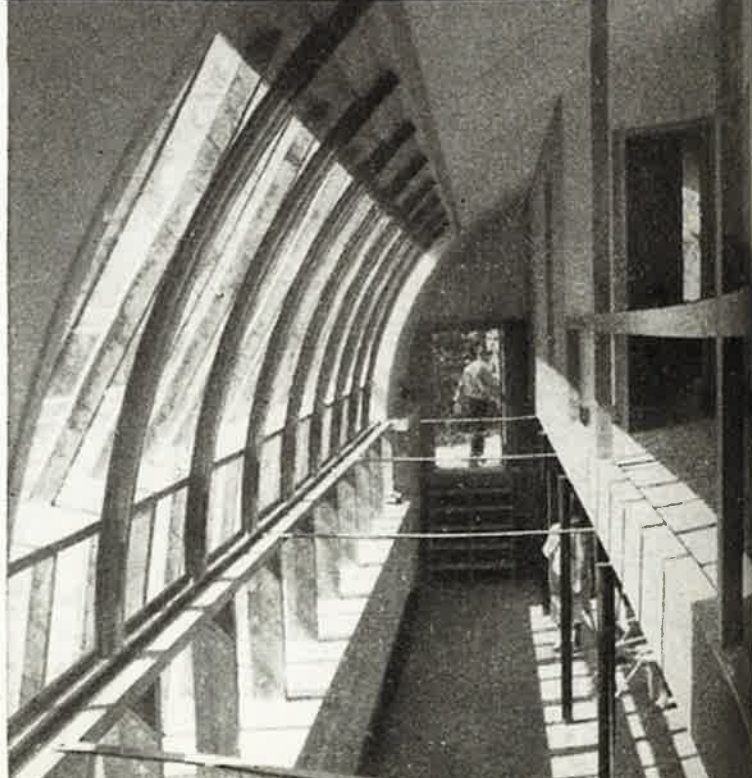
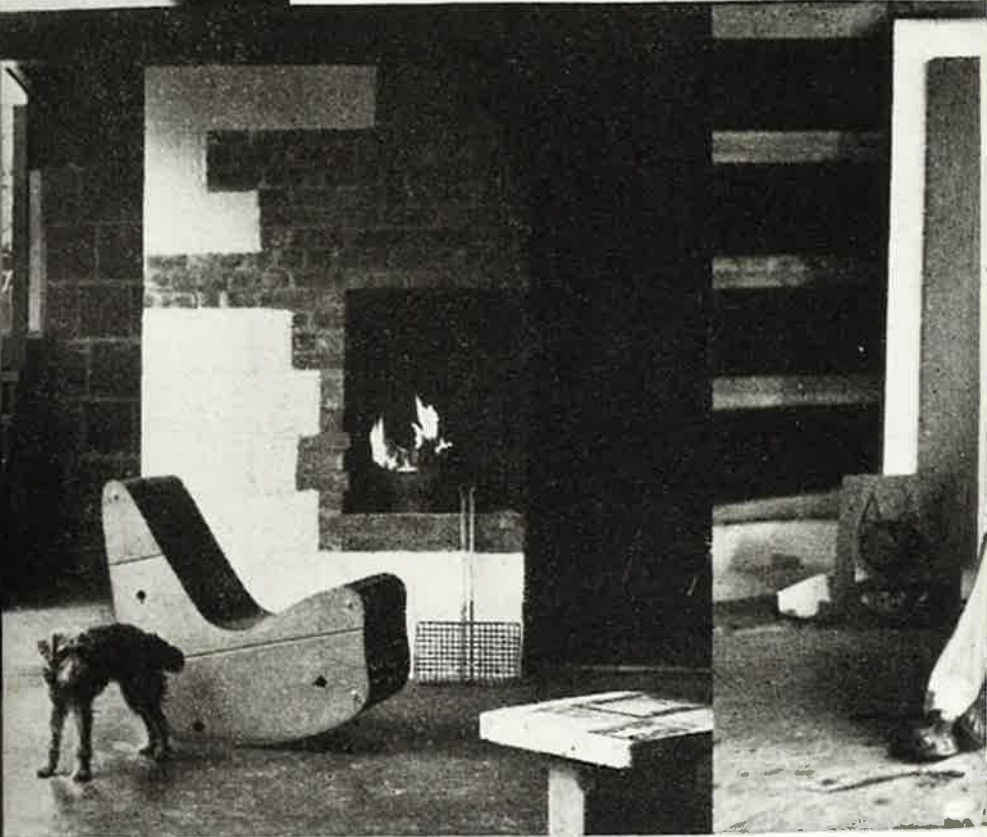




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Looking for Pierre: Chareau in Exile

Robert M. Rubin

Pierre Chareau fled France for America in 1940. He died in East Hampton, New York, ten years later. Archival traces of his decade of exile are frustratingly few. We know he participated in a few wartime events organized by the French enclave in New York—"Free French Week," "France Forever," "France Comes Back"—and was a speaker or otherwise a participant in symposia at cultural institutions such as the New School for Social Research and the New York Public Library. He was involved in preparations for General Charles de Gaulle's visit to New York in 1944. After the war, he designed what must have been very modest exhibitions at the French embassy in New York, among them installations on the architect Auguste Perret and the hundredth anniversary of the death of Honoré de Balzac. Although he continued to design furniture in the 1940s, very little seems to have been made (pages 168–71).¹

His architectural work was similarly sparse, and in consequence has received relatively little attention. He designed a house and studio for the artist Robert Motherwell in East Hampton in 1947; in payment, he received the right to build his own little cottage on the premises. He designed one other built work in the United States: La Colline, in Spring Valley, New York (1950), a house for the pianist Germaine Monteux and the writer Nancy Laughlin (page 268).

Chareau and his wife, Dollie, seem to have known virtually everyone in New York's cultural circles,

but there are few surviving traces where one might reasonably expect to find them. We know he had dealings with the Museum of Modern Art because he sold the museum art from his own collection as well as acting as agent for the Dalsace family (for whom he had built the Maison de Verre). The architect Philip Johnson certainly knew of him, but ignored him. While other refugee architects benefited from Johnson's networking, there is no documented contact between the museum and Chareau, other than relating to art acquisitions in which he played a role. Although Johnson had visited the Maison de Verre with Le Corbusier while it was under construction, the house was glaringly absent from Johnson's 1932 *International Exhibition of Modern Architecture* at the museum. As with the exclusion of another key French architect and rival of Le Corbusier, Robert Mallet-Stevens, from the same show, this was clearly a conscious omission.²

In 1943 Chareau was involved in the design and construction of the Cantine La Marseillaise, a Free French cafeteria and watering hole in Manhattan.³ So was Alexander Calder, but no document or letter regarding their interaction is to be found in the Calder archives—which is surprising, given what a pack rat

Detail of a 1948 article on Chareau's
house for Robert Motherwell.



The exterior of the Cantine La Marseillaise, New York, c. 1943–45. The facade, with its striking horizontal stripes, suggests a modernist aesthetic, but the design cannot be firmly attributed to Chareau.

Calder was. The architect Oscar Nitzchké, one of Calder's closest friends, drew and signed the plans for the Motherwell house on Chareau's behalf, since Chareau was not a licensed architect. He also helped Chareau get a small grant of \$250 from the American Committee for Refugee Scholars, Writers, and Artists.⁴ So Chareau and Calder are tantalizingly close from several angles, but no records of their relationship have been found.

Chareau reached outside New York architecture circles for a patron. The young painter Robert Motherwell was an active presence in the art scene of the 1940s, and had spent time before the war in Paris, absorbing its avant-garde cultures. He met Chareau during the war, and after its end invited him to serve as architecture editor of *Possibilities*, a new "occasional review," along with Motherwell himself (art), Harold Rosenberg (writing), and John Cage (music).⁵ Among more extensive contributions from the other three, one finds from Chareau two pages of photographs of a 1946 church designed by Oscar Niemeyer, whose curvilinear forms evoke the Motherwell house, begun the same year. But there is no text—not even the name of the church or its location. Just this: "Oscar Niemeyer. Church. 1946. Reinforced concrete. Brazil." It is frustratingly elusive, but still a fragmentary clue as to what architecture Chareau was absorbing at the time when Motherwell approached him to design a house in the country.

The Motherwell house was a compound, made from easily found, inexpensive materials. It comprised a house, a studio, and a little cottage for Chareau himself. The house was a modified Quonset hut (a prefabricated metal structure developed by the military). Additional

materials were a found industrial greenhouse window, concrete blocks for retaining walls, and plywood. The floors were brick and (even more economical) disks sliced from oak logs, laid in poured concrete. "We wanted to use tiles," recalled Motherwell, "but I couldn't afford them." The curving metal crossbeams that supported the roof were exposed and painted bright red, evoking the vertical I-beams of the Maison de Verre. The design was an open plan, with two bedrooms and a bath off a second-floor balcony—perhaps also a nod to the Maison de Verre. The replacement of one wall with the salvaged greenhouse lent the space "a Mediterranean light." A second Quonset hut was converted into the artist's studio (pages 262–67).⁶

The cottage Chareau built for himself nearby, known as the Maison "Pièce Unique" or Petite Maison de Repos, was of concrete and terracotta block. Its modest dimensions (thirty-five by twenty-six feet) and sophisticated program anticipate Le Corbusier's Petit Cabanon of 1951, his tiny end-of-life retreat on the French Riviera, as if the concept of the "primitive hut"—so beloved of architectural theory—was in the postwar air. Le Corbusier may even have seen Chareau's cottage on one of his visits to East Hampton (page 269).

Chareau incorporated sleeping, dining, storage, and studio spaces around a central core with a wood-burning stove, bathroom, and kitchen. He combined this format with such subtle details as windows set at a slight angle, installed unframed in order to open onto the exterior, and cinder and terracotta blocks in alternating sections. Clearly, Chareau's subtlety was not extinguished, but rather stimulated, by the paltry budget.

The Motherwell house was written up in *Harper's Bazaar* in June 1948, but it was not until more than twenty years later, with the publication of the Yale architectural journal *Perspecta* 12, that Chareau's reputation in the wider architectural milieu began to be resurrected. The focus was on the Maison de Verre. The influential critic Reyner Banham went so far as to say that he might have featured it in his canonical *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* (1960), had he been aware of it at the time of writing. Later, in *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment* (1969), Banham described the house as a successful example of modern architecture, favoring it over the 1931 Aluminaire House by Le Corbusier's disciple Albert Frey.⁷

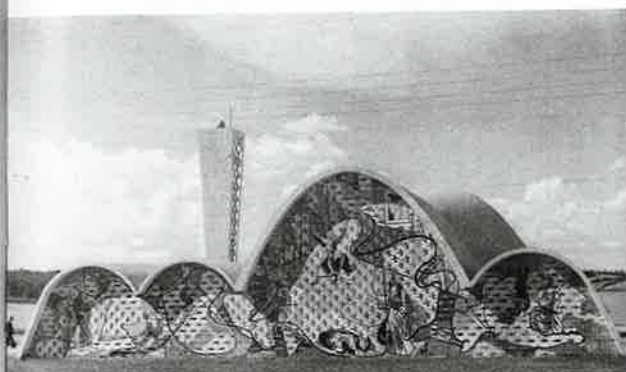
Against these hosannahs, the Motherwell house barely registered. There are several reasons for this. The Museum of Modern Art in New York was the leading tastemaker of the 1940s, and the artists of its circle were powerful. Neither the director of the architecture and design program, Philip Johnson, nor the department's



44



Oscar Niemeyer. Church. 1946. Brazil



Oscar Niemeyer. Church. 1946. Mosaic by Portinari. Brazil

45

Chareau's wordless article on Niemeyer's church, published in *Possibilities*, a short-lived journal published in 1946.

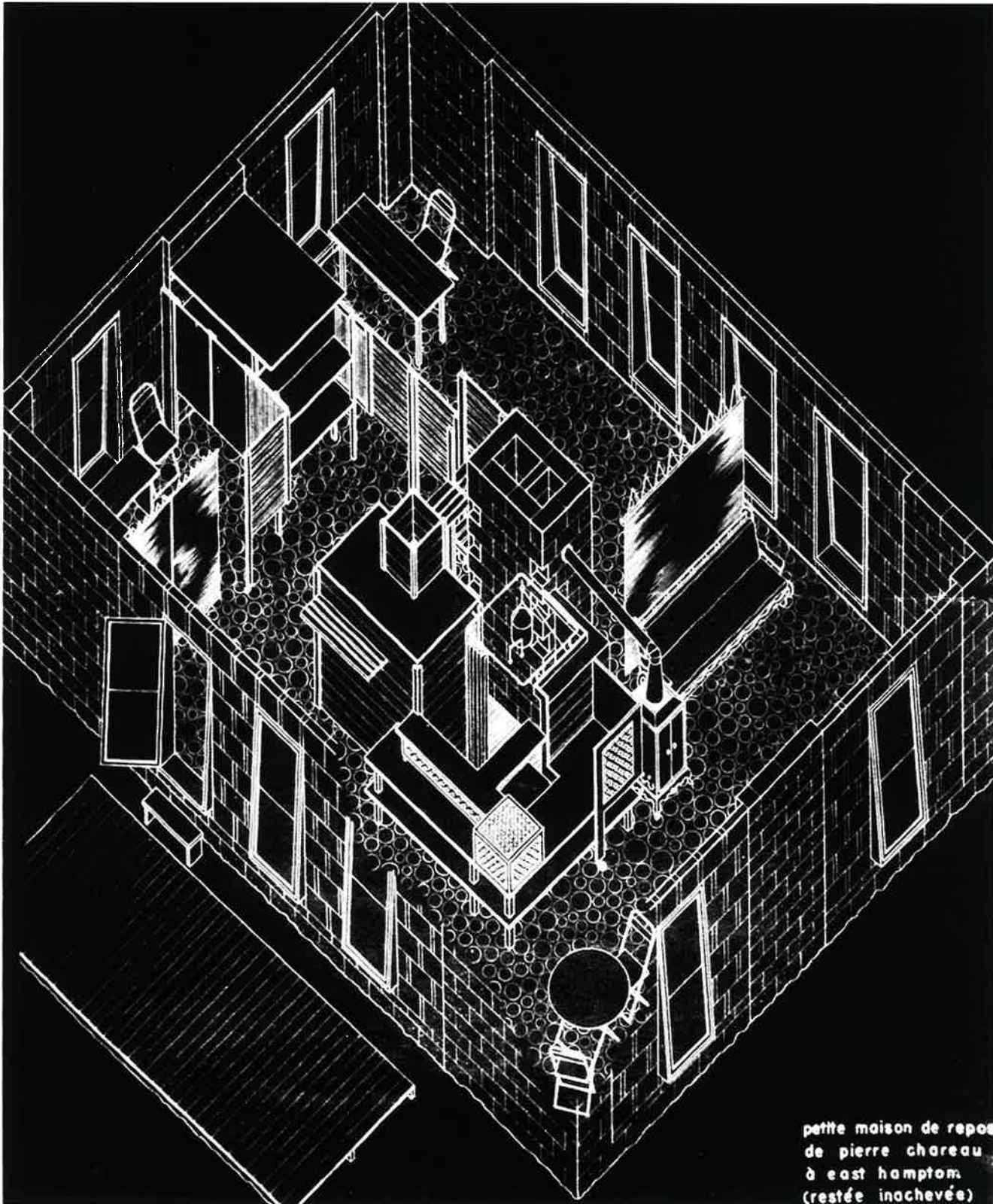
curator, the architect and critic Peter Blake, were fans of Chareau. Both Blake and Johnson were firmly in Le Corbusier's corner, and seem to have seen other French architects as rivals. Thus, Blake's later negative assessment of the house in his memoir is hardly surprising: Chareau's work was "rather uneven" and the Motherwell house was "a bit of a joke—Chareau, like other French visitors, was greatly impressed by American technology." Blake derided him for the idea that wartime Quonset or Nissen huts (which he likened to "sheet metal igloos," temporary shelter for soldiers in "inhospitable climes") were "just the thing to use in building a fairly luxurious summer house in the Hamptons." He asserted that Chareau's "exotic notions about interior finishes" were a financial burden and the reason Motherwell "never quite finished the house." Blake asserted that Chareau was among several French refugees whom Motherwell was supporting (though there is no evidence that their relationship continued beyond the architectural commission). The house, Blake concluded with a sneer, was "viewed as a landmark,

especially by those not condemned to living in it."⁸

Those French gentlemen supposedly blinded by technology had a somewhat different view of the house, as did the following generations of European architects. Jean Prouvé listed it in 1977 as one of the great landmarks of modern architecture, alongside American works by Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Norman Foster and Richard Rogers visited the house while architecture students at Yale. The publisher Barney Rosset, who bought it in the winter of 1952, recalled regularly receiving architectural pilgrims and architourists of the time.⁹

It is always referred to as the Motherwell house, but it was Rosset who really took on the house for the long haul. Though not the original client, he deserves full credit for its custodianship: Motherwell occupied it for less than five years, Rosset for three decades. He took the time to deal with some of the ergonomic and climatic issues initially posed by the design and its low-budget finishes. He shingled the roof and took down a wall Motherwell had put in, because he thought it "knocked out the fireplace's usefulness" and "spoil the craziness of the house."¹⁰

At the level of architectural preservation and what constitutes legitimate adaptive reuse, one can



Axonometric drawing of the Maison Pièce
Unique, 1947.

The Motherwell house was covered by *Harper's Bazaar* in its June 1948 issue. The magazine referred to Chareau as "one of the foremost modern French architects."

AT NIGHT, THE LIGHTED HOUSE GROWS BY A BEACON



EDWIN JAGUE

**ROBERT MOTHERWELL'S
QUONSET HOUSE**

RIGHT, A LONG VIEW THROUGH THE HOUSE; FAR RIGHT, THE FACADE WITH FRONT DOOR ABOVE IT, A FIRE PLACE IN THE CENTERED FIREPLACE



• One hundred miles from New York, at Easthampton, Long Island, Robert Motherwell, the abstract painter, has made a home from a huge Avon Quonset, in a setting of sand, scrub oak, and pine. It was designed by Pierre Chareau, builder of the revolutionary "Glass House" in Paris and one of the foremost modern French architects. The house has ends and sides of overlapping glass panes reclaimed from an ancient greenhouse during the epinectical storm—the rains pour down the windows in a delicious waterfall. The interior is minimal: there are no partitions, only one big kitchen-living-dining room, partly shadowed by a balcony from which open two bedrooms and a bath. A chimney rises out of the center of the common room with a knee-high hearth, open on two sides. The woodwork is



STANDING, ANNE WATTS, FEMINE OF THE CHAREAU HOUSE; SEATED, MARIA, MOTHERWELL, WITH THE WATTS CHILD

varnished hemlock; the walls, coiled ply-wood. Red concrete floors are balanced by circled, curving cross-beams. The floors are of oak shingles, set like steppingstones into cement, then waxed. The rear of the house nestles close to a hill. In midsummer, corn tassels wave at the upstairs windows. At night, from without, the lighted house looks very much like an elongated, curiously warm and brilliant goldfish bowl

LEFT, DESIGNER PIERRE CHAREAU; ABOVE, THE ARTIST ROBERT MOTHERWELL



Influences from the Maison de Verre can be seen in various touches throughout the Motherwell house: left, the main staircase in the Maison de Verre; opposite, the original staircase in the Motherwell house, before it was altered by Barney Rosset.



The Motherwell house in East Hampton, New York, designed by Chareau, 1947. The visual analogy between the Niemeyer design and Chareau's use of the Quonset hut is clear.

certainly question some of Rosset's interventions, but he did make the house a home. Rosset unabashedly loved it and embraced its impracticalities—it leaked and lacked insulation, among other things. As he said, he understood its “texture” and “playfulness.” But the program of the compound changed significantly with his arrival. Motherwell's studio became a guest house—*cum*—studio and photo lab, with linoleum laid over the concrete floor. Rosset removed the central bath and kitchen facilities of Chareau's cottage, inserted a pool, and domed the ceiling. Perhaps owing to his reputation as a sexual libertine, this pool has often been described erroneously in oral testimonies as a hot tub.

For nearly four decades, the house was a busy intersection of diverse avant-gardes. Motherwell painted his early *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* paintings there. He recalled in an interview that Mies van der Rohe once stopped by to purchase a painting. In 1952 Willem de Kooning rented the studio for the summer. Rosset bought the property soon after he acquired the fledgling Grove Press; he was twenty-eight and dreamed of creating a compound around it for his extended publishing family. At one point he bought a tiny church, moved it to the site, and, by removing one wall, made a little theater out of it—the Evergreen Theater, named for his magazine, *Evergreen Review*. Samuel Beckett spent considerable time there, as Rosset was his American publisher. In addition to Motherwell and his friends and then Rosset's Grove Press entourage, virtually every painter,

writer, and architect in the artistic enclaves of eastern Long Island was a guest or visitor at one time.¹¹

Rosset sold the house in 1980 (the “stupidest single act of my life”), and it was torn down in 1985 to make way for an Adirondack-style Hamptons McMansion, despite efforts by the architectural historian Alastair Gordon and others to save it.¹²

One significant artifact of the house survives, however: Norman Mailer's idiosyncratic film *Maidstone*, shot there over five days in July 1968, with the nearby grand estate of the painter Alfonso Ossorio providing the *haute* Hamptons WASP establishment location. The film was screened at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, in fall 1970 and then failed commercially, but it is widely considered Mailer's most interesting and ambitious attempt at moviemaking. It is a frustrating film for a Chareau scholar to watch. There are no establishing shots of the exteriors of the main house, the studio, or Chareau's cottage. The interior of the latter, as depicted in the film, is more evocative of a sixties swingers' club than of poetic functionalism. Apart from fleeting glimpses of the original oak-and-concrete floor, there is not much grist for the researcher's mill. However, Mailer used five camera crews, and hours of unexamined outtakes survive. Perhaps some stills can be gleaned from these to fill out the visual chronology of the house started by Hans Namuth and Ronny Jaques in the Motherwell era and closed out by Alastair Gordon's haunting images of the empty house in 1985, just prior to its destruction.¹³

Setting aside architectural preservation and history, Chareau's inventiveness, even in this modest project, leads us to consider what architecture is supposed



to *do*, in a broadly creative sense. It is particularly noteworthy that a man whose freestanding built structures can almost be counted on one hand created two residences that were avant-garde hothouses—live-work environments each of which is emblematic of the creative cutting edge of its time and place: interwar Paris and postwar New York.¹⁴ In this respect, *Maidstone* crystallizes the bohemian East End scene out of which the Motherwell house emerged in much the same way that Marcel L'Herbier's 1924 film *L'Inhumaine* reflects the cultural milieu that produced the Maison de Verre. It is also a memory site of the influence on postwar American culture of refugee European avant-gardes. Motherwell (who had visited France before the war but did not meet Chareau until later) was a major conduit. So was Chareau, if a silent one. And *Maidstone*—a film about a Maileresque movie director filming a hard-core remake of Luis Buñuel's 1967 *Belle de Jour*—was likewise in the vanguard of American independent filmmaking in the era when directors in the United States were digesting European art-house cinema.¹⁵

Pierre Chareau was not an architect by training. He was licensed in France as an *ensemblier*, a term that literally means “one who puts things together” and that loosely translates as “interior designer.” The Motherwell house is, in some sense, as much ensemble as unified concept. *Collage* is another word that comes to mind. The compound is a juxtaposition of Quonset hut, industrial greenhouse, concrete, and humble wood.¹⁶ But Chareau's legacy—especially when the avant-garde *bouillabaisse* simmering around the Motherwell house is juxtaposed with the interwar avant-garde of Paris that gathered at the Maison de Verre—is also one of bringing together and collaging disparate iconoclastic milieus.

NOTES

1. Much of the biographical information about Chareau's years in the United States is gleaned from correspondence in the Dalsace/Vellay family archives, Paris. Where archival documents exist, they mention Chareau only in passing. (There is of course the usual rumored suitcase of what he brought from France, including plans for the Maison de Verre.) For a more detailed chronology, see Olivier Cinqualbre et al., *Pierre Chareau, Architecte: Un Art Intérieur*, exh. cat. (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 1993), 13–55; on the events named, see 31.

2. Adam Gopnik, “The Ghost of the Glass House,” *New Yorker* (May 9, 1994): 54. Peter Blake discusses Chareau as being in the same circles as the Surrealists Yves Tanguy, André Masson, and André Breton, as well as knowing Piet Mondrian, Fernand Léger, and others; Peter Blake, *No Place Like Utopia: Modern Architecture and the Company We Kept* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 66. According to Barney Rosset, Chareau knew “a surprising number of people, considering there were no buildings!”; Leo Edelstein et al., “Interview with Barney Rosset,” *Pataphysics*, Pirate Issue (2001): n.p., http://www.yanniflorence.net/pataphysicsmagazine/rosset_interview.html.

3. The Cantine La Marseillaise was established by Maria Jolas, founder of the École Bilingue and an influential translator in New York. Jolas was a critical link between American and French mid-century avant-gardes—but there is no mention of Chareau in her memoir, *Maria Jolas, Woman of Action*, ed. Mary Ann Caws (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2004). The Cantine was a meeting place for French refugees, artists, intellectuals, Free French sailors on leave, and others who supported the French Resistance. Jolas remembered: “Two empty Second Avenue shops” near 42nd Street “were soon turned into a gay French café; on April 17th 1943 [it] opened its doors”; *ibid.*, 123. Extant photographs show only a glimpse of Chareau's design; the building survives, but the storefront and interior have long since been replaced. Eugène and Maria Jolas Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, box 57, folder 1329, <http://brbl-zoom.library.yale.edu/viewer/1021826>.

4. Archives and Manuscripts Division, New York Public Library.

5. *Possibilities* 1 (Winter 1947–48), *Problems of Contemporary Art* series (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, 1947). The journal published exactly one issue.

6. Robert Motherwell, quoted in Alastair Gordon, "Lost Houses, The End of an Era: Recalling Robert Motherwell's Landmark 1946 East Hampton Quonset Hut, Architecture by Pierre Chareau," *Architectural Digest* (October 2007): 134–41; and in James Brooke, "Trend-Setting Quonset Hut Is Demolished on L.I.," *New York Times* (August 3, 1985). For a detailed description and analysis of the Motherwell house, see Alastair Gordon, *Weekend Utopia: Modern Living in the Hamptons* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2001), 48–53.
7. "Robert Motherwell's Quonset House," *Harper's Bazaar* (June 1948): 86–87; Kenneth Frampton, "Maison de Verre," *Perspecta: The Yale Architectural Journal* 12 (1969): 77–126; Reyner Banham, *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 163. Banham later extolled the Maison de Verre further: "This is not modern architecture as it is generally understood. . . . It's as if its architects, the French Art-Deco superstar Pierre Chareau, and the Dutch modernist Bernard Bijvoet, had invented an alternative Modernism to the one that is in all the books"; Reyner Banham, "Modern Monuments," *New Society* 78, no. 1246 (November 1986): 12–14; repr. in *A Critic Writes: Selected Essays by Reyner Banham* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 261–62.
8. Blake, *No Place Like Utopia*, 114–15. Blake, himself a German Jewish refugee from the Nazis (born Peter Blach), and nearly forty years younger than Chareau, was at the time establishing himself as a fixture in the Hamptons, where he later built a number of "fairly luxurious houses" himself. Motherwell assisted and sponsored various art projects on behalf of émigré artists. The art patron Peggy Guggenheim, who also aided refugee artists, may also have been involved, as the furnishings in the Motherwell house included pieces by Frederick Kiesler from the same series that equipped Guggenheim's Art of This Century gallery.
9. Jean Prouvé, "Influences Réciproques: Est-ce Exact?," in *Paris–New York*, exh. cat., by Pontus Hultén et al. (Paris: Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Pompidou, 1977; repr. 1991), 55 (Prouvé misdates the house to 1940); Norman Foster, conversation with the author, October 14, 2012.
10. Edelstein et al., "Interview with Barney Rosset." The article includes a detailed discussion by Rosset of the changes he made.
11. On Mies's visit to Motherwell, see Gordon, "Lost Houses," 140.
12. Edelstein et al., "Interview with Barney Rosset."
13. See Norman Mailer Collection, 1947–2007, Harvard Film Archive, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, HFA items #16026, 16081, 16107, 16284, 16683, 16720, 16722, 16724, 17774, 17775, 17780, 17791, 17808, 17809, 17810, 17815, 17817, 17819, 17821, 17829, 17843, 17875, 17880, 17887, 18317, 20067. My thanks to Michael Chaiken, Mailer's cinema archivist, for this information. Namuth photographed the house in 1950; Jaques in 1948.
14. In addition to the Maison de Verre (1932) and the Motherwell house (1947), Chareau's works of architecture (as opposed to interior design) are a golf club at Beauvallon (with Bernard Bijvoet, 1927) and, nearby, the Villa Vent d'Aval, Saint-Tropez, France (1928), both commissioned by Edmond and Émile Bernheim; a weekend house for the dancer Djémil Anik outside of Paris (1937); and La Colline in Spring Valley, New York (1950). This last was a restructuring of an existing building.
15. On *L'Inhumaine* see Esther da Costa Meyer's essay in this volume; see also Richard Abel, *French Cinema: The First Wave, 1915–1929* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1984), 383–94; Prosper Hillairet, "L'Inhumaine, L'Herbier, Canudo et la Synthèse des Arts," in *Marcel L'Herbier: L'Art du Cinéma*, ed. Laurent Véray (Paris: Association Française de Recherche sur l'Histoire du Cinéma, 2007); Standish D. Lawder, "Léger, l'Herbier and l'Inhumaine," in *The Cubist Cinema* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), 99–115; Dorothee Binder, *Der Film "L'Inhumaine" und Sein Verhältnis zu Kunst und Architektur der Zwanziger Jahre* (Ph.D. diss., Ludwig Maximilian University, Munich, Germany, 2005); and Nieves Fernández Villalobos, "Mallet-Stevens, Modern Design, and French Cinema," in *Designing the French Interior: The Modern Home and Mass Media*, ed. Anca I. Lasc, Georgina Downey, and Mark Taylor (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), esp. 145.
16. As Kenneth E. Silver points out in this volume, Cubist aesthetics—particularly the drawings and collages of Picasso—were a key influence on Chareau's style. We may extend this idea: if Chareau's Maison de Verre is famous for the completeness and unity of its conception, his house for Motherwell encapsulates an equally nuanced grasp of the found element, the incongruous combination, the transformation of common materials. On this idea, see also Gordon, *Weekend Utopia*, 53.