

Dow Jones Reprints: This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, use the Order Reprints tool at the bottom of any article or visit [www.djreprints.com](http://www.djreprints.com)

See a sample reprint in PDF format.

Order a reprint of this article now

## **THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.**

WSJ.com

FEATURE FEBRUARY 25, 2011

# The Court of Modernism

A passionate collector and restorer of modernist artifacts, Robert M. Rubin brings a purist's eye to the genius and intricacies of Paris' Maison de Verre, the house of glass he lives in

By ALASTAIR GORDON



Photograph by Todd Eberle

The Maison de Verre, designed in 1928, stands out as a one-of-a-kind hybrid with glassblock walls, I-beams and the ingenious engineering required to fit into a courtyard setting.

When I first visited Robert M. Rubin at the Maison de Verre in Paris in 2008, he was in a side room fiddling with the wiring of an old lighting fixture. The owner since 2005, he seemed very content to be so intimately engaged with the restoration of his house, designed in 1928 by Pierre Chareau in collaboration

with Dutch architect Bernard Bijvoet and metal-working craftsman Louis Dalbet, and one of the great landmarks of 20th-century Modernism. Rubin, 57, keeps a selection of old fixtures laid out in a row on a worktable, as if waiting to be repaired.

"I leave them that way because it reminds me of my father," he says while we wend our way through levels of interior spaces suffused with a subaqueous light that filters through the Maison's famous glass-brick facade and spreads across the ivory rubberized floor. The raised dimples of the old floor tiles are now cracked and puckered, as if some chemical decomposition were at work, but Rubin has made a point of preserving them exactly as they were when he bought the house.

"It relates to my interest in originality. Things that are original have personality and a sense of accrued time

### Photos: Tour the House



[View Slideshow](#)

Photographs by Todd Eberle

The pronounced structural elements were a result of the propping and infilling required when an elderly fourth-floor tenant refused to move out of the pre-existing building during the Maison's three-story construction.

that you can see for yourself," he says as the mysterious mechanics of the house artfully reveal themselves: layer upon layer of perforated metal screens, folding grates and other ingenious devices that roll or pivot and move smoothly on their tracks with a kind of hushed confidence, like parts of a well-oiled machine.

Rubin is not the former Secretary of the Treasury, but a Wall Street commodities trader turned exuberant and idiosyncratic collector. "I'm the other [Robert Rubin](#)," he says with a smile. He and his French-born wife, Stéphane Samuel, a landscape designer, divide their time between a comfortable but relatively conventional apartment on Manhattan's Central Park West, a shingle-style house in Wainscott, Long Island, and the very unconventional Maison de Verre, which he has been restoring with the same meticulous attention he gives to all of his possessions, whether it's a vintage Ferrari, a piece of Modernist furniture or an old racetrack. More than just preserving, in keeping with all his restorations, Rubin goes to pains to ensure that all the Maison's rust and tarnish and dents and dings are intact.

"One of the things I learned from restoring vintage cars is that if you clean up something too much it undermines the overall effect—the gestalt—of the object." (In the early '80s Rubin felt that a vintage Ferrari he purchased had been "over-restored," so he leased an old icehouse in Southampton and began

supervising the restoration and maintenance of the cars himself.) "You make a distinction between dirt and patina," he says. "If you take off the patina you might as well rebuild the whole thing from scratch."



The house was built between 1928 and 1932 for the family of a bourgeois doctor, Jean Dalsace, a prominent gynecologist at the time. "Brigitte Bardot was one of his patients," notes Rubin. And compared to the utopian housing experiments in

The main living area has modular components reminiscent of Cubist collage: Built-in bookcases rise along the stairwell and a black metal wedge encloses the staircase to the third level.

other parts of Europe, the house was surprisingly

retro, almost Victorian, in its stratification of social conventions. The open-plan credo of the Modern movement is abandoned at the front door when you see three distinct doorbells marked in red Deco lettering: Docteur at the top, Visites in the middle, Service at the bottom. (The sense of social hierarchy is even audial, with each button sounding a different chime.) The interior spaces are fractured and articulated in such a way that they recall Cubist collage, with so many screens, dividers and honeycomb-glass partitions suggesting an illusion of open, free-flowing areas (and equality) while retaining the spatial hierarchies of the French upper middle class. The veils of privacy and separation were due to the fact that the house served as both a private residence and Dr. Dalsace's clinic. Discrete pathways were established so that patients wouldn't bump into family members but pass like so many shadowy apparitions on the opposite side of a translucent wall or a metal scrim.



[View Full Image](#)

Photograph by Todd Eberle

Even the Maison's prosaic details, such as electrical conduits and structural columns, become integral parts of the overall composition.

"We've documented everything with great care," says Rubin, explaining that he's still searching for the original theatrical lamps that once lit the outside of the house. "We have the word out with people who deal with industrial objects," he says. "We're also looking for the missing bathroom sinks."

"My father was a blue-collar worker, an appliance fix-it man. He'd been a middling student who never went to college," says Rubin, leaning back in a red-metal Prouvé Kangaroo chair surrounded by his collection of artwork and one-of-a-kind furniture. He's wearing Yoga toe-separators made from some kind of clear rubber gel. We're back in Manhattan, high above Central Park in the living room of his apartment at the El Dorado, with the afternoon sun shining off the reservoir and reflecting across the living-room ceiling. The flickering light makes it feel more like we're at the beach than on the Upper West Side.

"My parents were married for 49 years. My mother used to say, 'I could have married a doctor.' She always discouraged me from working with my hands—she was terrified of me turning out like my father," he says.

Therein lies the dilemma, the "disconnect" as Rubin calls it, that gave shape to his own particular combination of worldly ambition and admittedly manic obsession with machine-oriented objects, ranging from racing cars and modern art, to architectural artifacts like Jean Prouvé's Maisons Tropicales, prefabricated metal housing designed for Colonial Africa, the Maison de Verre and the Bridge, a state-of-the-art golf course built upon the ruins of an old racetrack in Bridgehampton, New York.

Rubin always remained intrigued by his father's workshop, the A-1 Service Co., in the basement of their family home in Hazlet, New Jersey, where he reconditioned broken appliances—washing machines and refrigerators mainly—and resold them. Rubin was fascinated by the workbenches and broken




[View Full Image](#)

Photograph by Todd Eberle

Rubin in his New York apartment with an Alexander Calder mobile and a photograph by Christopher Williams of the disassembled Maison Tropicale, the Jean Prouve house he bought in 1997.

fixtures lying around, the wires and condensers and soldering guns and how all the spare parts were stored in different boxes. In a sense he's created a compromise between his mother's aspirations and his father's handiwork, re-creating the cluttered environment of his childhood, not with broken appliances, but with highly prized objects.

Rubin excelled in public school and won a scholarship to Phillips Exeter Academy in the 1960s. "Exeter taught me that anything was possible. I realized that there was a system built up, a Protestant ethic, and I was given the tools to work in all sectors," he says. He skipped the 11th grade and spent the year in Brittany, where he learned to speak French. (He graduated from Exeter when he was 15 and went on to Yale.) As a boy, Rubin collected baseball cards, LP records, coins and stamps, but his biggest obsession was cars, and this collection started when he graduated Yale in 1974 and his parents gave him a Dodge Dart Swinger that he quickly traded up for a BMW 2002.

While working as a commodities trader at J. Aron and Co. (now part of Goldman Sachs) in the '70s, Rubin bought a '60s 275 GTB 2-cam Ferrari for \$45,000. "We were way beyond dishwashers here," he says. "I'm basically buying every car

that comes my way at this point, trading and bartering." At one point he owned more than 30 vintage racing cars. In 1981 he purchased five Ferraris, including a short-wheel-base 1961 California Spyder that he had professionally restored; he wasn't happy with the end result. "I said, 'It looks like a brand-new car,' and I didn't want it." It was then that Rubin leased the icehouse and began personally supervising the cars' restoration.


[View Full Image](#)

Photograph by Todd Eberle

In 1990, after eight years running the commodities division for Drexel Burnham Lambert, Rubin co-founded AIG Trading Group. During this time, he went to an auction at Hervé Poulain in Paris looking for unusual furniture made from car parts. Instead he ended up buying several furniture pieces by Pierre Chareau. It was a relatively uneventful transition, but Rubin, who'd had no previous interest in art history, suddenly found himself playing in a different arena.

"To me, beauty comes out of the function, and if it works well it will be beautiful all the same," he says, explaining how he went on to collect many other pieces of French Modernist furniture by Chareau, Charlotte Perriand, Jean Prouvé and others, virtually cornering the market at one point and single-handedly raising the auction value of these designers.

Rubin's transition to architecture commenced with his reclamation of one of the Maisons Tropicales, prefabricated affordable housing designed by Prouvé in the late 1940s in order to be packed into an airplane and shipped to French colonial outposts. In 1997 Rubin set out to acquire a prototype

The original doorbells at the house's main entrance each sound a different chime.

being used as shelter for a warlord. After some delicate negotiations and Indiana Jones–type escapades, the house was disassembled and shipped back to France, where Rubin oversaw its restoration and later gave it to the Centre Pompidou, bullet holes intact.



[View Full Image](#)

Julian Dufort

In converting the old Bridgehampton racetrack into a golf course, Rubin integrated artwork (here, a sign by the Scottish artist Nathan Coley) and the original architecture of the track.

"I migrated into 20th-century design as part of a larger midlife crisis that included a divorce and a change of profession," says Rubin, who quit AIG in 2000 and at 48 entered the doctoral program at the Columbia Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation. Meanwhile, he'd also assumed ownership of an old 520-acre racetrack in Bridgehampton, Long Island, where the likes of Stirling Moss and other luminaries had once raced during the 1950s and '60s. The plan was to have a place to race his beloved Ferraris. "However in the Hamptons, real estate is a contact sport," he says, and local planning authorities soon made it clear that a racetrack was no longer acceptable—too much noise pollution. So after much deliberation Rubin decided to build a golf course.

"You wake up one morning and you own this racetrack, but you aren't allowed to make any noise, so what to do?" He didn't want to build a housing subdivision, which the land was already zoned for, but he had no interest in golf at the time. "I thought of it as something that fat Republicans did, and if you'd told me as a kid that I was going to work 25 years on Wall Street and then build a golf course, I would have shot myself."



[View Full Image](#)

Julian Dufort

Two neon signs with the old Mobil Oil Pegasus logo look over the practice range.

The idea was to somehow make golf cool, despite its clubby, privileged veneer. He attempted to bring back the game's naturalist approach by using only native plants—pitch pine, shad, scrub oak, bayberry and wild blueberry—and incorporating structural elements of the old racetrack. A particularly tricky bend was preserved, as was the original straightaway, which has become the main entrance road to the club. Working with designer Rees Jones, Rubin "choreographed" the hilly rolling landscape, opening up the most interesting vistas over the sandy reaches of Great Peconic Bay. There are no toxic chemicals used in its maintenance, no golf carts allowed (unless you're over 60) and

no formal dress requirements within the clubhouse. (Indeed, blue blazers and club ties are frowned upon.) "It speaks to the site specificity of the game. The sequence of holes tells the story of the course. It's in the picturesque tradition—like those 19th-century gardens and gazebos," Rubin says. "But that sensibility was completely lost with the generic modern golf course." (This style of anti-golf chic doesn't come cheaply. Initial membership fees at the Bridge will set you back \$850,000, and annual dues are \$30,000.)

We've now moved to the kitchen of his apartment, where the table is covered with printouts for a Richard Prince exhibition opening in March that Rubin is curating at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. "What resonates about Richard's work is that he's a paleo-digital artist well before Photoshop, the



[View Full Image](#)

Mark Lyon

The prefabricated Maison Tropicale by Jean Prouvé in Presles, France, soon after being rescued from the Republic of the Congo. Today it is at the Centre Pompidou in Paris.

Internet and all that stuff." The printouts show "appropriated" covers of pulp-fiction books that Prince has placed with the illustrator's original renderings such as "Massacre Trail," a Western novel with a cross and covered wagon on the cover, and "Jet Set Nurse," with psychedelic peacock feathers swirling around the curvaceous hospital attendant in question. "Appropriation has always been around," Rubin says, "but Richard is redrawing the lines of demarcation."

Rubin's latest collecting fetish is Japanese streetwear. He recently bought a pair of sneakers designed by Malcolm McLaren and an old Sex Pistols jacket that was "reworked" by Japanese label Uniform Experiment. "They're particularly good at taking something from another culture and making it

better," he says.

The afternoon light has faded and the noise from the street seems suddenly more urgent. "I'm really interested in the tension between the manufactured and the artisanal," says Rubin, who walks into the living room and gazes out the window to Central Park. "All of this stuff that's palpable gets better with age."

Copyright 2011 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our [Subscriber Agreement](#) and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit [www.djreprints.com](http://www.djreprints.com)