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Every good tale should have a twist

and, for the architect Ben van Berkel, a twist can also transform an ordinary kind of building into something unique. Van Berkel is well known for dynamic buildings with a sense of fluidity, full of curves and sinuous shapes, and with the Villa NM in upstate New York he has applied imaginative thought to a modestly scaled holiday home, transforming the idea of a box-like cabin into a highly sculpted and intriguing object.

Van Berkel's clients had bought a plot of land on a hillside, with mesmerising views of the surrounding woodlands and undulating countryside. They had seen van Berkel's designs for an earlier project, the Mobius House, at an exhibition in New York, and were so taken with his practice's work that they asked him to create a family house for them, for weekends and holidays.

Shape shifter

No cabin has ever looked as cool and curvy as this Dutch-designed family retreat in the woods of upstate New York.

Dominic Bradbury follows its contours

The sculptural staircase with its 'harp string' handrail leads to a white Corian kitchen island

Photographs by Christian Richters





A section of the house curls up in one corner to create a natural space for a carport, with bedrooms above

It's as if a box of concrete and glass has been grabbed and twisted

'From the house you have an incredible panoramic view of the whole region,' says van Berkel, who heads the Amsterdam-based UN Studio with Caroline Bos. 'The house plays with this view and with the landscape, but we really started with the geometric transformation of the structure, exploring how the house could turn from a simple horizontal experience, through a twist, into something else.'

The twist becomes a point of fascination, as well as defining the layout and structure of the building. It's as though a rectangular box of concrete and glass has been grabbed at two corners and twisted in the middle, creating an irregular building with a number of levels. Essentially, there are two main floors, with two bedrooms and a bathroom on the upper level, and the living-room and kitchen, plus a guest room, on the lower. Yet, inside, the twist at the centre

of the house allows for additional shifts in floor level using sculpted ramps, topped with steps, to lead you from one area to another. The living-room, then, steps down gently and without doors to the kitchen, where an island of sculpted white Corian emerges from the white, polyurethane floors.

'The twist plays with the idea of how sleeping and living can become almost one, how everything can flow together,' van Berkel says. 'There is this idea of continuous living and an emphasis on the moment of crossing from one level to another. It's not a linear space but a kaleidoscopic one. We also played with ideas of furniture-making, so that elements such as the staircase almost become pieces of furniture.'

The simple, modest beauty of the house belies its structural complexity. It has three bedrooms, and measures

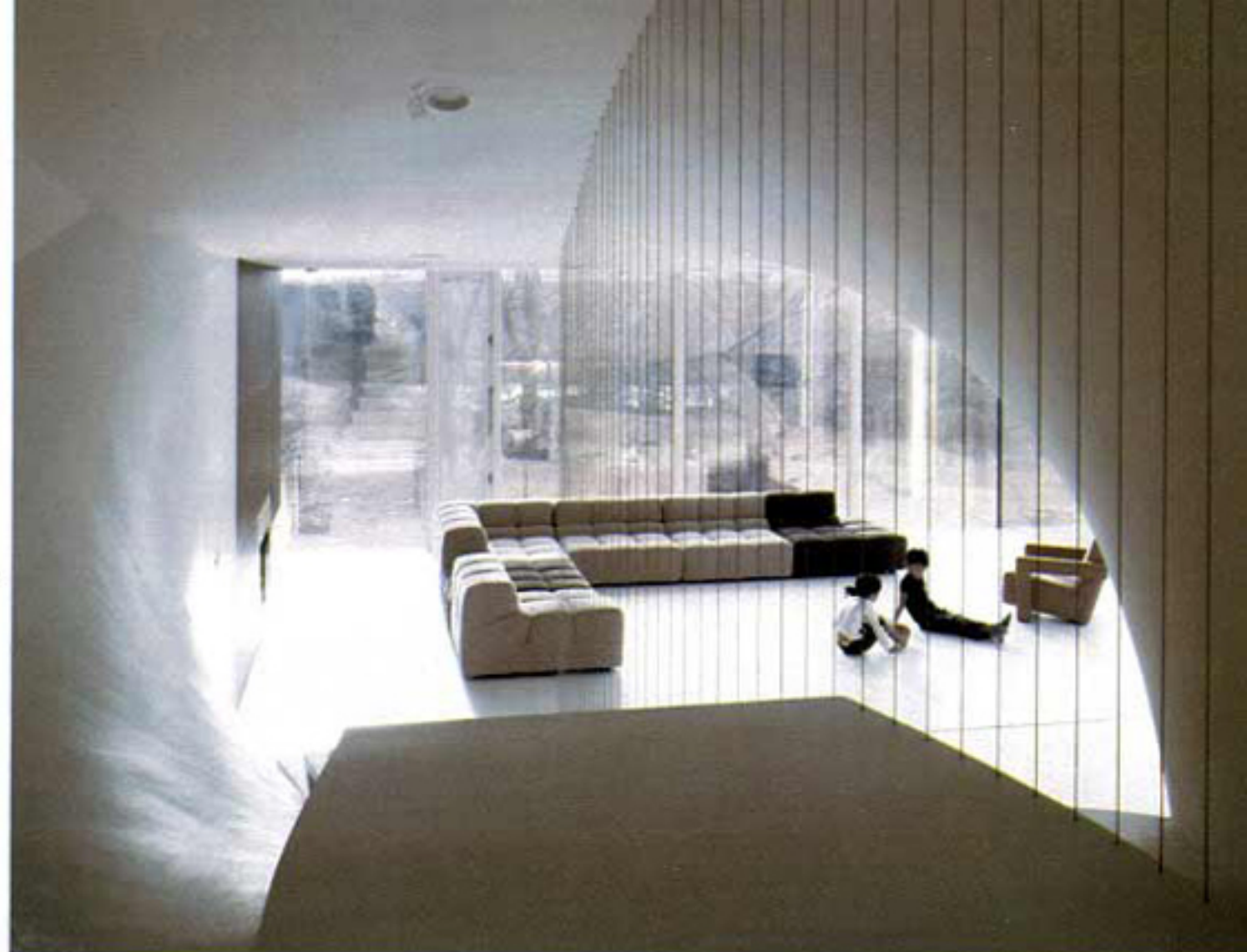
about 250 square metres – not large for a holiday house, especially one in America – yet it feels larger because of the lack of solid divisions and the simplicity of the detail. Much of the interior is pure white, with select areas of contrast, such as wooden panelling around the fireplace. This makes the villa appear more spacious, as does the lack of intrusive additions such as handrails on the staircase, where an almost invisible system of wires – stretched like the strings of a harp – creates a safety barrier instead.

‘We wanted to keep it very pure,’ says van Berkel. ‘Too heavy a detail, such as a handrail on the stairs, would have been too much. It is a compact house, but the finishes and the big windows give it a beautiful, spacious effect. At the same time, one detail can generate an enormous impression, depending on how you articulate that detail.’

The owners, who are now completing their garden and swimming-pool, are apparently so taken with their new home that they find it hard to leave. Few houses connect so well with the surrounding countryside, which is a defining part of Villa NM, with the large windows opening up different sight lines, and expanses of glass reflecting the shifting colours of the trees through the seasons.

‘The most important thing here is the landscape,’ says van Berkel. ‘That’s what the clients fell in love with. The house plays with the view, and when you shift levels you have this frame, this beautiful background of the landscape itself.’ ◉

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Tufty-Time seating from B&B Italia, above. Even the kitchen unit, below, has its own twist

‘The finishes and big windows give a beautiful, spacious effect’

