STUDIO KO

Karl Fournier and Olivier Marty, the alchemical partnership behind architecture firm Studio KO, take a contextual approach to design projects—including their own Paris apartment.

BY SARAH MEDFORD PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRANÇOIS HALARD

IN THE SUMMER OF 2017, on a dirt road cutting through scrubland around Comporta, Portugal, Karl Fournier, one half of the Paris-based architecture firm Studio KO, hopped out of a rental car to join some real estate bigwigs who were touring the site of a potential resort project. Picking his way through the native *matagal*, he snapped pictures of lichen-topped dunes and pine trees backcombed by the coastal wind.

After a few minutes of small talk, his associate Nabil Afkiri recalls, "Karl turned to the group and said, 'If you really think we are capable of designing anything that would look better than this, you're wrong. So, so wrong.' He was shaking his head. They laughed and said, 'So what would you recommend to do?' And Karl answered, 'We recommend to do nothing. No one has ever built here. It really is untouched land.'"

Stopping a developer in its tracks isn't exactly standard architectural practice, and the episode reveals the sort of rigor mixed with humility and reverence for context that Studio KO brings to each project—not to mention a nervy disregard for industry conventions. Eventually the firm decided to come on board, Afkiri says, because "we knew they were doing something anyway. So we thought, Maybe we can do something good." Studio KO's plan is based on the typology of a beehive, calling for simple, densely grouped structures shaped from local stone and timber and buffered by stretches of untamed landscape, a design that will allow nature to slowly inscribe itself on the built world.

For the past few years, Fournier and his business and life partner, architect Olivier Marty, have been puzzling over how to apply their lofty ideals closer to home, namely an apartment they've been renovating for themselves in Paris's 1st arrondissement. The quirky space, originally a goldsmith's atelier, is on the second floor of a building that dates to the 17th century, and it lacked features worth saving beyond a few ceiling beams. So Fournier, 49, and Marty, 44, went back to the basics of light and volume, looking for ways to evoke what the first occupants might have experienced and baking it into their design, thus echoing an approach they took to the projects that shot them to fame: Chiltern Firehouse, the exuberantly twee Edwardian-style hotel in London's Marylebone district, which opened in 2014 to rapturous reviews, and the vaultlike Yves Saint Laurent Museum in Marrakech, the last project of YSL co-founder Pierre Bergé before his death in 2017. Despite their differences, each is emphatically contextual—intended for its own city, district and block, down to the depth of a staircase riser or the finish on a doorknob.

As they routinely do for clients, the two researched their new neighborhood's colorful past before digging into the specifics of site conditions and solar orientation. Peeling away recent additions—mirrored walls and an aubergine lacquer ceiling, leftovers from a disco-era reboot—they restored east/west exposures and opened up a central fireplace flue, then recast the floor plan to allow for a generous living room and three small bedrooms. Along a wall of windows, they lined up an enfilade of high-functioning spaces and ran faux-marble baseboards typical of certain quarters of pre-Haussmann Paris around the perimeter.

"A lot of people think that being modern is to imagine the future," says Fournier, lounging in the

AHEAD OF THE CURVE
In the Paris apartment of Karl Fournier and Olivier Marty, an undulating concrete wall reshapes the living room, furnished with a de Sede sofa, Louis Sognot rattan chairs and an Allen Ditson & Studio coffee table, all vintage.

MATERIAL WORLD
Clockwise from top left: Vintage pieces in the study; a paneled bedroom wall conceals a door to the master bath; in the kitchen, a wicker fixture illuminates a marble-topped island; the master bath features twin sink areas separated by a shower. Opposite: Marty (left) and Fournier.

living room on a dunelike '70s sofa from the Swiss company de Sede. "And to try and bring the future in nowadays. Lots of designers work in that direction. We are exactly the opposite. We look back, in the other direction. And what is still relevant and appropriate, we use it and bring it forward. That is the way we want to be modern. The interest in the past and vintage things—nobody saw that coming. It's a kind of refuge, now, the past. To bring things from the past to nowadays is what we love."

"Being modern is not being '*moderneux*'—having the modern gestures," adds Marty, the darker-haired and more loquacious of the pair, as he tugs open a gray linen curtain. "You can look classical and be modern—or just the opposite. It should never be just a facade—it's much deeper than that. It's more an attitude than a look."

STUDIO KO, which Fournier and Marty established in 2000 when they were just out of architecture school, has been praised for its narrative-driven design. But narrative takes you only so far, and the pair have never defined themselves too rigidly.

"Their work is like jumping into a movie, a scenario," says Antoine Ricardou, founder and creative director of the French branding studio be-poles and a frequent Studio KO collaborator. Together they've worked on branding a series of Paris restaurants with chef Cyril Lignac (Aux Prés, Le Bar des Prés, Le Quinzième) that are rooted in place but never chained to a single era. "For me, there is no performance there," Ricardou explains. "That's why the Musée Saint Laurent is timeless—it's not about design, it's right in line with the original architecture and materials of Marrakech. And it's not about a performance, either."

Morocco has been a kind of career drawing board for Fournier and Marty, the site of their first cafe, house, hotel, museum and office tower, now underway in Casablanca. They made their initial visit in 1996, as freshmen in the architecture program at Paris's École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts. Marty remembers thinking, "It's so primal and ancient and something so strong that anywhere you go, you say, 'Oh, my God, this is who we are.'" They were blown away by the preponderance of handcraft, its quality and the dedication of its artisans. The experience left an indelible impression. Today, every Studio KO project, regardless of its location, makes use of vernacular craft.

After getting their hands dirty on a few renovation projects in Marrakech, the pair designed a getaway for a global nomad in the foothills of the Atlas Mountains. More an object in the landscape than a rational exercise in modernism of the sort they'd gravitated to in school, Villa D was austere to the point of privation. Other houses followed, for increasingly well-padded clients; Fournier remembers one asking for a home "to make me forget that I'm rich." The request jibed perfectly with Studio KO's preferred building materials of rough-cut stone and rammed earth, lime plaster, unfinished wood and polished black cement.

The contrarian splendor of the villas was revelatory. (Marty characterizes them as "anti-slick.") Plainspoken in the most luxurious of ways, they also somehow seemed empty and full, ancient and new, closed and open, dark and light. In the minds of their young designers, the contrasts were meant to provoke self-reflection.

"There's a great poetry there—it's hard to capture with photography," says garden designer Madison Cox, president of the Pierre Bergé–Yves Saint Laurent Foundation and Bergé's widower, of Studio KO's work in Morocco. Cox was an unseen hand guiding the YSL Museum project during his husband's final illness. "They have a very literary side, a very cerebral side. You never hear them say, 'There's a tendency now....' They do their own thing. They are passionate about music, literature, photography, artists—it's just a very different approach to design and architecture."

Cox draws a distinction between Studio KO's evident versatility and a deeper, more holistic embrace of culture and place. "You can be versatile to produce whatever the client wants," he says. "They are receptive and sensitive." These qualities, he adds, are what the late Marella Agnelli first latched onto back in 2006, when she spotted their lush revival of the Grand Café de la Poste in Marrakech and handed them the renovation of her house in the Palmeraie, which opened doors for them all over town. "She used to call them the *bambini*—the boys," Cox says.

In their denim shirts and Adidas, the two still come across that way, even as they dip into middle age. Both are children of "left intellectual revolutionaries," Marty says, though he grew up in Paris and Fournier in the north of France and on Corsica. Both endured a certain lack of visual stimulation as kids, and they've attributed their success, and the spark between them, to these similarities. While the overlaps might explain a few things—the precision the partners apply to their work, a lack of bias toward materials cheap or fine—they don't account for their gifts: Fournier's conceptual boldness and eye for objects, Marty's ultrafluid drawing style and sharp business sense.

One of the future challenges Studio KO has set for itself is to broker a marriage between the narrative esprit of its interior design work ("the super party places," as Marty calls Chiltern Firehouse and the like) and the sculptural force of its architecture. "To mix this experience of giving life to a place with this architectural language we have," Marty says—"we're trying that in some projects."

Exhibit A is the new apartment. Fournier and Marty's living room straddles a pedestrian passage that leads to the back of the Palais-Royal, where aristocrats bedded down for centuries a stone's throw from the Louvre. The *L*-shaped unit borders several historic streets. "We call it like Marie Antoinette would—the L Montpensier, the L Richelieu," says Marty. "It was impressive, but it needed an architect. Actually, no one wanted to buy it."

Before moving in, the couple lived for a decade in Bagnolet, a hard-edged eastern suburb where they colonized the ground floor of a former factory building. But when they made the decision to adopt a child, their priorities shifted away from ascetic chill toward walls, preschools and a more central location. By the time their son arrived in 2018, at the age of 20 months, his bedroom was ready, even if the rest of the apartment wasn't. The project was put on hold while they got to know the neighborhood (the toddler's first playground was the field of black-and-white Daniel Buren sculptures dotting the Palais-Royal's Cour d'Honneur).

For almost every project, Fournier and Marty make a corresponding scent with their friend Azzi Glasser, a London perfumer. Their tiny holiday house in Corsica smells of beeswax and honey. The new apartment doesn't have a signature aroma yet, Fournier says, but the prevailing notes are woodsmoke and Johnson's Baby Lotion. It's a measure of paternal love that baby lotion gets equal billing.

In the living room, Fournier dreamed up a fireplace

to end all fireplaces, hollowed out of an undulating wall of board-formed concrete. (Fireplaces are a Studio KO obsession, as are swimming pools and staircases, constructions that can deepen the experience of place through touch, sound and smell—and free of any time stamp.) "It's an architecture," he says of the wavelike structure, which seems alternately futuristic, Corbusian and as if it might be some newly unearthed Baroque-era artifact. Tucked just behind the living room in the couple's bedroom, a concave wall of vertically lapped oak panels runs up to the ceiling. It hides a pair of doors to the master bath and answers the fireplace curve, forming neat parentheses around the dimly lit chamber. And it was a real headache to build.

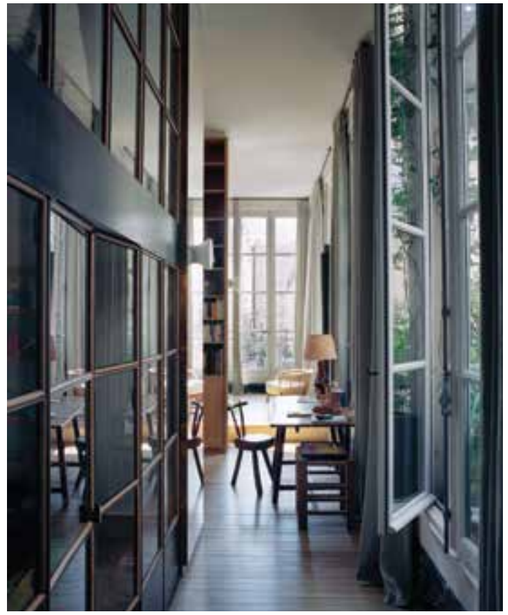
"This was absolutely not the plan," Fournier says of the arcing wall, which reclaims a bit of space for the bedroom from the bathroom just behind it. "One weekend during construction I came here by myself, and a new plan arrived in my head. On Monday morning, I called the contractor—he was really upset with me."

Marty drills a look into Fournier's pale blue eyes and says, "Which we never do for clients. And we'll never do it again."

Such flare-ups between the two are routine. "Around the table, Karl tells you, 'I wanted to do this, but Olivier told me he hates it,'" says Ricardou. "They talk like that. It's really something."

"When you're a pair, it means that you're open to listening to a discussion," says Cox diplomatically. "It's not just an imperial edict from one. When one's feeling a little less convinced, the other comes in."

The crook of the elbow-shaped apartment holds the kitchen, a cubical room with figured marble countertops, gleaming birchwood cabinetry and brass trim. The combination could read as maritime France or Vienna 1900; Marty sees something else. "It's funny, because the birch becomes very rich, even though it's a very poor wood—I feel like I am in Sue Ellen's kitchen sometimes," he says. Sue Ellen? "Sue Ellen from *Dallas*," Fournier explains with a deadpan smile.



Associations like these layer up quickly in a Studio KO interior. The floor is oak parquet, but not the noble parquet de Versailles that riddles the apartments of the Palais-Royal. Instead, Marty designed a pattern based on a "super-poor American parquet" he'd admired in a Venice, California, hotel room a few years ago. Rustic wood tables and chairs recall pieces that might have furnished the original goldsmith's workshop and were chosen by Fournier, who loves to skim the local flea markets on weekends. Marty favors transparency and glass, and with that in mind Fournier has designed a dining table with a glass top and mirrored glass legs that become more transparent as they ascend. It's still in construction and will be part of a small furnishings collection Studio KO sells online. Until it arrives, the couple are using a '60s piece by Jean Touret with a hand-chiseled top; it's just the kind of crafty, high-touch object that resonates with them now, in the same vein as the African sculpture they have begun to collect, a leaf-shaped wall sconce by the French metalsmith Jacques Duval-Brasseur or a pair of rattan easy chairs that their Marrakech patroness Marella Agnelli might have loved.

The leather sofa snaking through the living room is a different story altogether. Marty chose it to accommodate the multitude of friends stopping by to visit the new family, and though Fournier resisted it for months, he finally acknowledges the object's comfort and practicality. To counter its gargantuan scale, he's sprinkled small stools and sculpture around it like shrubbery. They also help to defuse its aura of high-'70s swingerdom, an association that Marty brushes away. "It has nothing to do with anything," he says of the apartment and its collective contents. "It's very simple. No style or period. It's just the way we wanted to live, coming from the context of the space."

Now that Studio KO has reached its 20th anniversary and a son is in the picture, Fournier and Marty are in the midst of an evolution, steering the firm toward slower-to-gestate architectural jobs with a built-in design component. A major Paris hotel project involving the renovation and restoration of several historic Left Bank buildings is underway with French investors Sophie and Stéphane Uzan. There are also commercial and cultural ventures around the Mediterranean basin, including the Comporta hotel and a museum for Provençal costume, in Arles; a London restaurant, Folie, opening later this month in Soho; and private homes from Hong Kong to the Caribbean.

The projects add up to an enviable list. Studio KO is turning down most new proposals that come its way, despite the fact that it has grown to a staff of 35 in Paris and another 20 in the Marrakech office, which opened in 2001. Until recently, Paris was the smaller of the two, but the success of the YSL Museum has vaulted the firm into the stratosphere. In 2018, it was honored with the Grand Prix AFEX, given to projects by French architects working outside France, alongside Jean Nouvel, who took the jury prize the same year. The award was especially meaningful because Nouvel's empyrean arguments for architecture as a dialogue with place—temporary transformation rather than wholesale invention—have resonated with Fournier and Marty since their student days.

Through it all, the pair still seem to be cramming for some not-so-distant exam. They avoid the party circuit, and their digital presence is slight. Ricardou says of the Studio KO website, which opens with a display of the date and a sequence of unrelated images over a portentous soundtrack (thunderstorm, knock on the door, ringing telephone), "It's like a nonsense way to look at their projects. But they don't mind."

He sees the partners as a dynamic, if reticent, influence on post-celebrity design culture. "In the past, it was, 'I'm going to this restaurant because it's about this chef or this designer,'" Ricardou explains. "Today, people talk about this glass, or this cocktail napkin they are holding or whatever." The focus has swiveled from creator to client. "I'm sure this [celebrity] idea is finished. We're talking about experience and narrative. What is the story?"

Studio KO attempts to write a new one with every commission. "We always try to go into unknown territories," says Afkiri, a 14-year veteran of the firm who now oversees the Paris office. "And when we go, we try to bring the clients along with us." Also in the mix are the artisans whose inherited traditions have so eloquently informed much of Studio KO's thinking.

The end of the year is traditionally a chance for a design firm to show off its flashiest new work in the form of a holiday mailing. For the past decade, Studio KO has sent out a poster of "a person who counts," as Marty puts it—from Bergé and Senegalese activist Marie-Angélique Savané to French pop star Camélia Jordana. One side always shows an intimate black-and-white portrait of the subject taken by their friend Jérôme Schlomoff. On the other, just a photo credit, the date and two words: "Happy Together." •

TEST PATTERNS
In the TV room, a distressed mirror echoes velvet sofa fabric from Mulberry Home; wall sconce by Jacques Duval-Brasseur and vintage table and lamp. Opposite: An enfilade of rooms culminates in a view over rue de Beaujolais.