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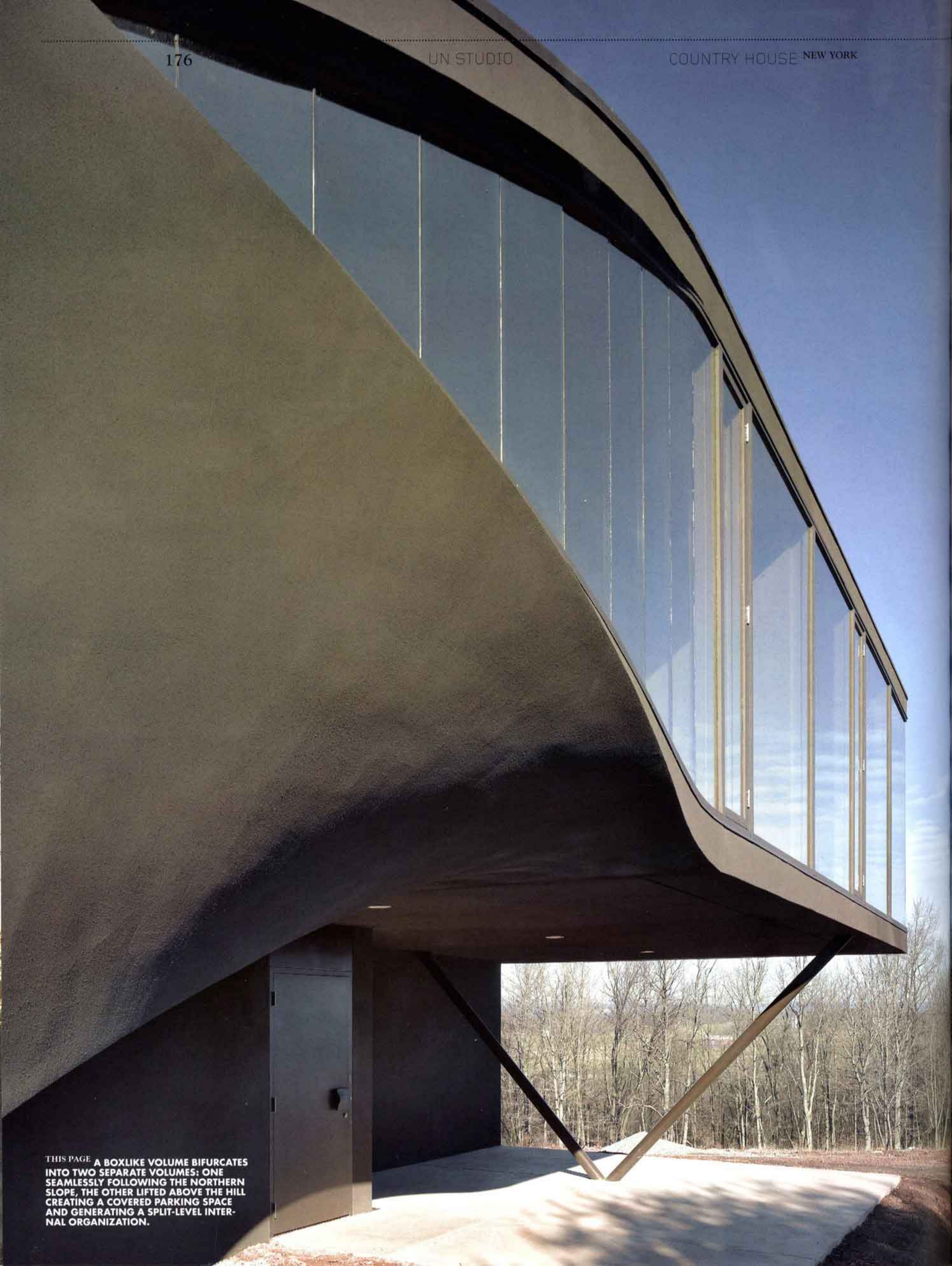


HOUSE WITH A TWIST



**IN A ROLLING LANDSCAPE IN UPSTATE
NEW YORK, UN STUDIO BUILT AN
ELEGANTLY TORQUED HOUSE THAT
EMPHASIZES THE VIEW.**

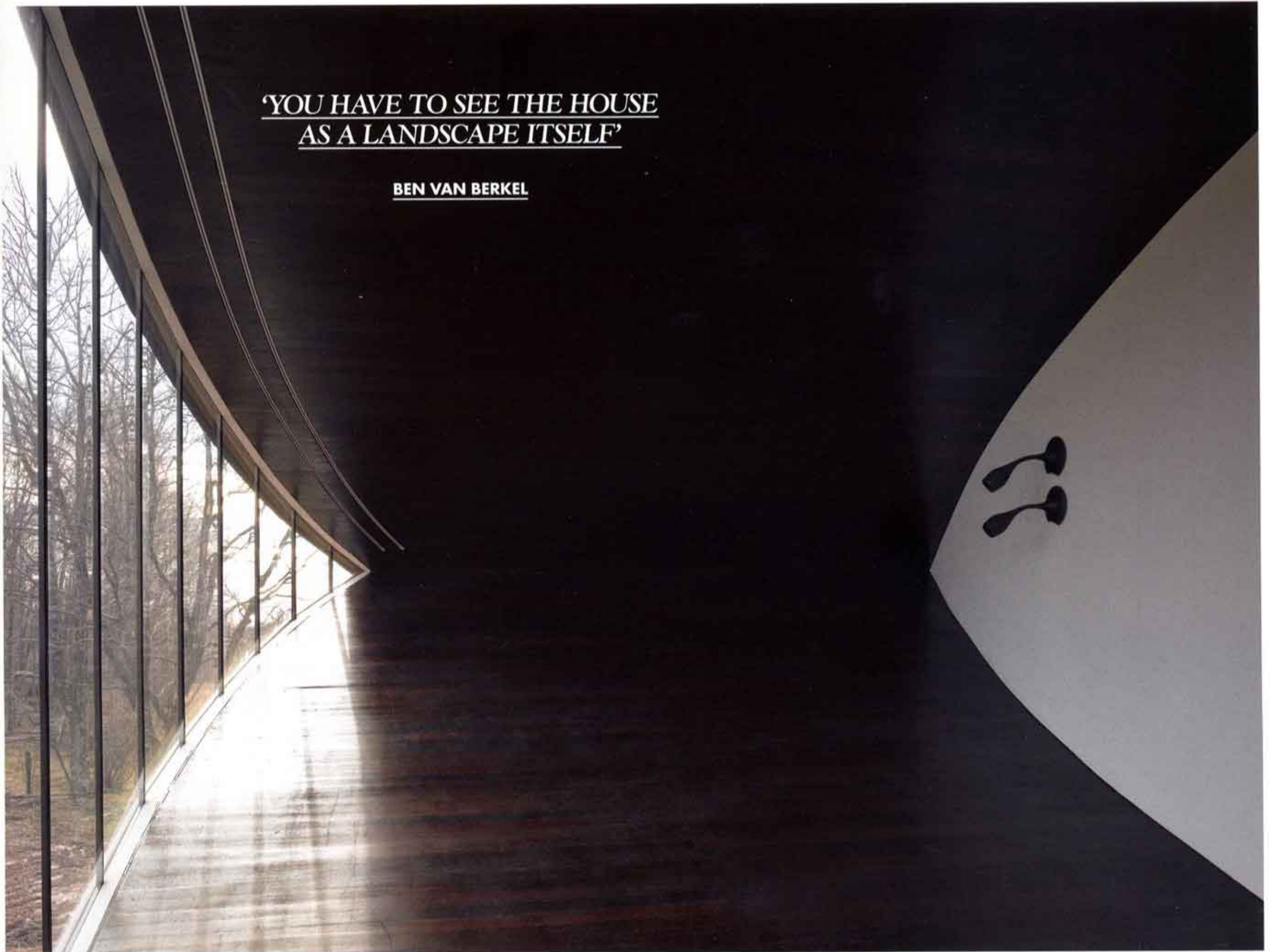
TEXT ARIC CHEN
PHOTOS CHRISTIAN RICHTERS



THIS PAGE A BOXLIKE VOLUME BIFURCATES INTO TWO SEPARATE VOLUMES: ONE SEAMLESSLY FOLLOWING THE NORTHERN SLOPE, THE OTHER LIFTED ABOVE THE HILL CREATING A COVERED PARKING SPACE AND GENERATING A SPLIT-LEVEL INTERNAL ORGANIZATION.

**'YOU HAVE TO SEE THE HOUSE
AS A LANDSCAPE ITSELF'**

BEN VAN BERKEL



THIS PAGE **THE SON'S BEDROOM. 'HE TELLS FRIENDS HE HAS A HILL INSIDE HIS HOUSE.'**

'I WANTED THE MOST BEAUTIFUL SITE IN the area,' recalls the client, staring out from his new country house on what may very well be one of the most beautiful sites in upstate New York.

Indeed, the home's initial requirements were straightforward enough: good light, fantastic views and an arresting landscape of rolling, wooded hills. But the client is a New York City developer with a taste for experimental architecture. So to realize his idyllic retreat – for himself, his wife and their two young children – he turned to UN Studio, the Amsterdam firm known for creating buildings of head-spinning complexity.

It's not as contradictory as it first sounds. Landscapes, after all, are fraught with intricacy, while UN Studio's spatial acrobatics – say, the dizzying ramps of its new Mercedes-Benz Museum, or the oozing volumes of its forthcoming Arnhem central station – are often derived from deceptively simple gestures. Called ViLA NM, and six years in the making, the home in upstate New York would be a synthesis of both: 'You have to see the house as a landscape itself,' says UN

Studio principal Ben van Berkel.

At two floors and just over 300 m² – a modest size by current American standards – the house is perched on a secluded ridge, high above a billowing topography of birch-, white pine- and maple-covered hills. Floating about 18 cm off the ground, it's shaped something like a twisting square tube that jackknifes as it rises; think of it as a bulging return stair with rooms in lieu of landings. Finished in brown stucco, with expansive windows made glaring by a shocking gold-bronze tint, the house features earth tones that literally mirror the scenery around it. 'The windows reflect the landscape so that it almost "walks" with you as you go around the house,' van Berkel explains.

These shifting reflections, or 'afterimages', as the architect calls them, have shown up before. In his earlier La Defense office complex in the Dutch city of Almere, van Berkel installed façades of iridescent glass that change colour depending on one's perspective and the time of day. At ViLA NM, the fluctuating relationship

between viewer and environment extends inside as well – thanks to the reflective properties of the glazing, a product of the same processes used for making sunglasses. (In fact, pinched at one end, the home's corner windows look like eyes in profile.) Within a cool interior of white epoxy floors and matching white walls, the glass casts a soft blue hue on overcast days; when the sun is shining, it gives the surrounding landscape a golden sepia wash, recalling Victorian-era photographs and the American Sublime. Meanwhile, at night, the windows become mirror-like on the inside; from the outside, they transform the house into a see-through fishbowl. ('We haven't chosen the curtains yet,' van Berkel adds.)

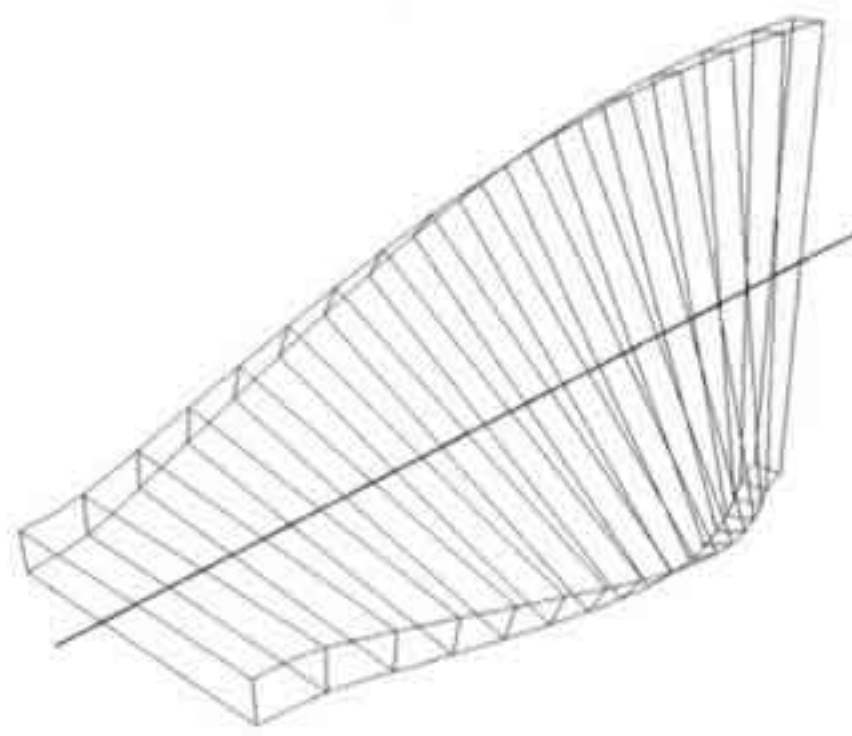
Just as colour and light help shape one's experience of the house, hard materials are given nimble plasticity. Constructed of a steel frame filled with concrete, the building's rectilinear volumes narrow and swell as you move through them, lending a sense of compression and expansion – of views that suddenly open up within 'an interior landscape that's always changing', van Berkel

THE VOLUMETRIC TRANSITION IS GENERATED BY A SET OF FIVE PARALLEL WALLS THAT ROTATE ALONG A HORIZONTAL AXIS FROM VERTICAL TO HORIZONTAL. THE RULED SURFACE MAINTAINING THIS TRANSITION IS REPEATED FIVE TIMES IN THE BUILDING.

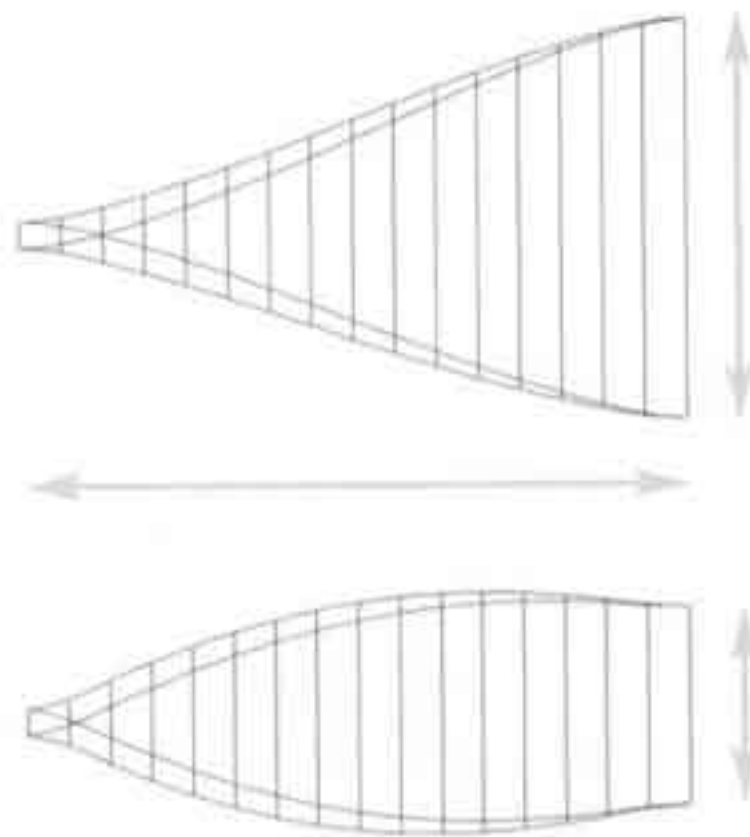
COMBINATION OF TWISTS



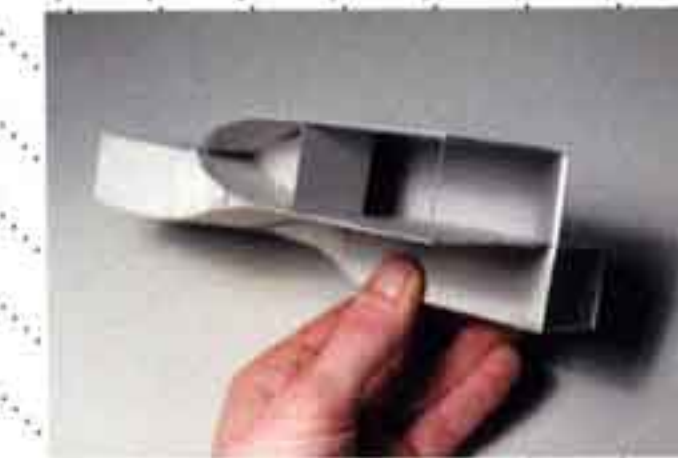
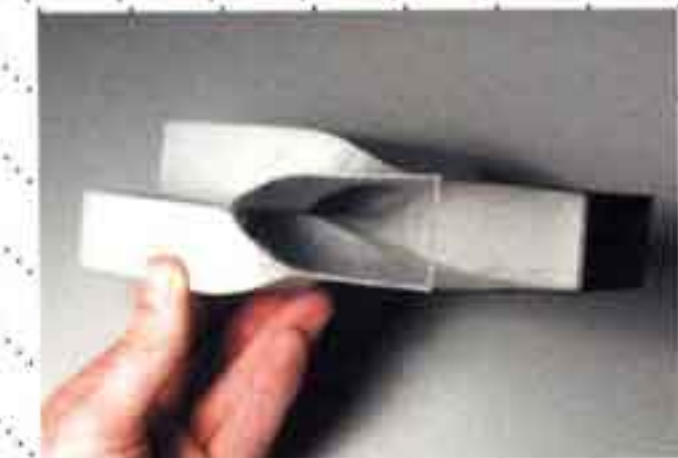
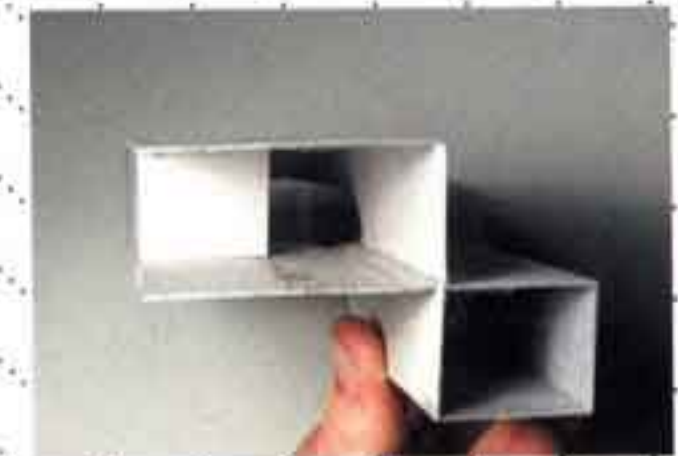
AXONOMETRIC VIEW



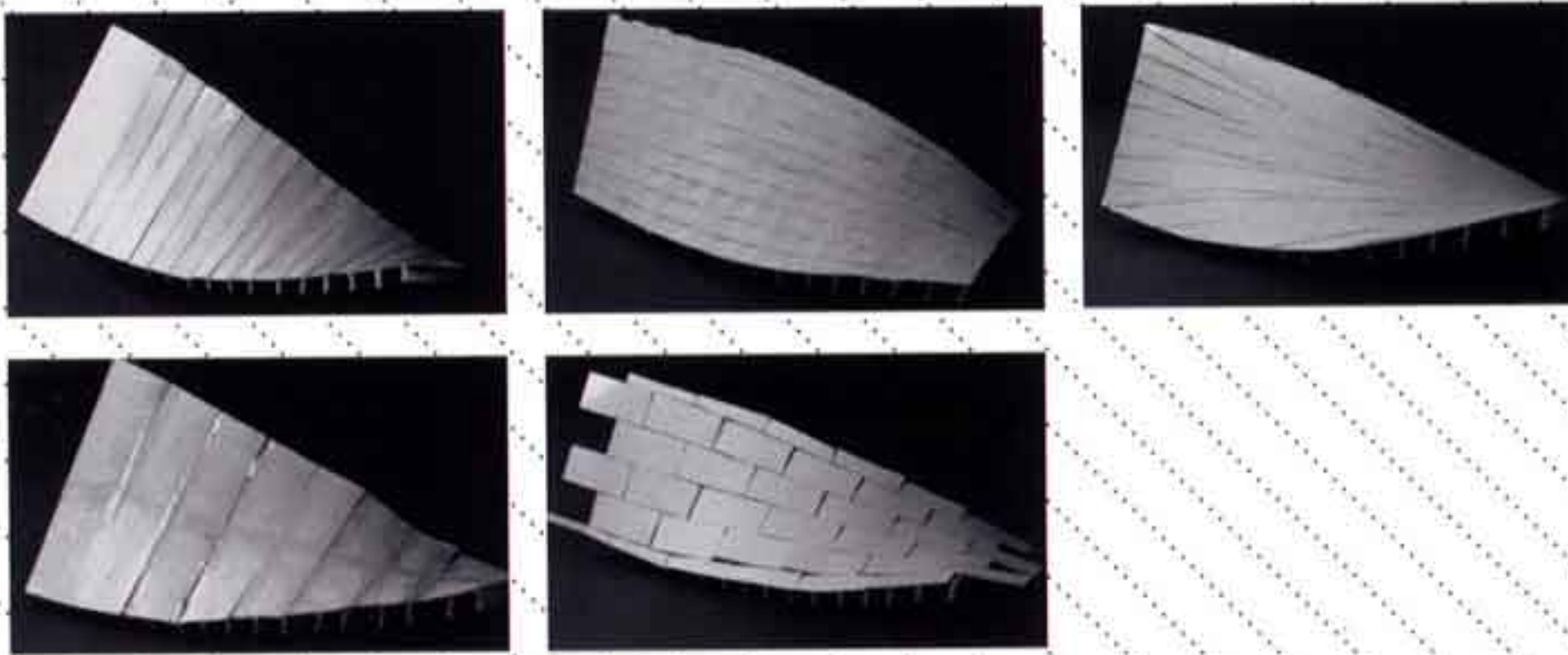
LONGITUDINAL ELEVATION



CROSS ELEVATION



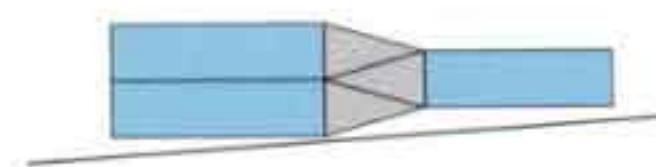
MATERIALIZING THE SURFACE



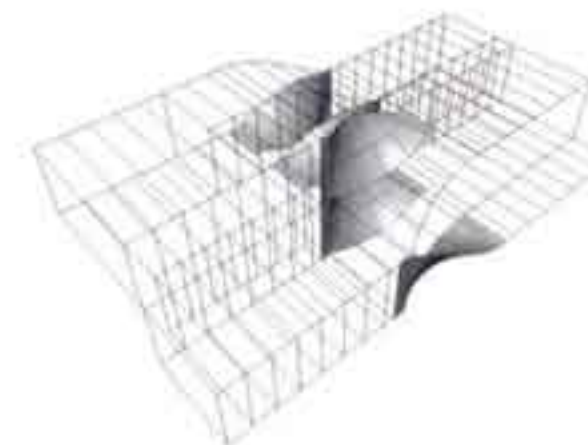
STRUCTURE OF VOLUME



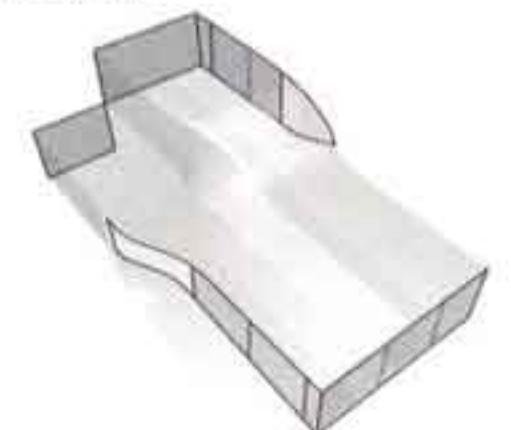
DIAGRAMMATIC SECTION



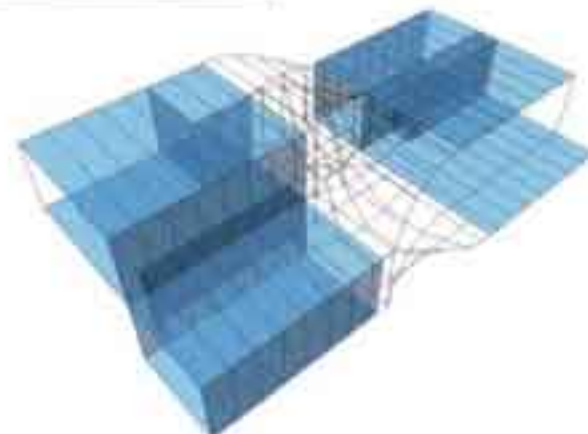
TWISTED SURFACES



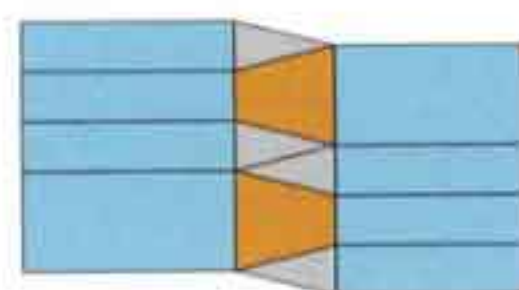
GLASS WALLS



PLANAR VOLUMES



DIAGRAMMATIC PLAN

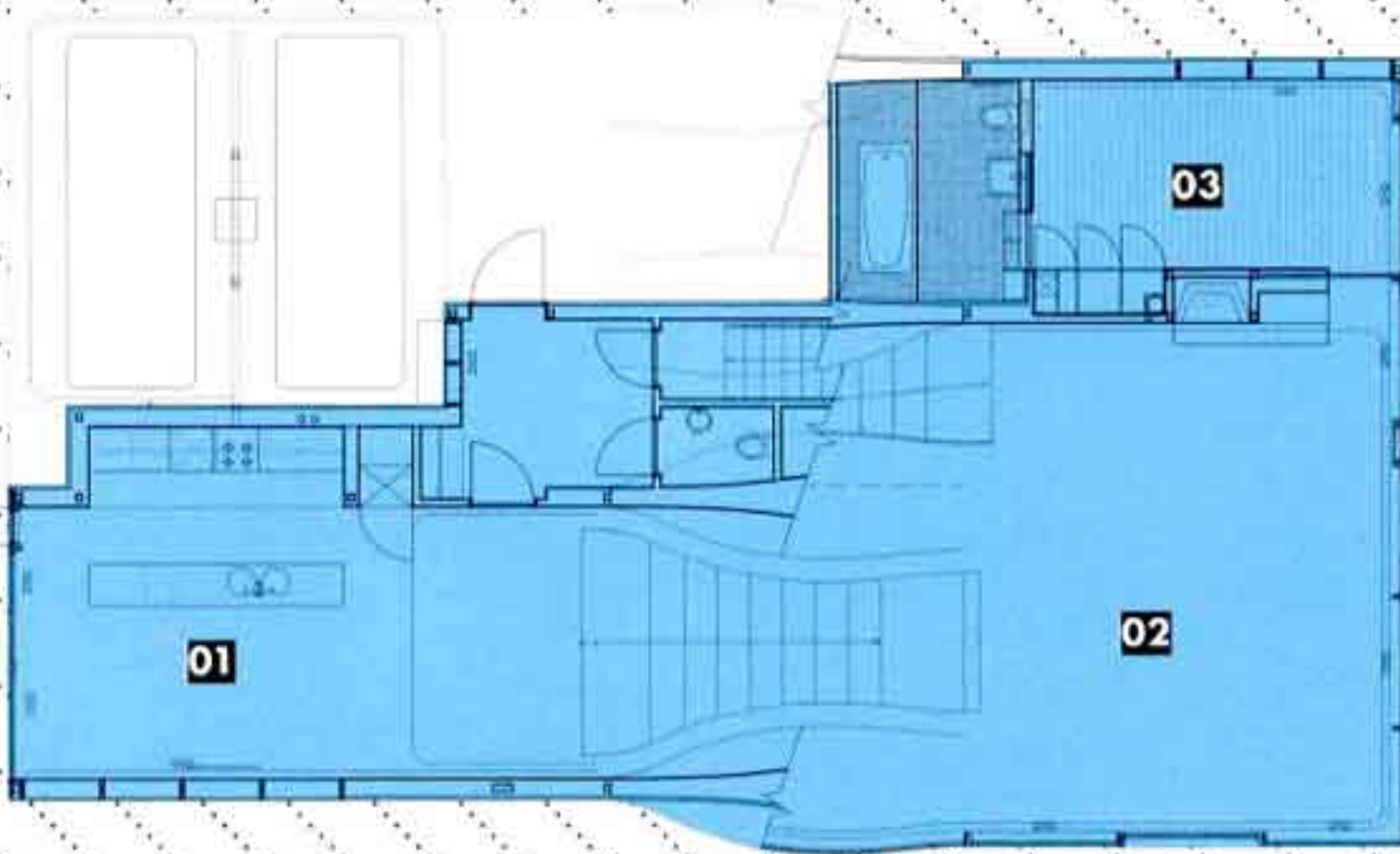


SINGLE-CURVED SURFACES



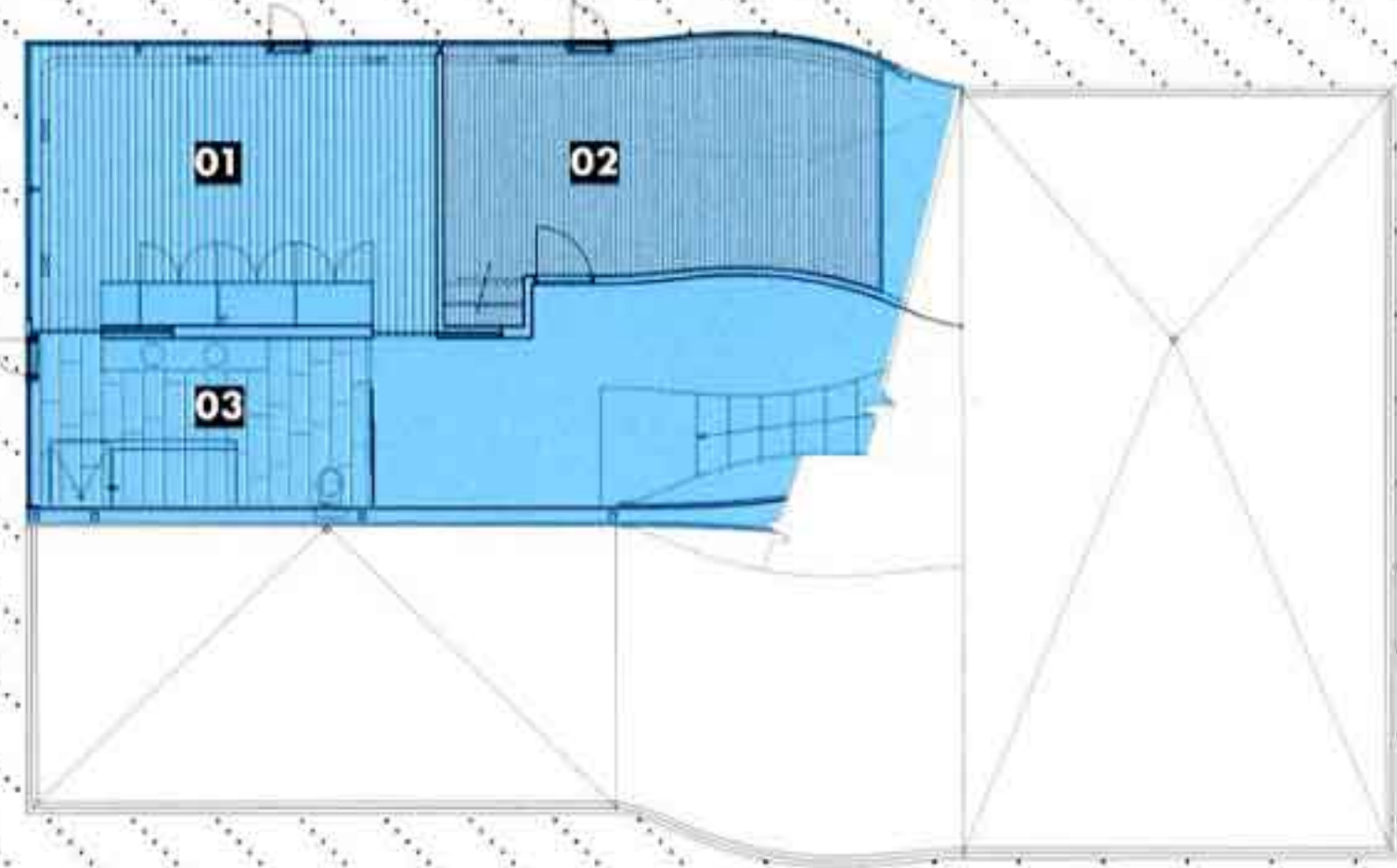
STRUCTURAL SUPPORT AND 2 ADDITIONAL WALLS





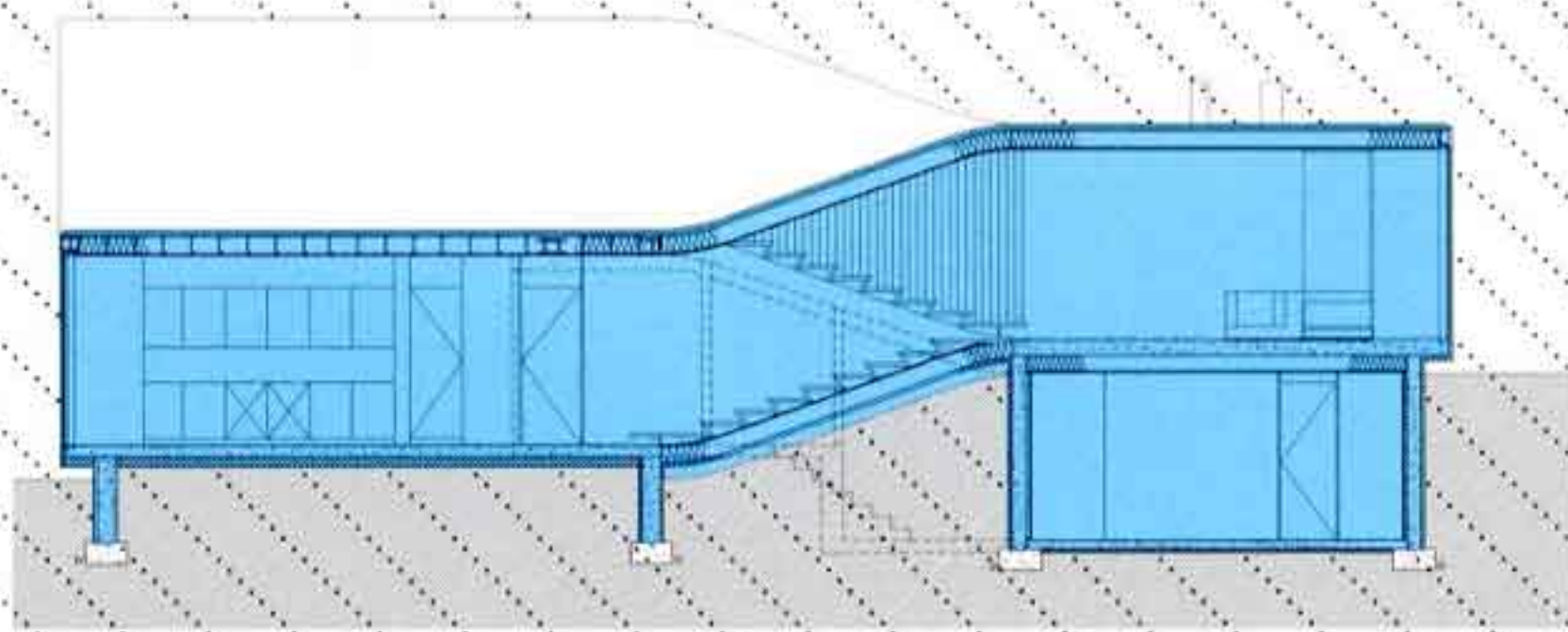
GROUND FLOOR.

- 01 KITCHEN
- 02 LIVING
- 03 BEDROOM

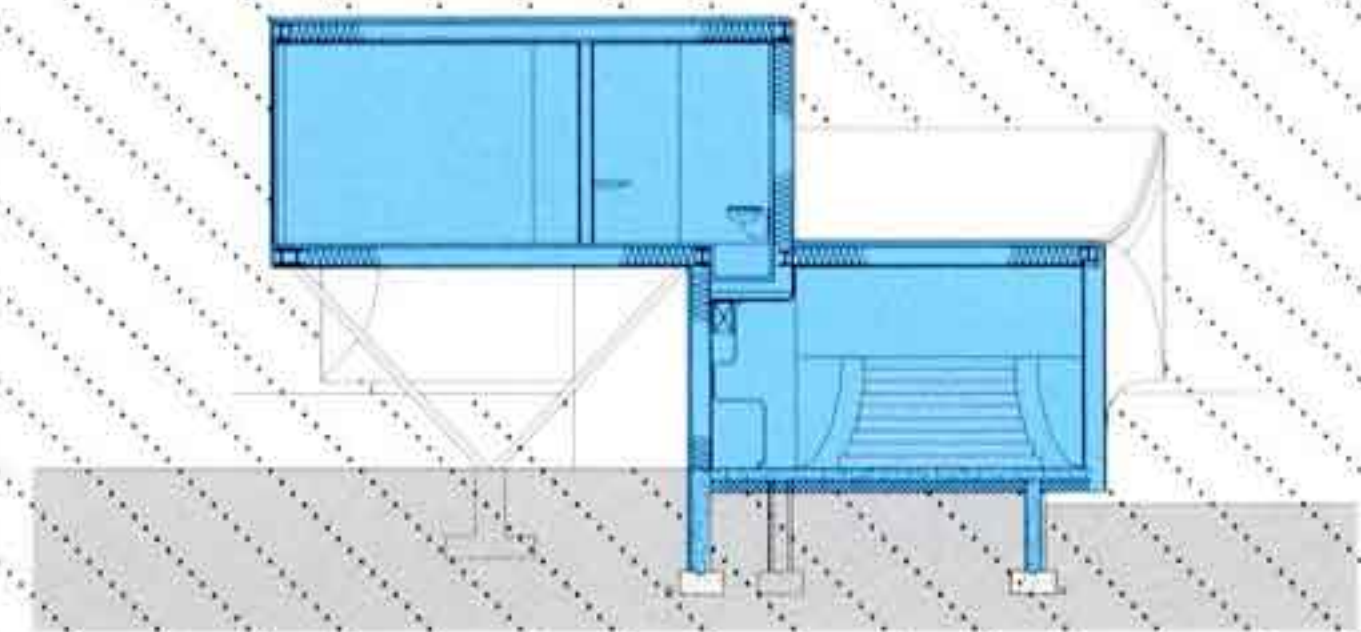
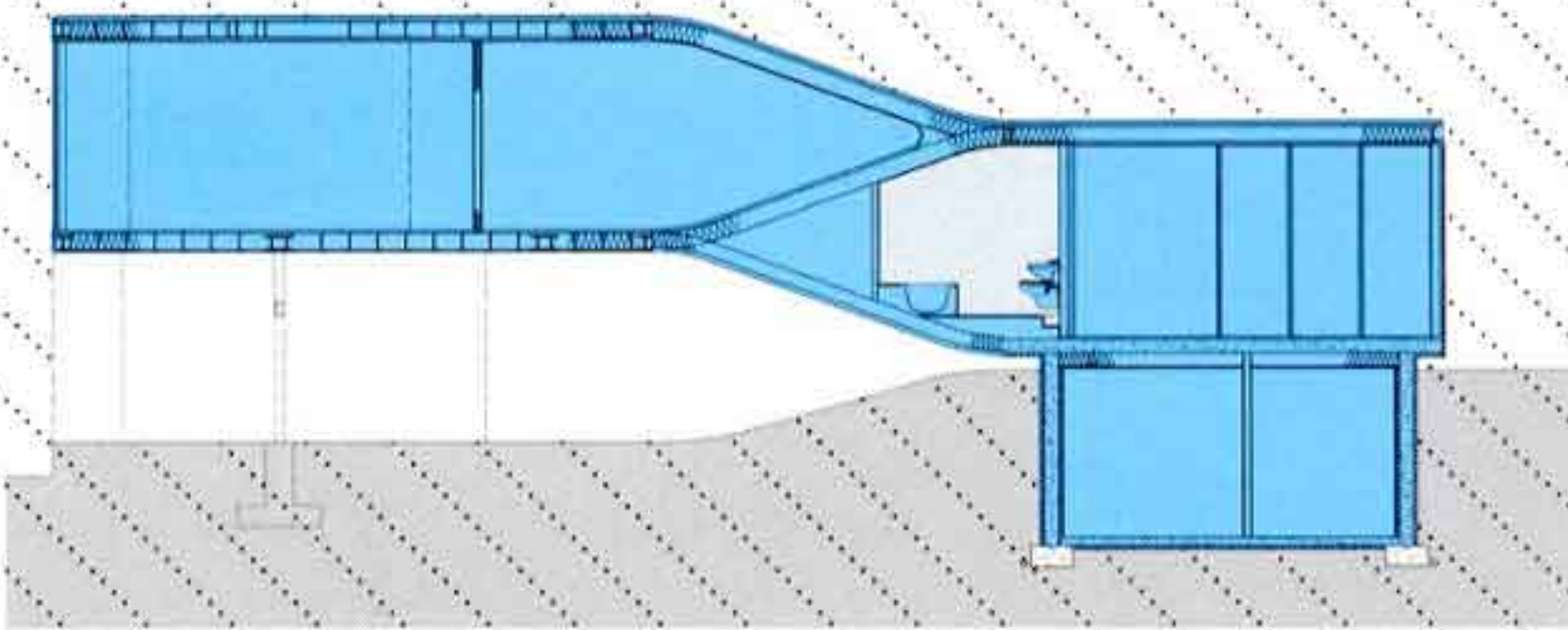


FIRST FLOOR.

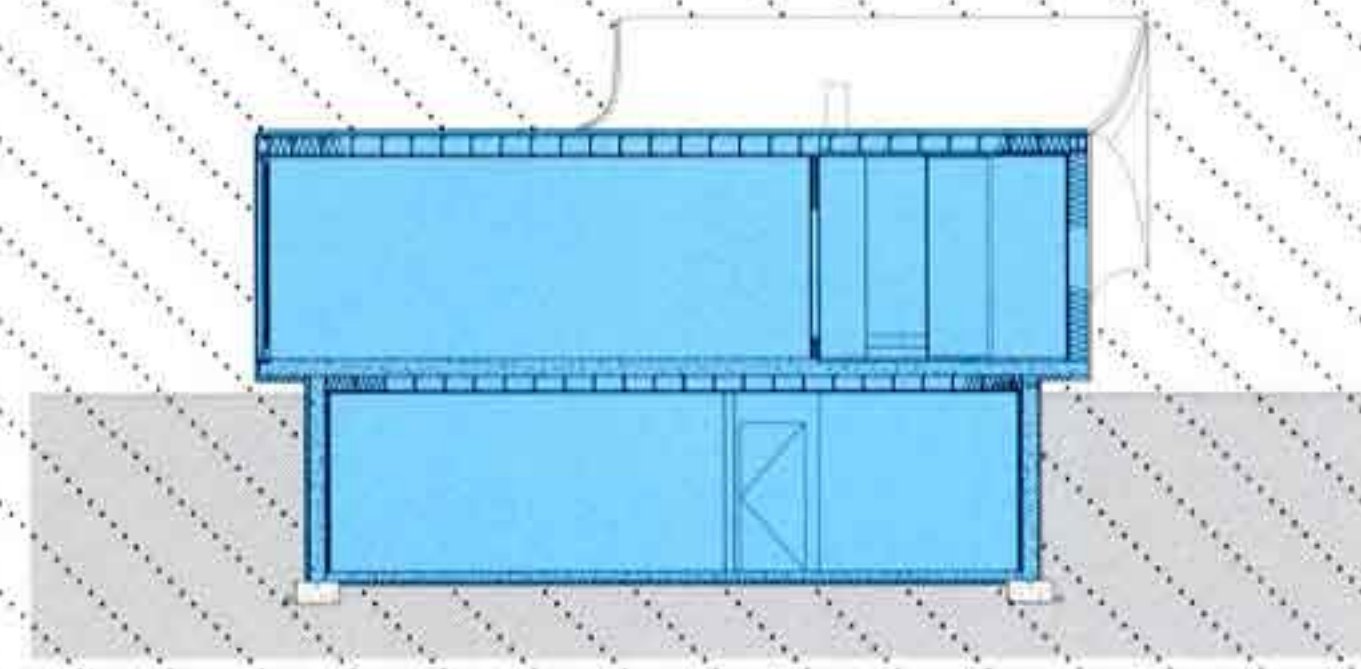
- 01 MASTER BEDROOM
- 02 BEDROOM
- 03 BATHROOM



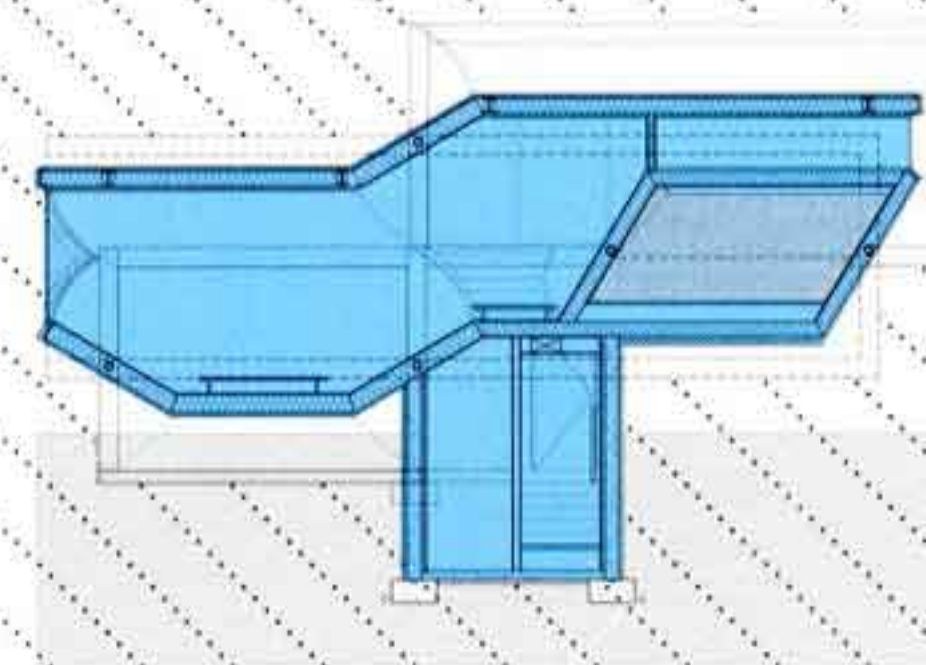
LONG SECTIONS.



SECTION THROUGH KITCHEN AND MASTER BEDROOM.



SECTION THROUGH LIVING ROOM.



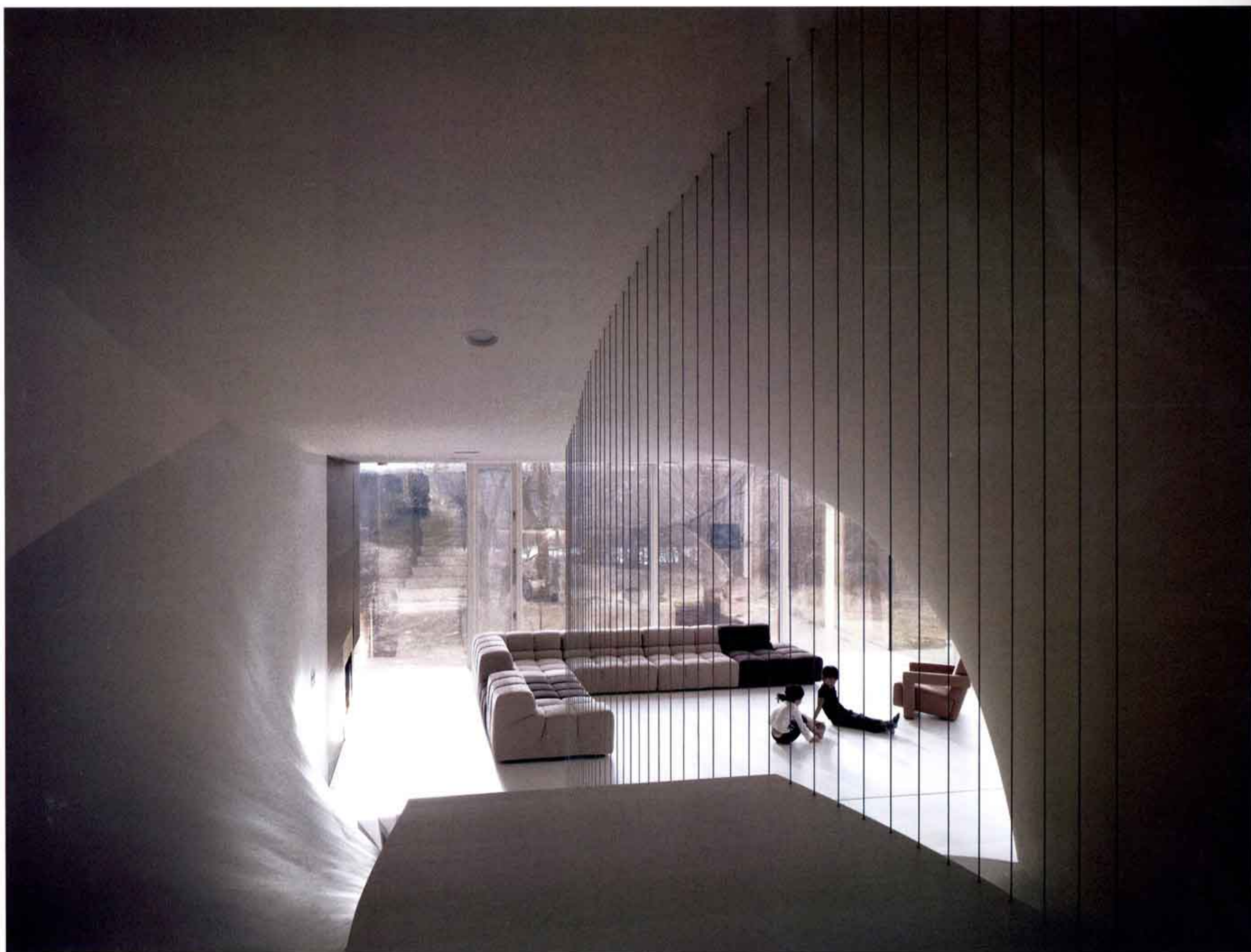
SECTION THROUGH STAIRWELL.

'YOU'RE NEVER REALLY IN
A SPACE BUT ARE INSTEAD
ALWAYS WALKING INTO
THE NEXT'

BEN VAN BERKEL







THIS PAGE FROM INSIDE, HUGE FLOOR-TO-CEILING STRIPS OF FENESTRATION CREATE A FLUID SENSE OF CONTINUITY BETWEEN INTERIOR AND LANDSCAPE.

says. From the comparatively tall and narrow kitchen, for example, a broad half-stair leads up to the low and wide living room, the change in geometry resolved by complex curves flanking the steps. The curves also double as slopes that the family's children – as well as the client himself – have taken to gliding across in their socks. Interior landscape, indeed.

All the while, as it reverses direction towards the upstairs master suite and child's room (a second children's bedroom is adjacent to the living area), the stair forms a 'twist' based on the mathematical Seifert surface; imagine a flat plane that's bisected and then torqued. The result serves as the home's fulcrum, the knot from which its volumes spin off and the locus, or 'communicator', as van Berkel puts it, 'where everyone always meets'.

For van Berkel, after all, brain-twisting geometries aren't just experiments in formal virtuosity, but rather the means by which new organizing systems arise. Inspired by the DNA double helix, the vertiginous dual ramps of his

Mercedes-Benz Museum effectively form two sets of galleries that intertwine in an infinite loop. His Mobius House in Holland – the project that first got the client's attention when it was shown in 1999 at New York's Museum of Modern Art – similarly feeds back into itself. By the same token, the Twist, and the bulging exterior walls that complement it, dictates the ViLA NM's morphing, linear progression. 'You're never really in a space but are instead always walking into the next,' van Berkel says. 'The idea was a simple gesture that was quite difficult to solve: how to go from a sober box to a more complicated four-fold box that emphasizes the spectacular views.' The totality gives sculptural dimension to a house that, like the landscape around it, seems to constantly evolve.

Of course, the house wasn't just a theoretical exercise but a place in which a family had to live. In this regard, its spaces function remarkably well. The Twist opens sightlines that make supervising the children easy. Rooms flow seamlessly from one to another while maintaining their

pragmatic right angles. Even the exceptions – like the sloping floor of the son's bedroom – serve a novel purpose: 'He tells friends he has a hill inside his house,' the client says of his son. 'And he's right!'

What's more, for all its twists and turns, the house retains a clarity and softness that are further subdued by warm finishes: book-matched onyx walls in the master bath, wenge floors in the bedrooms, green lacquered cabinetry, a brass and macassar ebony fireplace wall. The stairs also bevel inwards, making their treads appear to float above the light trapped below. But otherwise, van Berkel says, he wasn't weighed down by too many fussy details. 'Houses are often over-designed,' he continues. 'Here, I hope we've created something that's more casual, intimate and relaxed.' And, in both senses, he's right.

www.unstudio.com

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TWISTING GEOMETRIES
AREN'T JUST EXPERIMENTS
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RATHER THE MEANS BY
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