



Case Study

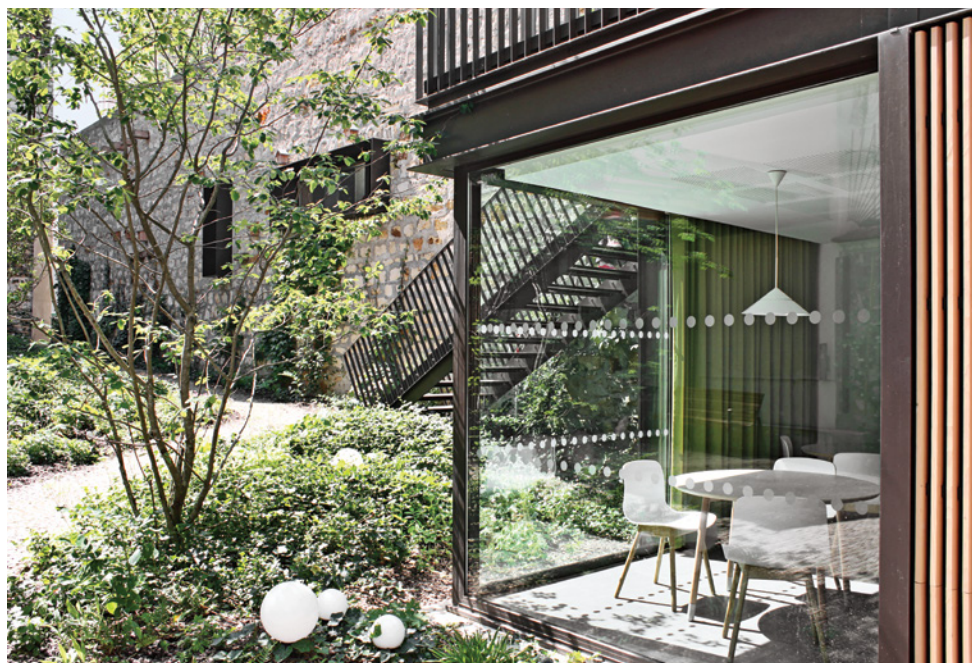
A Parisian architect calls on a domestic archetype from California to design a forward-thinking group home in the 20th arrondissement.



TEXT BY
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PROJECT
Unité de Vie
ARCHITECT
Damien Brambilla
damienbrambilla.com
LOCATION
Paris, France

Architect Damien Brambilla turned a run-down Paris apartment building into an open, bright adolescent group home with a landscaped garden. A common space features Hee Welling's About a Chair 12 for Hay and a Stick round table by Valsecchi 1918 (right).



PHOTOS COURTESY DAMIEN BRAMBILLA ARCHITECTE



A group home, essentially an orphanage

for teenagers, may not have been Damien Brambilla's dream commission. The budget was tight, the bureaucracy heavy, the room to design something radical—or even just artful—more or less nonexistent. But where others would see a headache, Brambilla, a Paris-based architect, saw an opportunity to change what this type of building can mean to its occupants—in this case, a dozen adolescents under the care of the city government. Some had lost both parents; some had been removed from parental care by the state. Brambilla explains that he wanted them to feel “*chez soi*,” at home, returned somehow to “the house they no longer have or one they never even knew.”

He took a derelict apartment building with an overgrown garden in the Belleville section of northeastern Paris, gutted it to the foundation, and added an extension that doubled the original square footage.

On the street side, he restored the typically Parisian facade, but indoors it's a different world, all glass, lacquered metal, and sleek wood. Brambilla's reference point was not French—much less Parisian—but rather Californian: the revolutionary midcentury Case Study Houses, which emphasized structural lightness and a breezy continuity between indoors and out.

The project, completed early last year, was not without its challenges. The narrow lot, accessible via a tiny, sloping street, offers little room to bring in heavy materials. “We needed to use easily transportable equipment and a minimum of concrete, reserving it for the foundations and the construction of the flooring,” Brambilla says. But he enjoyed luxuries not usually available for such projects, including a generous budget (2.6 million euros, or \$2.9 million), furnished by the French government, that allowed him to acquire >



The bedrooms are furnished with Overtime desks by Stina Sandwall for Abstracta, Jim beds by File Dans Ta Chambre, and DLM tables by Thomas Bentzen for Hay (left). The About a Chair 22 seats by Hee Welling are covered with cushions upholstered in fabric

from Kvadrat—a different shade for each room. Brambilla designed and crafted the built-in bookcase in a common area from laminated red birch (above). He spruced up and modernized the facade without sacrificing any of its period charm (below).



Brambilla used part of the \$2.9 million budget to acquire pieces from Hay, including Hee barstools by Hee Welling that are lined up by a long bar in a common area (right). A lounge is furnished with a Mags Soft sofa, an Ella coffee table, and a pair of Ray Lounge Chairs by Foersom Hiort-Lorenzen, all from Hay, and a Wow ottoman and tabletop by Pedrali.



“It was rewarding to communicate directly with the future residents and learn what worked.”
—Damien Brambilla, architect

quality furniture, including Hay chairs and Abstracta desks.

At 250 square feet, the shared bedrooms are smart and airy, despite their small size. But Brambilla tried to create spaces that would encourage common living: from a long kitchen bar, where residents can eat and socialize, to a covered terrace and a peaceful garden, filled with shade-loving varietals that bloom year-round. That “*jardin romantique*,” designed by the Paris-based landscape architecture firm Atelier Roberta, is both the “heart and the lungs” of the house, Brambilla says.

In drawing up the plans, the architect consciously included a safe outdoor space as an antidote to the potentially claustrophobic dormitory rooms. “I’m maybe a bit naive to think that this garden and the sensitive interior space will have the capacity to soften the sometimes difficult daily lives of the adolescents that live here,” says Brambilla, “but that was nevertheless my underlying intention.” □