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The Cité Internationale Universitaire de Paris is an academic village of ideas and interrelations on a global scale. Monocle attends campus to find out what happens when countries come together in the classroom.

SCHOOL OF LIFE

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LESSONS TO BE LEARNED

In the south of Paris, butting up against the city's busy Boulevard Périphérique, sits a collection of 40 buildings that represents one of the world's longest-lasting experiments in the art of international co-operation. Nations as diverse as Lebanon, Cambodia, Brazil and Denmark are gathered here, presenting exhibitions, film screenings and lecture series driven by a mission of peace, diversity and global sustainability. But you'll find far more than busy event spaces: you'll also find thousands of dorm rooms.

This is the Cité Internationale Universitaire de Paris – or the Cité for short. It's a global education village that each year is home to 12,000 students (mostly master's and PHD level) from 140 countries, attending an assortment of prestigious Parisian universities. Inaugurated in 1925, it has become a kind of international garden city and permanent World Expo rolled into one, set around a vast public park and blessed with some grade-A architecture. As you walk down the quiet avenues the variety immediately strikes you: the Greeks have their Ionic columns; the Tunisians adorn their exterior with bright orange Islamic calligraphy; the Italians hark back to the 15th century with loggias and arcades; and the Mexican house boasts a vast Mayan-inspired fresco above one entrance. It's a medley that's also reflected in the students who pass by: an American trekking to India with a stack of library books or a Dutch student bound for lunch courtesy of Spain.

It was the vision of André Honnorat, a French government minister of higher education and fine arts, who imagined a utopian village dedicated to international kinship and peace; the Cité Internationale's foundation just after the First World War was no fluke. To Honnorat this would be the place where a new world order could begin to take root and tomorrow's world leaders could be trained, taking with them a sense of cross-cultural co-operation via cohabitation.

There have been leaders aplenty since. Among the Cité's alumni: Léopold Sédar Senghor and Abdou Diouf, the first two presidents of Senegal; Jacques Santer, former prime minister of Luxembourg; Habib Bourguiba, the first president of Tunisia; and Pierre Elliott Trudeau, former prime minister of Canada. That's not to mention a healthy list of celebrated diplomats, painters, musicians, writers and Nobel Laureates.

The integration of different nationalities is by decree. In two waves, after each world war, national houses were constructed, largely funded in the first case by wealthy philanthropists and in the latter by governments. Accepting students mainly from their own countries, the national houses in the Cité then swap a minimum of 30 per cent of their students with other residences. On top of this a live-in director – always of the nationality of the house they run – manages each residence. As a result, each one maintains a national culture but is home to students from up to 60 countries.

"When I think of the Cité Universitaire I think it is a kind of miracle," says Maria Gravari-Barbas – director of the Fondation Hellénique, the national house of Greece – from behind her leather-topped wooden desk; it's one of the original pieces of bespoke furniture from the foundation's opening in 1932. "It's the only one of its kind in the world," she adds, proud that it has maintained an everyday relevance.

When the Greek debt crisis hit in 2009, the Fondation Hellénique became a place where students from around the Cité would come to hear the full story beyond what the press had to say. "Let's say the Greeks don't always agree with the official European line and the way things were represented," says Gravari-Barbas. Likewise, throughout the Jasmine revolution in Tunisia and in the aftermath of the Tohoku earthquake that devastated Japan, national houses on campus became magnets for people wanting to discuss, debate and support.

The Cité's administration vehemently backs this cohesive approach (it has just staged a three-day Cité-wide event focusing on global peace) and has a track record of action and activism. Last autumn it accepted 18 refugee students from Syria thanks in part to a Cité-organised "solidarity concert" fundraiser and external donors. Kahtan Alharbat is one of those students, arriving in March from his hometown of Daraa near the Jordanian border. Alharbat now lives in the Maison des Étudiants Canadiens, continuing his study of maths at the Pierre and Marie Curie University. "[In Syria] we were given the choice between Bashar al-Assad and Daesh – and the Syrians chose the sea," he says, adding that because of the Cité he "was lucky enough not to have to swim".

This isn't the first time that a refugee crisis has shaped the make-up of the Cité Universitaire. In 1930 the Armenia house was ostensibly opened as a home for intellectuals forced from their country during and after the genocide of its people a decade earlier, and as a meeting place for the diaspora from around the world. Built by the Istanbul-born French architect Léon Nafilyan in a stately Armenia style, it stands as a monument to the kind of sanctuary the Cité intends to be. "This is possibly the best environment for a student," says Alharbat. "The Cité Universitaire shows that everyone can live together – we can have fun together, we can study together."

Yet idyllic as the Cité may seem today, and however noble its mission, it cannot claim an entirely spotless history. In 1969 Iran opened its house (the most recent to be constructed on the campus), a distinctly tall and modernist structure funded by the Shah – a gift to his wife, who he met at a Cité-organised reception while she was living in the Dutch house. Quickly, however, the Maison d'Iran became a hotbed of opposition to the régime and the Shah cut off funding in 1972.

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ΑΙΣΧΥΛΟΣ
ΣΟΦΟΚΛΗΣ
ΣΟΛΩΝ
FONDATION HELLENIQUE
UNIVERSITÉ DE PARIS

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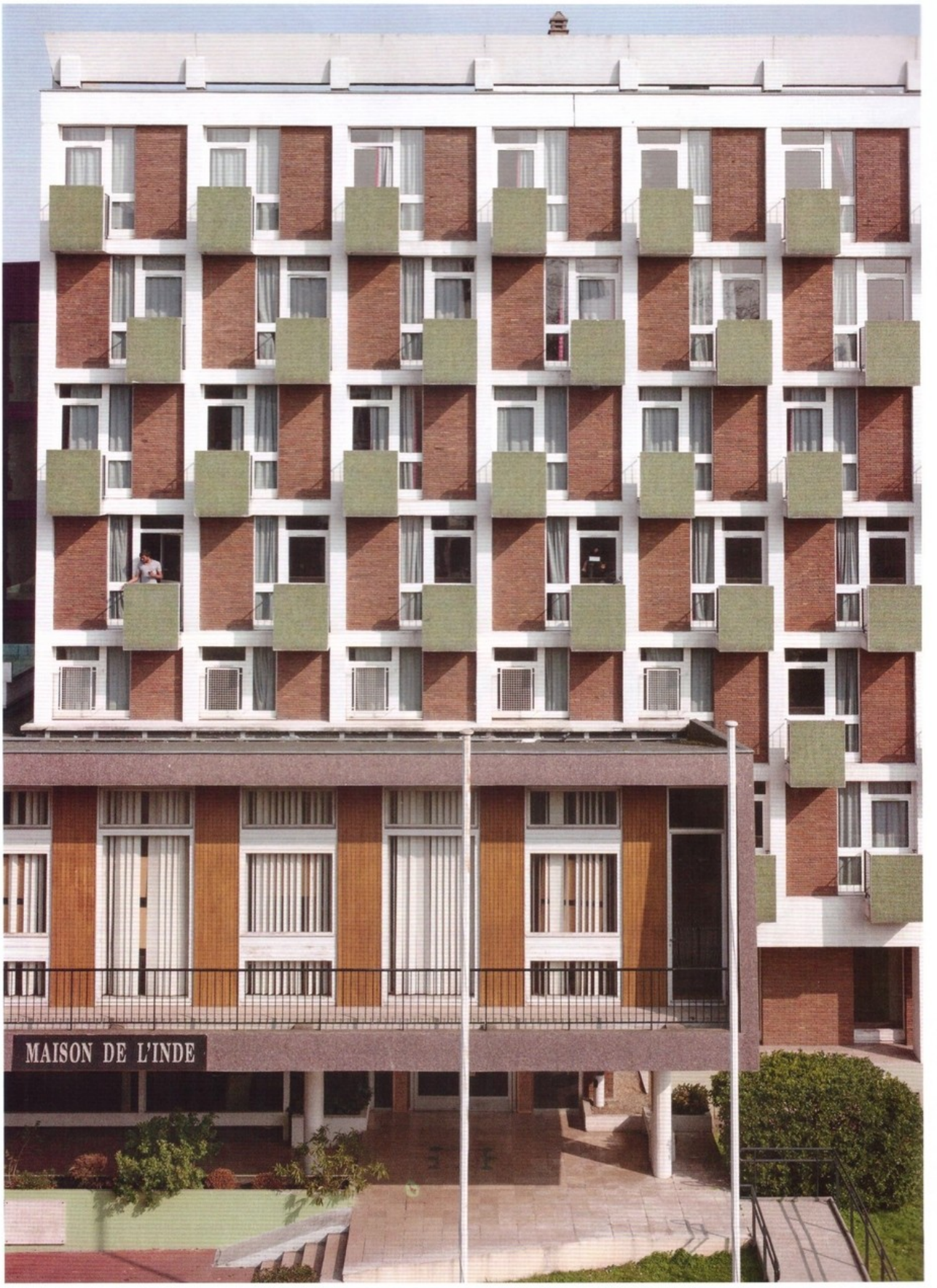

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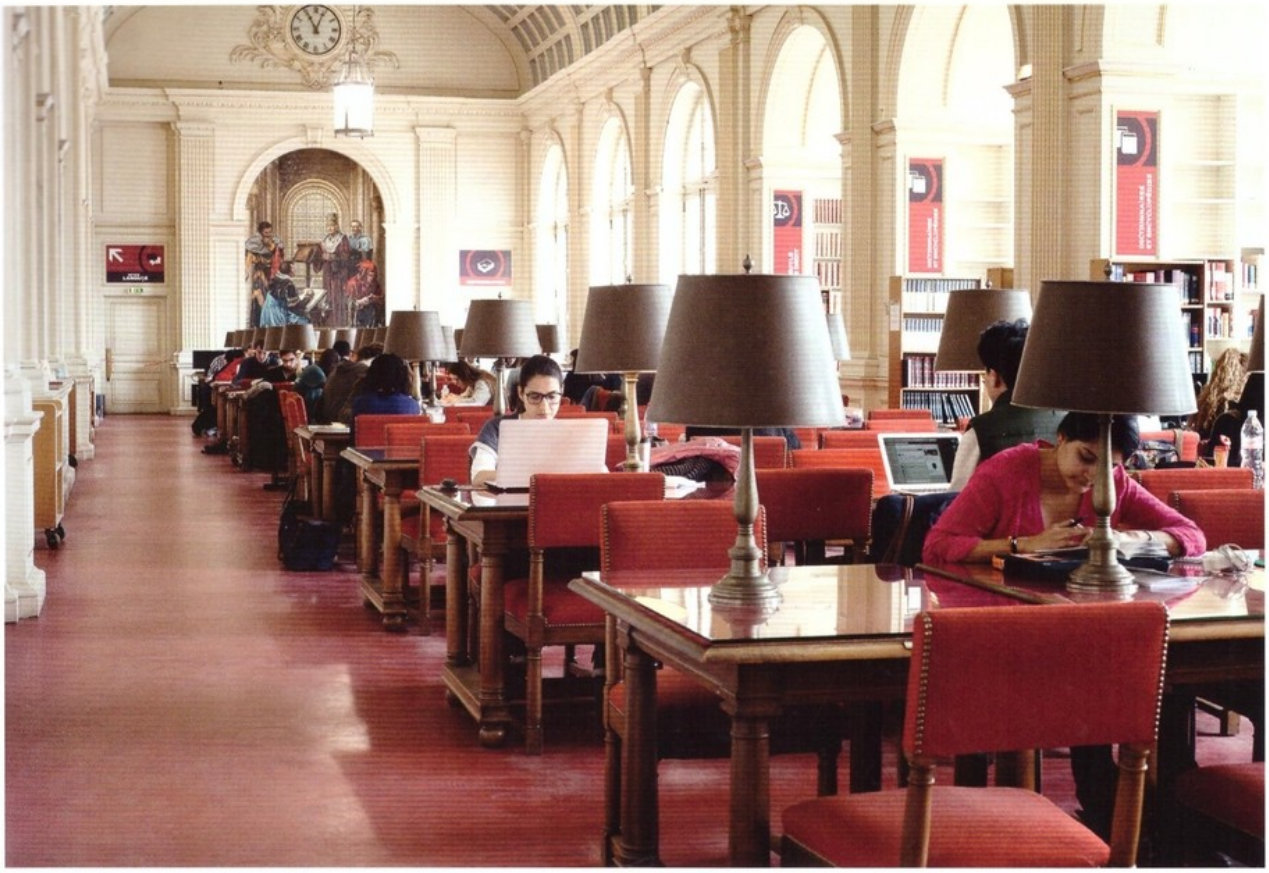

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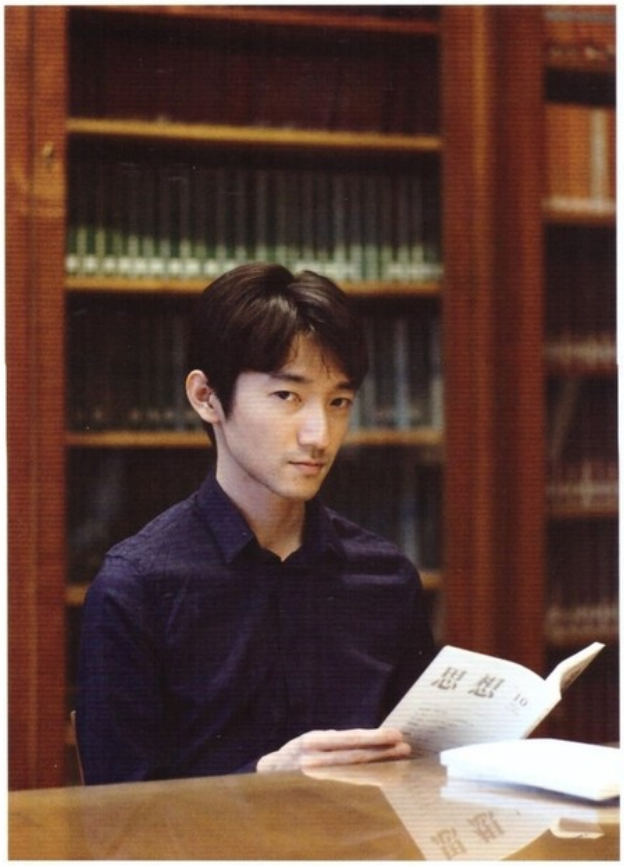

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More dramatic still was an incident in 1973. That year the Cambodian house was closed after violence erupted between students on either side of that country's civil war, which had begun six years before. One student was killed and the house remained out of use for more than 30 years, reopening only in 2003. Today the Cité offers multilingual services, including psychologists, to help its students adjust to the cultural shift of living in France – or even living with their own countrymen.

Not entirely unexpectedly, the financial and soft-power hierarchy of nations is also apparent here at times. While Swiss students enjoy a heritage-listed Le Corbusier building that accommodates 45 people, Moroccans endure a vast and increasingly institutional residence that squeezes in over 220. Where once you found a restaurant and a hamam at the Maison du Maroc, you now find offices and a computer room.

There are a few houses that truly seem to have the architectural and social model right and for the most part they are the likely suspects, with Sweden, Denmark and Germany among them. The Swedes have mastered communal life, fostered a strong familial atmosphere and keep a perky disposition – one certainly reflected in, if not a result of, its director Åsa Ekwall. An alumna of the Cité herself, she's known to occasionally bake *kanelbulle* for the students.

The Maison des Étudiants Suédois, with its Swedish-blue shutters, was designed to resemble an 18th-century manor house and is the smallest of all residences at the Cité with 43 rooms. Importantly each floor centres on a comfortable and cosy shared living room, with space to relax and a decent sized kitchen – not a stale and generic common room. "We are the first to say how lucky we are," says resident Sofia Lisboa (from Portugal, if you hadn't guessed). "People envy us."

Across the cul-de-sac at the Maison Danoise, director Marius Hansteen – who also happens to be Denmark's cultural attaché in France – has recently overseen a renovation funded in part by the Maersk Foundation. His country's design strength takes centre stage: bespoke furniture by Kaj Gottlob (the original architect) is paired with copper Poul Henningsen lamps and Hans J Wegner chairs. The bedroom furniture is a Bouroullec brothers design for Hay, something that might seem an extravagance to the financiers at other houses. Where every house has a piano, Denmark has two, as well as a large kitchen with built-in speakers, disco lights and Carlsberg – clearly not a space designed for the mere enjoyment of *smørrebrød*.

The good news is that not all the good stuff at the Cité is exclusively reserved for residents. Events throughout the campus are open to the outside world (a group of local regulars are known to make the rounds) and there is a long list of public facilities. In the Cité's main building, the Maison Internationale (built with a donation from John D Rockefeller), are a busy pool and café. There's also a dedicated sports building, with taekwondo and fencing, as well as outdoor basketball courts and football pitches (the Cité hosts its own tournaments). The Germans, whose house is named after the 19th-century poet Heinrich Heine, open both their library and their restaurant to the public; currywurst is always on the menu.

List of plates

01 Germany's building, the Maison Heinrich Heine was opened in 1956
02 The Fondation Hellénique, complete with Ionic columns
03 The Stavros Niarchos Foundation paid for a 2007 renovation of the Fondation Hellénique's main common room
04 Cité's indoor pool
05 Inside the Johannes Krahn-designed Maison Heinrich Heine
06 Fondation Deutsch de la Meurthe, the first to open at the Cité
07 On guard: the Espace Sud is a dedicated sports facility
08 Maison de l'Inde
09 Hard at work in the Cité's library
10 South-East Asia House
11 The Fondation Lucien Paye, which mainly serves students from sub-Saharan Africa
12 The look of the Maison Internationale was inspired by Fontainebleau Castle
13 Staircase leading up to the bedrooms at the Fondation Danoise
14 Carine Camby has been managing director at the Cité since 2010
15 The houses sit on several long avenues
16 Portrait of Mary, crown princess of Denmark
17 The murals on the walls of the common room at the Fondation Danoise were painted by Kraesten Iversen
18 The Maison d'Iran has remained largely empty since the Shah cut off funding in 1972
19 Student in the library at Japan's house, the Maison du Japon
20 Canadian student living at the Swedish house
21 Student in the Maison Mexique library
22 Maria Gravari-Barbas, director of the Fondation Hellénique
23 The library at Maison Heinrich Heine has a broad selection of German and French magazines and newspapers

Keeping tab on what works and what doesn't here on campus isn't just of interest to residents and the administration. Examining what the Cité has to offer is a group of Danes who are led by Jorgen Rossen, an 86-year-old property developer and alumnus who lived at Japan house. He and his team are creeping ever closer to replicating the model of the Cité in Copenhagen, with room for up to 5,000 students.

Even in Paris the project is a work in progress. For the first time in decades there are cranes on site, a sure sign that expansion is afoot. Building work is underway on the Maison Île de France, the South Koreans should be breaking ground this year and the Cité administration is busy pursuing the Chinese and the Russians. There is space set aside for a total of 10 new houses – and let's hope they feel more like Sweden than they do Morocco. The true success of the Cité isn't necessarily in its grand gestures but in its moments of true communal living and the individual experiences that are taken from it – Honnorat's aim, after all, was to socialise. — (M)