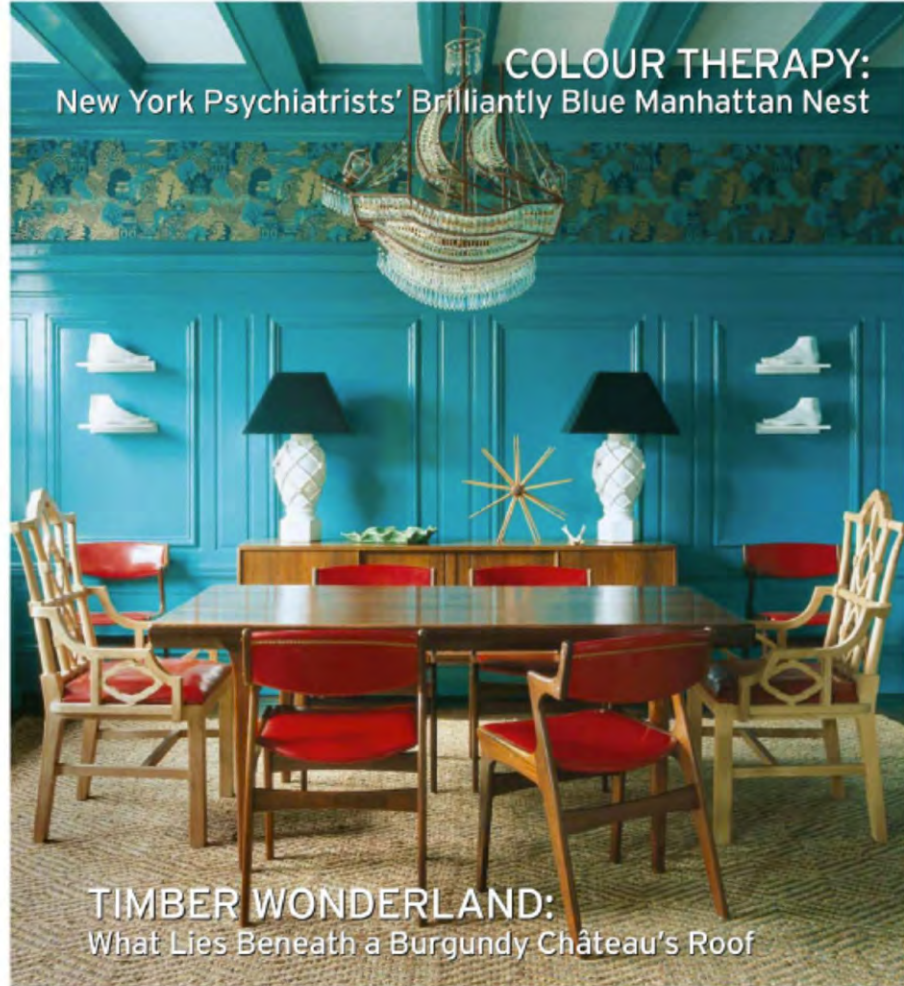


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THE WORLD OF INTERIORS

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TIMBER WONDERLAND:
What Lies Beneath a Burgundy Château's Roof

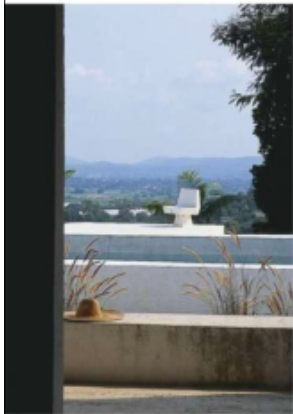
TEST BED

Emmanuel Picault's weekend home – a laboratory for his ideas – has been taking shape in rural Mexico over four years. Combining indigenous crafts and Modernist furniture, massive colonnades and streaks of mildew, the French antique dealer and designer espouses an architecture that responds to actual use – which is why he often has a catnap on concrete plinths dotted round the property rather than in his own bed. 'I sleep where sleep takes me,' he tells Valérie Lapierre. Photography: Ricardo Labougle

Built above the ground like a horse trough, the swimming pool affords views of the house, the mountains and the facing valley, where sugar cane is cultivated.



Left: the house, with its concrete colonnade, viewed from the garden. Middle left: a vestige of the urban furniture of the 1960s, this chair found in a Mexican street has been restored and then cast directly into the concrete floor by the pool. Middle centre: one end of the long gallery



Above: in the rainy season, water pours through the oculi into the little lounge, falling noisily into containers. Left: this staircase with no handrail was inspired by the Aztec step pyramids. Opposite: a small copal incense burner from the province of Oaxaca perches on a repoussé metal table from Lebanon



In the main sitting room, "Bird" chairs, by Harry Bertoia, and "Petal" tables, by Richard Schultz, gather round an Iranian rug. A concrete daybed sits on the far wall. The papier-mâché cow in the foreground was used as fancy dress in village festivals





Left: doors and windows have deliberately not yet been installed. Middle left: a central corridor bisects the courtyard, and the bedrooms and bathroom. Middle centre: the dining area. Middle right: this huge salvaged stainless-steel kitchen unit, made in 1967 by an unknown Mexican architect, is in perfect condition



Left: a fibreglass idol - a film prop - guards the entrance to the house, which is traversed by a 25m-long corridor reminiscent of those in Spanish monasteries. The mildew is planned patina. Opposite: in the small bedroom, with its hesequen-leaf rug, an old blanket typical of Saltillo chimes with a photograph of Zapata coloured by Marie Taillefer





Left: two Guatemalan candlesticks, made from fuzzy-drink bottle tops, sit in front of a concrete plinth perfect for a siesta. On a 19th-century frankin kiln, an 'Acapulco' chair has a seat made from genuine fishing net, instead of the usual coloured cords

'AT THE AGE of nine, I decided I would be Mexican,' says Emmanuel Picault, a tall, fair 40-something with Viking ancestry. 'I don't remember if I had read a book or seen a documentary about it, but I fell in love with Mexico.' Today, it's a done deal: Picault is now a Mexican citizen. Living in the capital during the week, he exercises his many talents as antique dealer, interior designer and architect. But it is in Santa Catarina, an hour and a half away, at the foot of the mountains and facing a plain of sugar-cane plantations, that he has found the ideal plot of land for his weekend home, which also serves as a laboratory of ideas. Construction began four years ago, but it's still a work in progress.

Born in Domfront, a village in Normandy with an 11th-century fortress, Emmanuel spent his childhood playing at William the Conqueror in the park around the ruined castle. 'I especially enjoyed looking for a way out of the place, but the drawbridge didn't open very often,' he says with irony. At the age of 20, with no formal qualifications, he entered the picture department of an intellectual Parisian journal – 'a wonderful university' – where he began to develop an eye. Between the ages of 25 and 30 he travelled, and continued packing his 'suitcase of images' at an antique dealer's in Los Angeles. In 2001 he opened his own antique gallery, *Chic By Accident*, in Mexico City, specialising in objects that emerge from where traditional indigenous crafts meet the European design movements of the 20th century. 'It gives rise to improbable encounters,' he laughs; collectors come from all over the world to see his finds. In 2011, Emmanuel joined forces with architect Ludwig Godofroy, another Norman expat living here, to open a practice, which has already designed private clubs, restaurants, hotels, shops and apartments. 'We are having terrific success; we can invent whatever we want, such as a club with a pyramid inside. It's crazy, it's sublime! Mexico is a wonderful place to practise an architecture that is free and unfettered.'

Emmanuel experiments with his ideas on the Santa Catarina country house. In its current state, the house is a single-storey building extending over 650sq m, and has been built without a prior plan. 'I drew it out on the ground with lime from a tin with a hole in the bottom, like they do on football fields. It is being built little by little by a single builder and his son. Thanks to the slowness of the construction, I can get on with my outside projects very fast.' In his own home Emmanuel is in favour of an 'emotional architecture', and he takes his time 'to feel things, listen and watch people moving around in this space'. As a result, doors and windows are deliberately not yet installed. The swimming pool, however, built like a horse trough, was constructed right at the beginning. Sitting naked in a cast-con-

crete seat by the swimming pool, Emmanuel spends his time envisaging how the house will unfold.

The entrance is guarded by a fibreglass idol made for a film set in the 1960s. A long corridor runs through the building and ends at a wall of volcanic stone – along with concrete and lime, one of only three materials used here. The house is laid out on either side of the corridor. On the right, an interior courtyard leads to the bathroom, bedrooms and library. On the left, the kitchen and the main sitting area open onto a gallery with concrete columns, facing the pool.

Life changes with the seasons, the dry one, from October to May, being the longest and most comfortable. Emmanuel let two rainy seasons pass before putting on the roof so as to obtain a special patina from the water, which creates streaks of mould on the interior walls of whitewashed stone. And on the terraced roof of the large gallery he has put in an oculus through which water gushes loudly during downpours, and then flows into the garden. 'It makes a magnificent curtain of rain,' he rhapsodises.

Rather spartan, and very Chic By Accident, the furnishing combines vernacular design, tropical-style furniture, Oriental carpets and vintage pieces, such as an 'Acapulco' chair with a seat made of real fishing net or a 'Bird' chair by Harry Bertola, 'perfect for listening to music'. There are also lots of reclaimed objects, such as the huge 1960s stainless-steel kitchen, or the Carrara-marble shower floor reclaimed from a table, which contrasts with the mildewed wall. 'For me, this house is... a place for my close friends, and a laboratory where my artist friends can make *travessuras* – mischief.' Interventions by young French artists include Etienne Chambaud's mosaic, and a ceiling-painting project by Théo Mercier, currently artist-in-residence at the Villa Medici in Rome. It's this that excites Emmanuel, more than the choice of a chest of drawers or a mattress. Besides, this is a man who sleeps only five hours a night ('my Normandy peasant heritage'), and rarely in the bedrooms. When he does so, it's most often in the old wrought-iron bed in the room adorned with a photograph of Emiliano Zapata coloured by artist Marie Taillefer, 'but in general I sleep where sleep takes me,' he confesses. Throughout the house he has provided large concrete cubes covered with mattresses, rugs and cushions, perfect for lazing around on at weekends. Emmanuel, who travels a great deal, sees himself as something of a nomad, like the lords of the manor of the past who sojourned briefly in their various residences. 'You arrived with your furniture, unrolled the carpets, and the spaces would take on meaning with use. That's what I'm trying to recreate' ■

Chic By Accident. Ring 02 55 5511 1312, or visit chicbyaccident.com



This page: In the bathroom, fine towels made in Homs, Syria, drape down over 1970s chairs from Veracruz. The shower area is fitted with two pull-chain shower heads, as in a 1950s changing room