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TEXT NICOLAI OUROUSSOFF  
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In this sinuous villa on a hill in upstate New York, boundaries between private and public spaces are blurred, and the layout twists and turns in unexpected ways to create a startlingly modern yet calm interior

# *TWIST IN THE WIND*



ew architects today have the finesse of Ben van Berkel. Working with his partner, Caroline Bos, the 50-year-old Amsterdam native has become one of a handful of designers who, driven by a fascination with new computer-age technologies, has an approach with a touch of the prophetic. Of all of them, he has so far come closest to fulfilling the dream of a truly elastic environment, one in which the boundaries between work and play, private and public life, have all but melted away.

The ViLLA NM – a weekend house for a Russian client in New York State, and the first project Ben’s firm, UNStudio, has completed in the US – conjures up a tornado of images: Hudson River School paintings, garish Las Vegas casinos, Seventies kitsch and Russian fairy tales. Somehow Ben has fused these images into a coherent architectural vision, one that allows the mind to drift through different worlds without ever becoming unhinged.

The client helped. A short, wiry man with penetrating eyes, Leo Tsimmer grew up in Sverdlovsk (now Yekaterinburg), a grim industrial wasteland at the base of the Ural Mountains. He brings to mind the kind of maverick spirit that once defined the American West: a healthy willingness to take risks coupled with a disdain for the values of the crusty old-world establishment.

Before the fall of the Soviet Union, Leo moved to Moscow, where he quickly joined a new breed of scrappy capitalists then reshaping Russia. He organised Moscow’s first rave and opened a chain of American-style doughnut shops. Eventually, he made his way to the US, where he expanded his business empire by exporting produce such as frozen chickens to Russia at a time when grocery shelves were often bare. ‘I’m a hard-core capitalist,’ Leo says. ‘But I still believe in socialism as a Utopia. I just don’t know anyone who can get us there.’

Like any upwardly mobile New Yorker, Leo soon began thinking about building a country house for himself, his wife, Angelika Lee, and their two children. He found a 13-acre plot in a quiet corner of Sullivan County, a two-hour drive from the city, and a few months later he spotted a model of Ben’s Mobius House while wandering through a show of modern houses at the Museum of Modern Art.

‘I didn’t know much about modern architecture then, but I loved the house,’ Leo remembers. ‘I called the architect’s office in Amsterdam and asked for a meeting.’ For his part, Ben still seems slightly shocked at the no-nonsense nature of their first encounter: ‘We met at a hotel bar, and we started to play with the idea of a Russian dacha. He gave me a cheque on the spot. He was an unusual client, super open minded and not afraid to experiment.’

With a little imagination, in fact, you can picture the house in the Russian countryside. To get to it, you drive through rolling hills with the occasional barn and cheap bungalows clad in vinyl siding. Eventually, you turn on to a bumpy track that winds up to the top of a hill through pine and birch trees with a view of undulating mountains.

The ViLLA NM stands atop this rise, resting on a lawn with the coiled energy of a cobra preparing to strike. Sealed inside a taut skin made from earth-coloured, spray-on concrete

The central pivot of the house is the staircase. Clean white lines are tempered by dramatic pieces, such as the fireplace in the sitting room, ensuring the house’s modernity is never clinical

and mirror glass, its rectangular form twists at midpoint, then lifts up at one end to form a canopy over a small carport.

At the back, the form twists again, this time to follow the slope of a hill. A series of terraces and steps lead down to a pool, their smooth marble surfaces a tribute to the famous floating planes of Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion.

The meaning of these contortions becomes clear only from the inside. An informal entry leads from the carport into the kitchen, whose back wall is made of polycarbonate panels set with softly coloured LED lights. From here, the room narrows into a funnel-like passageway that twists sharply to connect the two ends of the house: a floor becomes a wall; a wall turns into the ceiling. Broad steps cascade down through this space; the staircase acts as the house's connective tissue, and its sinuous form escorts you up to the sitting room, where a sweeping view of the mountains opens up. It then switches back on itself, with a second set of stairs leading up to the bedrooms and a decadent marble-clad bathroom.

What's most striking about the interiors, however, is their mutability. Rooms appear and then disappear from view. Spaces stretch and contract. The graceful flow of movement through the centre of the house contrasts with quieter corners at either end.

To some, this blurring of boundaries between private and public life might be disarming. But it is also an attack against a central tenet of early modernism: the association – which now seems so naïve – of transparency and light with a healthier, morally pure society. As Ben puts it: 'You could never hide yourself in these places – in Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth house, for example. That was a mistake of modernism. People need places to hide from each other, too.'

That suspicion of modernism's dogmatic streak is underscored by some playful touches. A sitting-room fireplace, clad in brass, brings to mind a sophisticated take on Seventies style; speakers are set in the pool so that you can listen to disco while frolicking underwater. (Leo claims this was inspired by childhood memories of watching synchronised swimmers on Soviet television.)

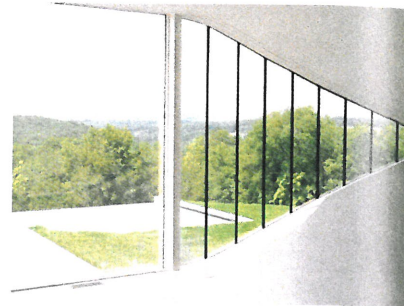
Best of all is the play of reflection and transparency in the windows, which are made of the same bronze-tinted glass used in old Las Vegas casinos. As you stand in the sitting room on a bright afternoon, the glass gives the surrounding landscape a glorious bronze glow. But as the sun sets, the glass becomes reflective. The landscape slowly recedes from view and you see yourself mirrored in glimmering bronze. At the same time, you become suddenly aware that people can gaze in from outside, giving the house a voyeuristic frisson.

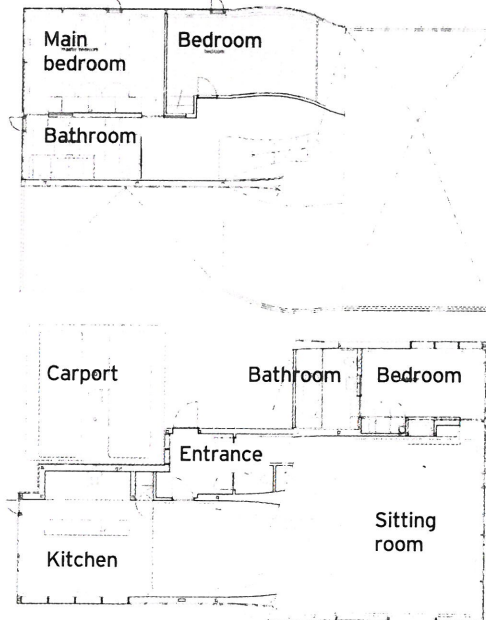
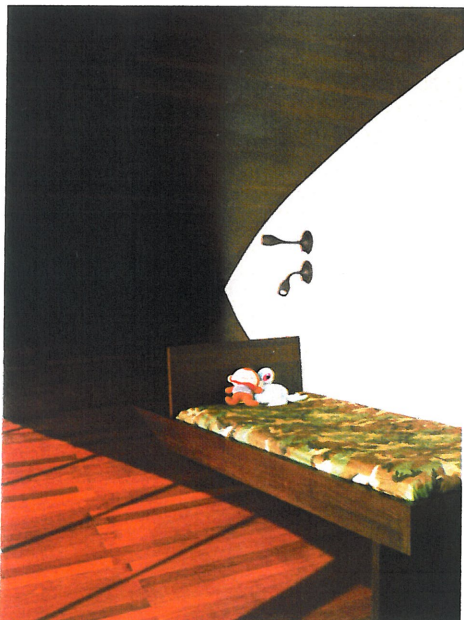
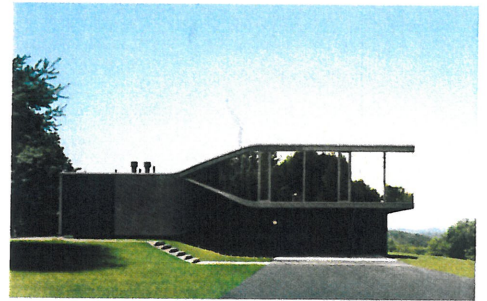
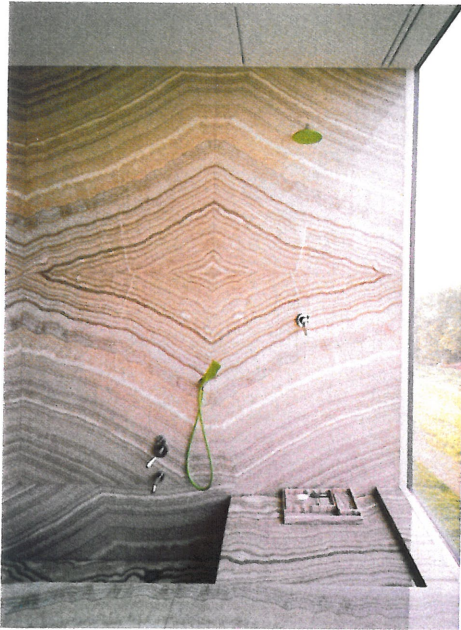
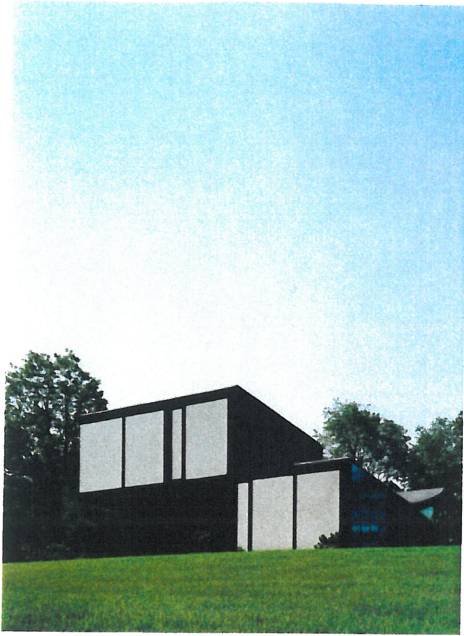
Such refinements are a testament to Ben's maturity. Both his willingness to explore uncharted conceptual territory and a deep understanding of how things are put together give his work a substance that is rare even among his most talented peers. Villa NM is a monument to what can happen when you let go of inhibitions, and proof that the slickness of the computer age does not have to lead us to a world sanitised of sensual charms □

*Ben van Berkel, UNStudio*

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**THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** The twisting form of the staircase creates interesting perspectives within the house. An L-shape sofa complements these lines. Full-height windows look over the swimming pool. Stairs lead up to the bathroom and down to the kitchen, where a Corian sink unit is the focal point





THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT The façade of the house has large expanses of mirror glass set into a spray-on concrete shell. A series of marble steps and terraces leads down from the sitting room to the swimming pool. The cantilevered main bedroom forms an overhang that shelters a carport at ground level. In the main bedroom, a wall of glass counteracts the dark walls. The convergence of the curved wooden floor and ceiling in the children's bedroom, with a built-in bed, makes a visual impact. The marble-clad bathroom has a sunken bath. Lime-green accents pick up the colour of the opposite wall (centre), where a wall-hung, dark wood cabinet is topped by a pair of basins