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In Conversation with Christiane Schmuckle-Mollard: Winner of 2018 WMF/Knoll Modernism Prize

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Architect Christiane Schmuckle-Mollard has worked with a diverse group of impressive structures during her nearly 40-year career in historic restoration. From Gallo-Roman archaeological sites to seventeenth-century chateaus; from fifteenth-century convents to twentieth-century concert halls. But she says her approach to architecture is always the same. “High quality historical buildings

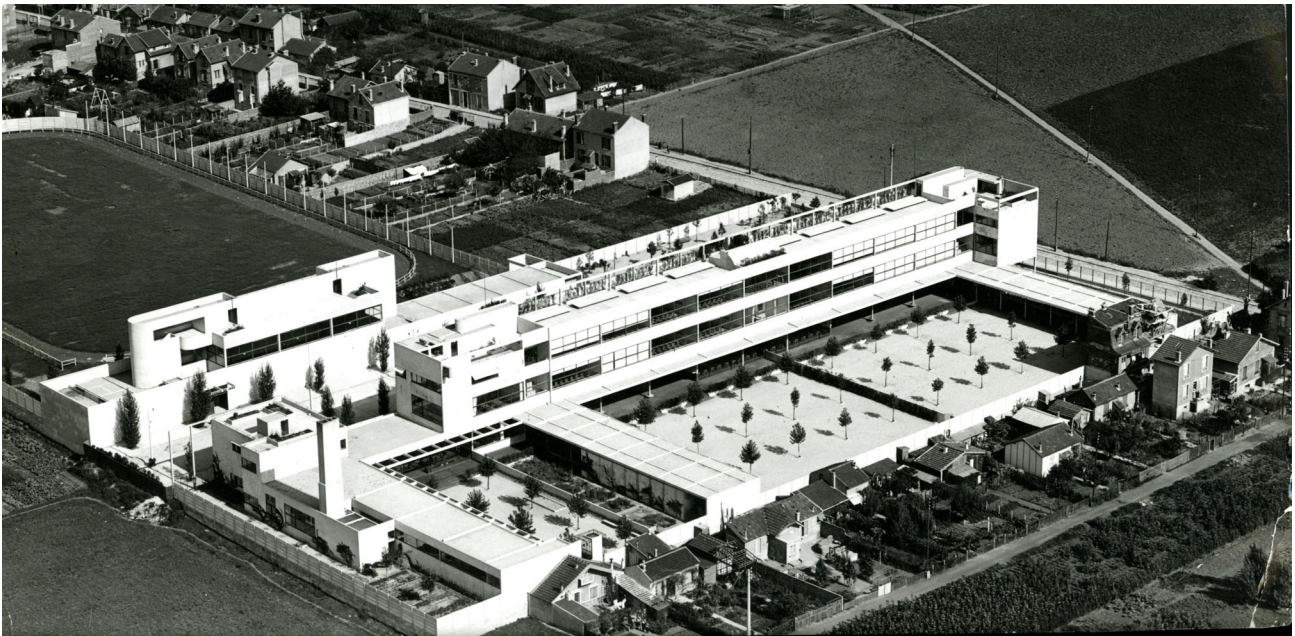
require high quality restoration and sensitive modern interventions equally for all elements of the project, regardless of the age of the building and its materials,” said Schmuckle-Mollard during a recent interview from Paris, France. “Modernizations, additions, or creation of new spaces need to be treated in dialogue and not in competition with what exists.”

Because of this strategic approach as applied to the Karl Marx School in Villejuif, France, Schmuckle-Mollard has been awarded the 2018 Knoll/WMF Modernism Prize. Now in its tenth year, the biennial prize recognizes architects or designers who have demonstrated innovative solutions to preserve or save threatened modern architecture.



Designed and constructed by French architect André Lurçat in a communist Paris suburb, the Karl Marx School was celebrated and described as “the most beautiful school in France” upon its inauguration in 1933. Designed according to functionalist principles that emphasized the logic and simplicity of the forms, Lurçat’s design draws attention to the buildings’ clarity by maximizing the contributions of natural light.

By the 1990s, though continuously occupied by various schools, the poorly maintained complex was in danger of being lost. In 1996, the Karl Marx School was listed as a National Historical Monument in France, bringing new resources to undertake a restoration that would preserve the integrity of the structures while adapting them to new regulations.



Schmuckle-Mollard first became involved with the Karl Marx School restoration project when the Ministry of Culture commissioned a feasibility study. At the time, she was the chief architect for all 1st class listed buildings in Val-de-Marne, and was familiar with the complex from her work consulting on the restoration of two of Lurçat's private houses. Schmuckle-Mollard recalls being astonished upon seeing the complex in person for the first time.

"I was surprised by the authenticity of the buildings. They had not been much modified with exception of the window frames that Lurçat had changed himself in the 1950s, and one of the open-air covered play areas that had been closed. I could easily imagine the original beauty of the building after exterior cleaning and minimal restoration work."

The project that followed included seven years of research and three years of physical restoration, including addressing exterior wall cracks, conserving interior ceramic sandstone tiles, and resealing the structures' windows. It also required design and construction of a new wing to accommodate the demands of the present-day school. Schmuckle-Mollard said the extension was the most challenging part of the decade-long project. Ultimately, she said, the high design quality of Lurçat's masterpiece was both a constraint and inspiration for the final solution: a long glass box that slips under a protective canopy.

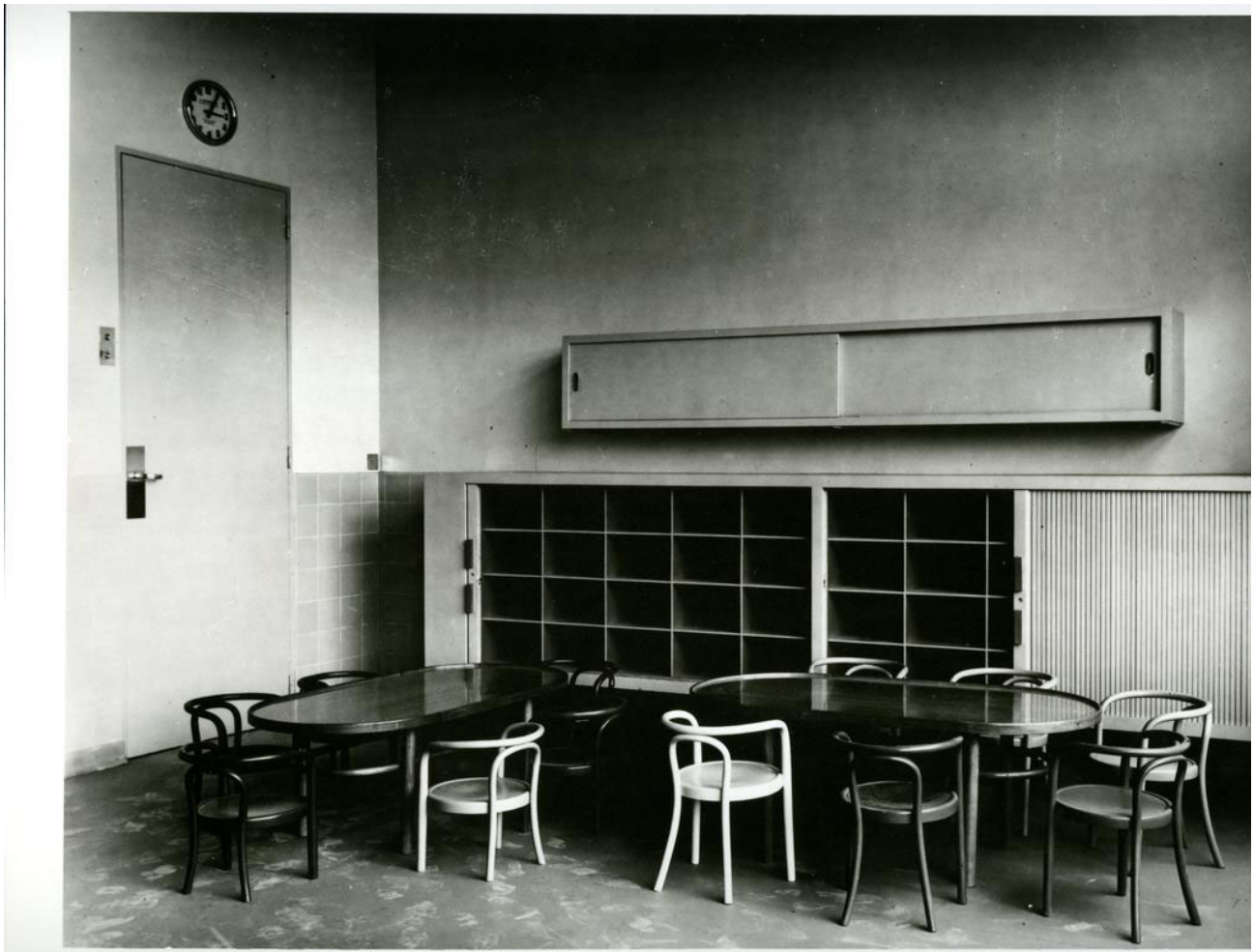


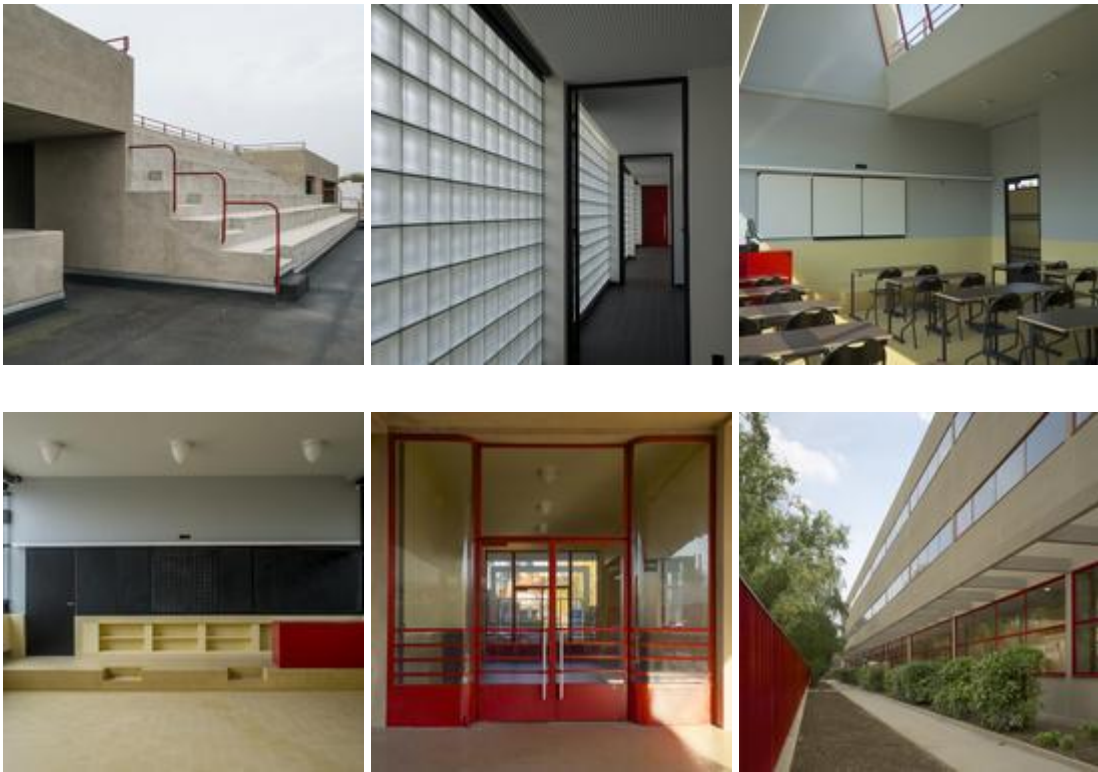
Following completion and reopening, Schmuckle-Mollard said the restoration of the Karl Marx School has had an unexpected social impact. Students are enjoying their restored and reimagined spaces, and teachers have developed increased interest in the social relevance of architecture. Some are even organizing class excursions to the Fondation Le Corbusier.

“The success of Lurçat’s design should teach us that school buildings can be much more than just functional,” said Schmuckle-Mollard. “The change of behavior of the students at the Karl Marx School before and after the restoration shows us how much architectural quality and beauty impact the well-being of its users, and how it can positively inspire respect, a keystone for social work at schools.”



In general, Schmuckle-Mollard believes education and awareness should be at the center of the fight for the preservation of modern masterpieces around the world. “Modern architecture is the first architecture that was really conceived for post-industrial modern men and women,” she said. “We are not different from the men and women of that time, but our architecture has lost many qualities that theirs had. We need to preserve the best examples for the future.”





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