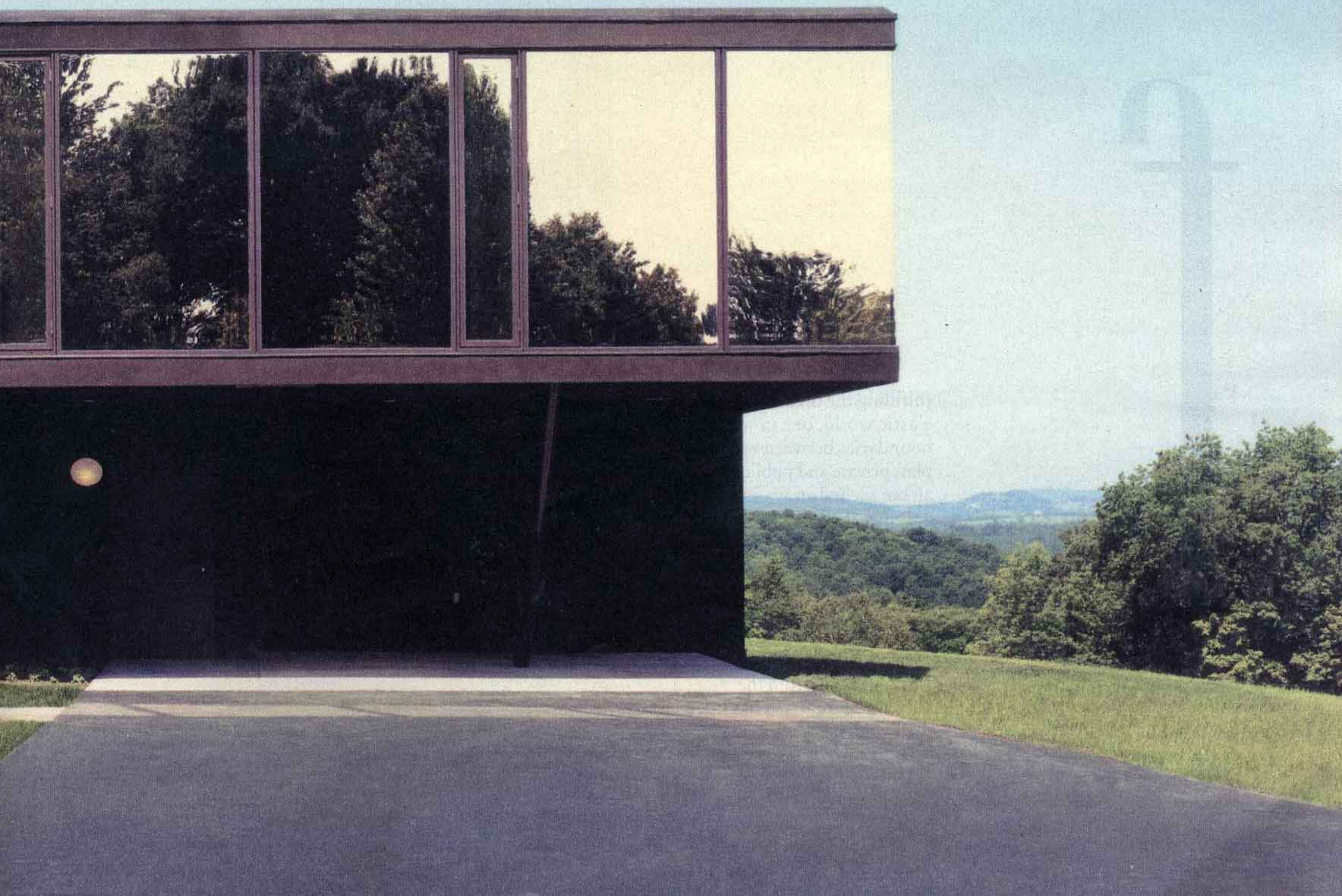


Astrohome

A DUTCH ARCHITECTURE FIRM'S FIRST PROJECT IN THE U.S. — A WEEKEND HOUSE IN UPSTATE NEW YORK — IS SIMPLY OUT OF THIS WORLD.

Text by Nicolai Ouroussoff Photographs by Nikolas Koenig







Above: the view from the third-level landing down to the living room. Right: from the living room, a view of the twisting stairs that lead back to the third level and master bathroom, and down to the kitchen and entrance.



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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 whose approach, driven by a fascination with new computer-age technologies, has a touch of the prophetic. Of all of them, he has so far come closest to

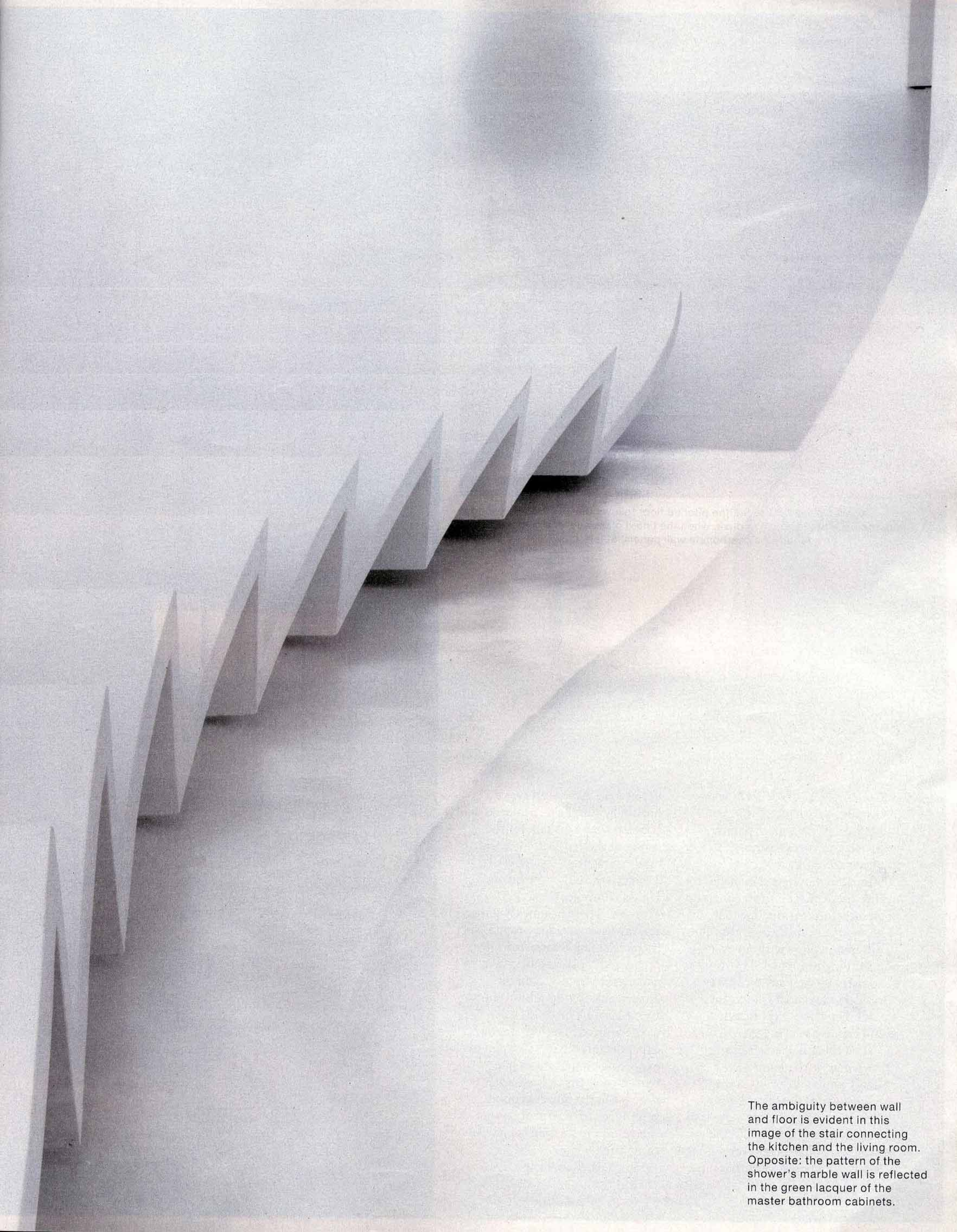
fulfilling the dream of a truly elastic world, one in which the boundaries between work and play, private and public life have all but melted away.

But in the Villa NM, the first project his Amsterdam-based firm, UNStudio, has completed in the United States, van Berkel combines this intellectual rigor with something new: a blend of play and eroticism that is a welcome relief from the puritanical tone that has infected the world of contemporary high culture.

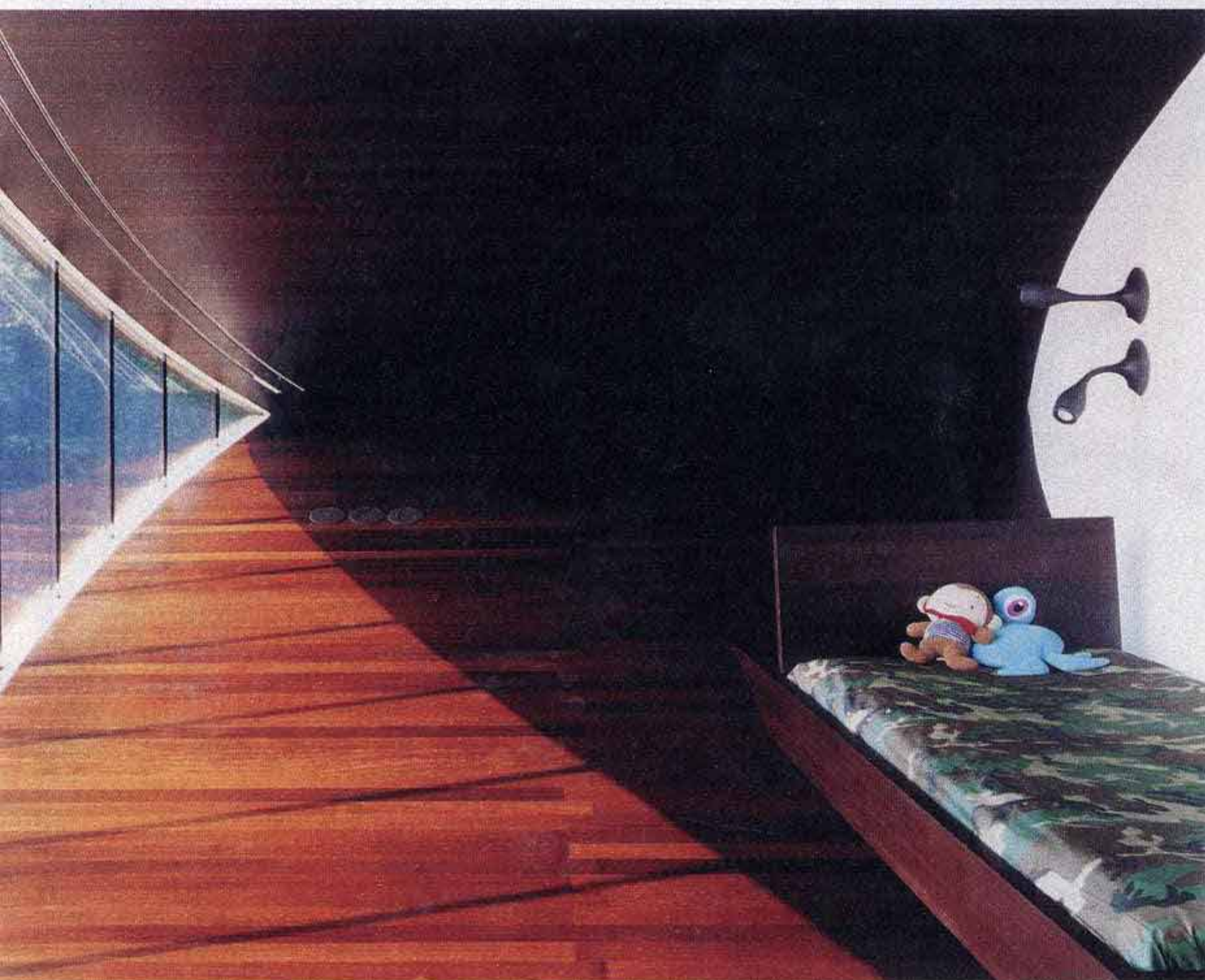
Designed for a Russian client as a weekend house in Sullivan







The ambiguity between wall and floor is evident in this image of the stair connecting the kitchen and the living room. Opposite: the pattern of the shower's marble wall is reflected in the green lacquer of the master bathroom cabinets.



Above: in a child's room, the pitched floor follows the curve of the window. Right: the back of the house at dusk, when the tinted glass allows a glimpse inside. The kitchen's polycarbonate wall panels, at left, glow with L.E.D. light.

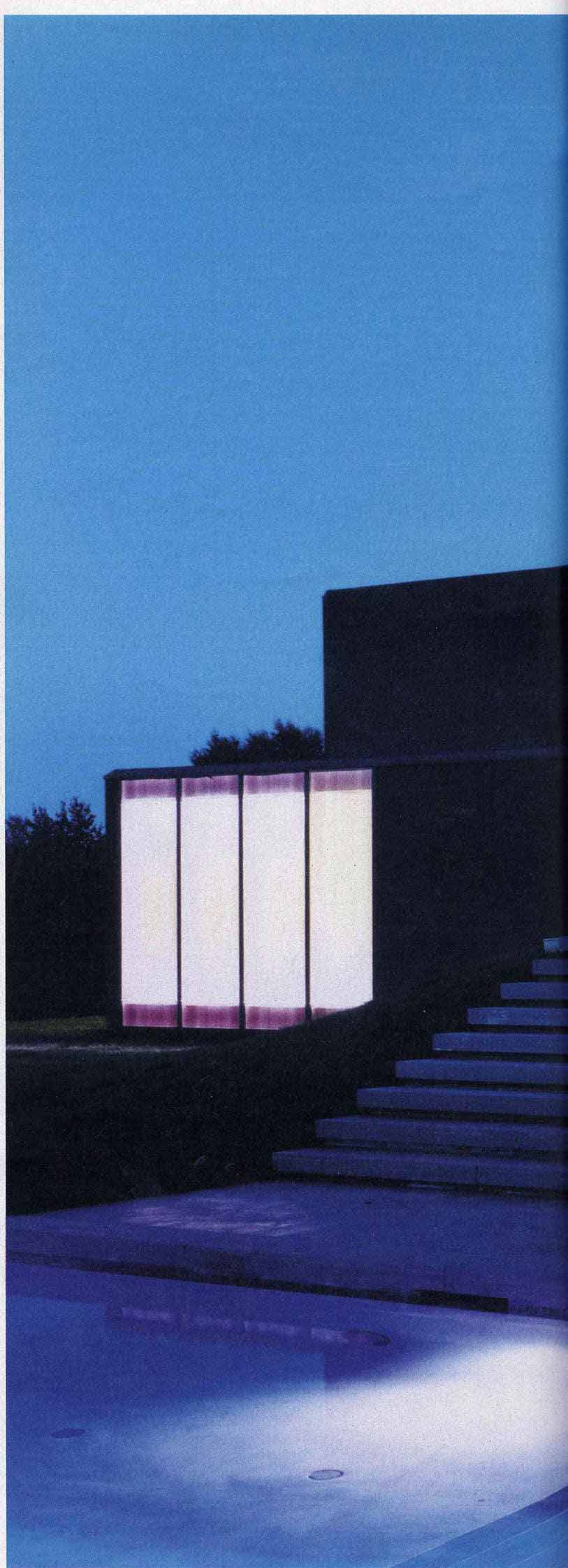
County, N.Y., the Villa NM conjures a tornado of images: Hudson River School paintings, garish Las Vegas casinos, '70s kitsch and Russian fairy tales. Somehow van Berkel manages to fuse these images into a coherent architectural vision, one that allows the mind to drift through different worlds without ever becoming unhinged. The result is confirmation, if any more was needed, that van Berkel is an architect who is now hitting his full creative stride.

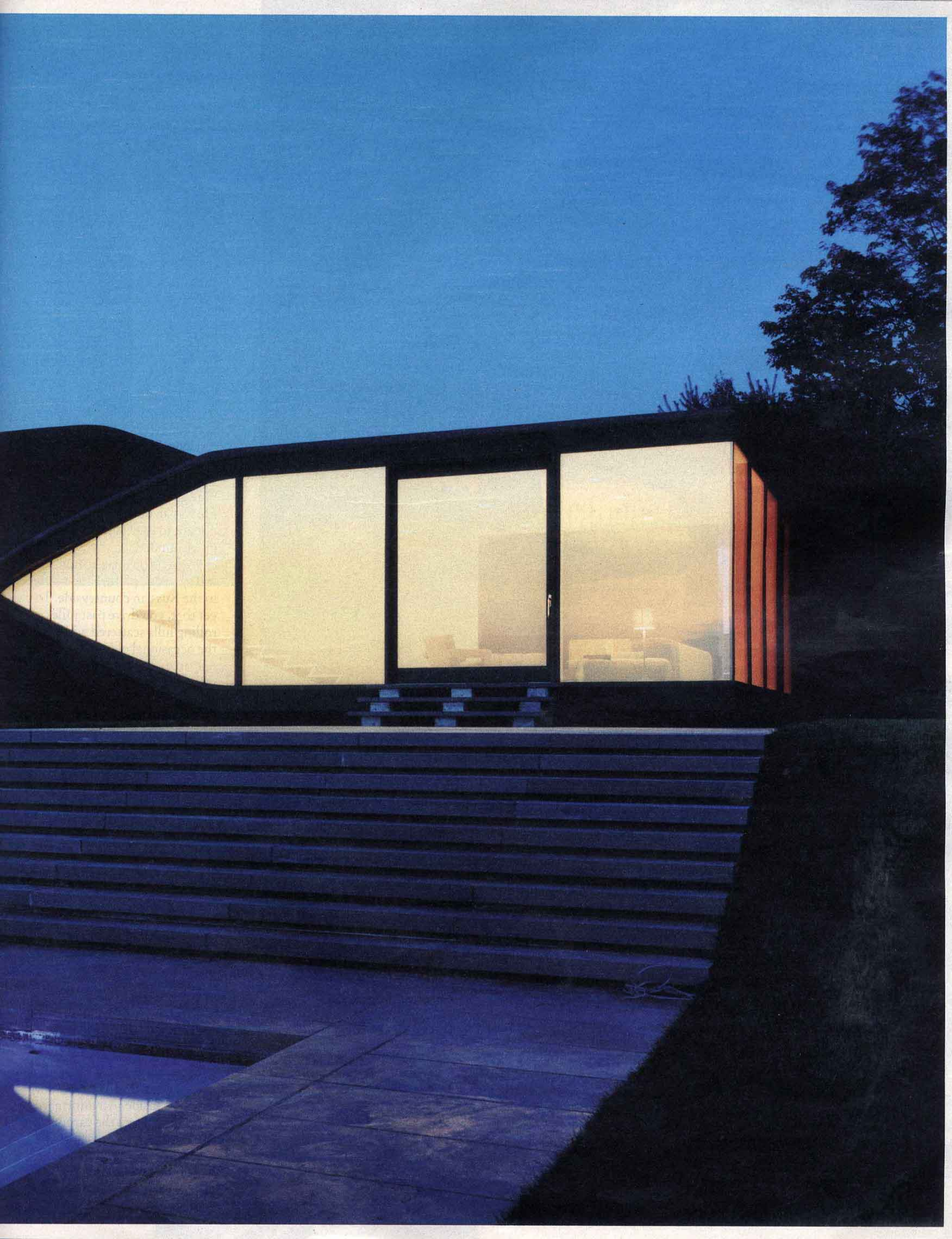
The client helped. A short, wiry man with penetrating eyes, Leo Tsimmer grew up in the Soviet city of Sverdlovsk (now Yekaterinburg), a grim industrial wasteland at the base of the Ural Mountains. He brings to mind the kind of maverick spirit that once

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, Tsimmer moved to Moscow, where he quickly joined a new breed of scrappy capitalists then reshaping Russia. He organized Moscow's first rave and even opened a chain of American-style doughnut shops. Eventually, he made his way to the United States, where he expanded his business empire by exporting commodities like frozen chickens to Russia at a time when the Soviet economy was in free fall and grocery shelves in the Russian capital were often bare.

"I'm a hard-core capitalist."







Ben van Berkel and his partner, Caroline Bos, in their offices in Amsterdam. The two architects began working together in 1988 but did not establish UNStudio until 1999.

Tsimer said, standing in front of his new house in a dark flowered shirt, worn jeans and flip-flops. "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, Tsimer soon began thinking about building a country house for himself; his

wife, Angelika Lee; and their two kids. He found a 13-acre plot in a quiet corner of Sullivan County, a two-hour drive northwest of the city, and a few months later he spotted a model of van Berkel's Mobius House while wandering through a show on the design of contemporary houses at the Museum of Modern Art.

"I didn't know much about

contemporary architecture then, but I loved the house," Tsimer said, remembering the moment. "I called the architect's office in Amsterdam and asked for a meeting. A month later I handed him a check."

For his part, van Berkel still seems slightly shocked describing the brusqueness of the encounter. "We met at a hotel bar, and we

started to play with this idea of a Russian dacha," he told me recently over drinks in Amsterdam. "He gave me a check on the spot. He was an unusual client. He was not afraid to experiment. Super-open-minded."

With a little imagination, in fact, you can picture the house in the Russian countryside. To get to it, you drive past miles of rolling hills scattered with the occasional old barn and cheap one-story houses clad in vinyl siding. Eventually, you turn down a bumpy dirt road, winding up to the top of a hill surrounded by pine and birch trees with a view of undulating mountains.

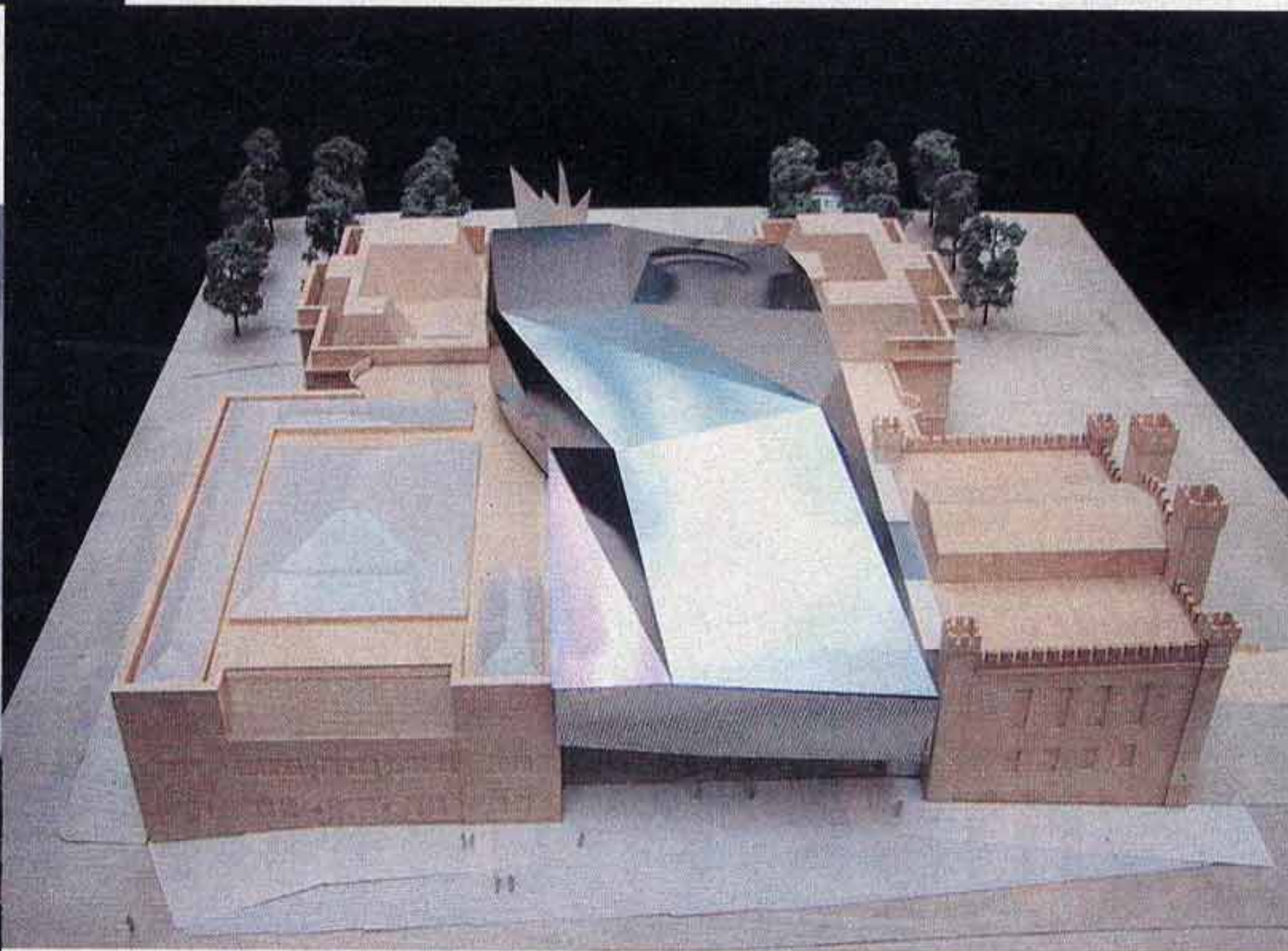
The Villa NM stands atop this landscape, resting amid a dewy lawn with the coiled energy of a cobra getting ready to strike. Sealed inside a taut skin made of earth-colored spray-on concrete and mirrored glass, its rectangular form twists at midpoint, then lifts up at one end to form a canopy over a small carport. As you circle to the back, the form twists again, this time to trace the slope of a hill. A series of decks step down to a pool, their smooth marble surfaces a sly 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 embedded *Continued on Page 176*

Right: the 1998 **Mobius House**. Below: a 2006 competition entry for the **World Business Center** in Busan, South Korea.



UNStudio's work ranges from houses to large-scale urban design projects.



Left: UNStudio's unbuilt 2000 design for the renovation and expansion of the **Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art** in Hartford.

Right: the design for an 18-story **Louis Vuitton flagship store** in Japan. The leaf-shaped openings echo the form of the floor plans.



Above and right: the interlocking spirals and systems of ramps at the **Mercedes-Benz Museum** in Stuttgart, Germany, completed in 2006, are a bold reworking of Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum.



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UN HOUSE

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with softly colored L.E.D. lights. From here, the room narrows into a funnel-like passageway that twists violently to connect the two ends of the house: a floor twists around to become a wall; a wall turns into the ceiling. Broad steps cascade down through this space from the living area above.

This is the house's connective tissue, and its elastic form conjures multiple metaphors: the muscular structure of an alien creature, a piece of toffee, a birth canal. But why mince words? It's simply one of the most gorgeous private staircases in America. As you reach the top and enter the living room, a sweeping view of the mountains opens up through bronze tinted glass. The sequence then switches back, 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 center of the house contrasts with quieter corners at either end.

To some, this may be a scary statement about our current era, where the boundaries between private and public life have less and less meaning. But it is also an attack against a central tenet of early Modernism: the association — now seemingly so naïve — of transparency and light with a healthier, morally pure society.

As van Berkel put it: "You could never hide yourself in these places — in Mies's Farnsworth house, for example. That was a mistake of Modernism. People need places to hide from each other, too. You need everything."

That suspicion of Modernism's dogmatic streak is underscored by a number of playful touches. A living room fireplace, clad in brass, brings to mind a sophisticated take on the swinging '70s; speakers are set in the pool so that you can listen to disco while frolicking underwater. (Timmer claims this last detail was inspired by childhood memories of watching synchronized swimmers perform 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. Standing in the living room on a bright afternoon, the glass gives the surrounding landscape a glorious bronze glow. But as the sun sets, the glass becomes mirrored. The landscape slowly recedes from view and you see yourself reflected 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 van Berkel's maturity. He began his architecture career in the mid-1980s working for Zaha Hadid, who was then known for her dynamic, formal language, followed by a brief stint in the office of Santiago Calatrava, a designer known for flamboyant feats of engineering. These seemingly contradictory experiences have obviously served him well: his own architectural voice demonstrates both a willingness to explore uncharted conceptual territory and a deep understanding of how things are put together, giving his work a substance that is rare even among his most talented peers.

His first significant civic project, a bridge completed in 1996 in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, is reminiscent of Calatrava's early work. The contrast between its towering wishbone-shaped pier and the lightness of the roadway

creates an exquisite tension. It's the kind of structural daring that makes Calatrava fans gush.

But while Calatrava has gone on to make increasingly flamboyant, even self-indulgent works, his protégé's designs have become more taut and precise. In 1998, van Berkel caught the attention of many in the architecture world with the completion of the 1998 Mobius House, whose faceted concrete and glass interior was organized in a kind of elaborate figure eight. The house, which is located in Het Gooi in the Netherlands, had some of the overwrought detailing typical of a young architectural talent brimming with ideas — every handrail seems designed to make a major architectural statement. But it was also an expression of a wonderfully nuanced mind.

Taking his cue from the music of modern composers like Schoenberg and Boulez, van Berkel found that by using a limited palette of three angles — of 4, 7 and 11 degrees — he could produce a remarkably complex composition that nonetheless retained an underlying clarity. "It was a way to create a more disciplined model," he said. "And I think it also gives the project a calmness that you might not notice at first."

This compositional rigor was coupled with a social mission: to create a more elastic relationship between private and communal space. The owners' respective work spaces, for example, anchor the two ends of the house, while the living area is located at the point where the various pathways through the house intersect, so that they are constantly drifting back and forth between the two.

By the time of the completion of the Mercedes-Benz Museum in Stuttgart, Germany, early last year, van Berkel was a more confident talent. Conceived as a finely honed machine, the museum is a bold reworking of the rotunda of Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum. Its complex, interlocking spirals — a system of ramps that lead down through galleries stocked with sleek cars — revealed the same preoccupation with complex geometries as his earlier work, but with an astounding level of refinement.

Unfortunately, van Berkel has had less success in the United States. In 1999 he was included in a competition sponsored by the Canadian Center for Architecture to come up with proposals for the development of a vast site extending west from Madison Square Garden to the Hudson River, but nothing came of it. A year later, he was awarded a commission for the design of a major addition to the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford. The design featured an ingenious system of intertwining ramps that connected several existing 19th-century buildings around a central court. But the museum's board and directorship changed, and it died.

The Villa NM is a taste of what we've been missing. The seeming ease with which van Berkel handles such a complex formal language makes you eager to see the discoveries that are yet to come.

In the end, however, the house's most delicious feature may be the way it playfully mocks our cultural pretensions. In a society driven by rampant careerism and painfully averse to risk — especially the risk of being labeled gauche — the house is a monument to what can happen when you let go of inhibitions. It proves that the slickness of the computer age does not necessarily have to lead us to a world sanitized of sensual charms. ■

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