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The house that fell to earth

Ben van Berkel of Amsterdam-based architects UNStudio talks to Christopher Kanal about VILA NM, an otherworldly private residence in upstate New York that is the first building to be completed by the practice in the US.



A space oddity sits among the rolling hills of upstate New York. The golden windows of UN Studio's first building in the US look out onto the New World.

The sinuous characteristics of Dutch architectural pioneer UNStudio's building are evident from a distance as you approach the two-storey house, called ViLA NM, sitting astride one of the most prominent hills in the area. This is the Big Country: waves of pasture, undulating mountains and abrupt snatches of pine and birch forest.

ViLA NM, located in Sullivan County, New York State, was completed last year. It was built for Leo Tsimmer, a Russian businessman and his family, as a retreat from the Big Apple. Depending on your point of view, ViLA NM looks either like it fell from the sky or was raised up from the earth. 'I like the way ViLA NM is connected to the ground as well as the way that it is almost trying to fly away from it,' says UNStudio's Ben van Berkel from his office in Amsterdam.

ViLA NM certainly explores new frontiers of architectonics as well as evoking, all at once, 1970s kitsch, Mojave desert motels and Russian dachas. The house responds well to its rural location, even transforms it a little. The windows are made of the same bronze-tinted glass used in old Las Vegas casinos. In the afternoon the glass gives the surrounding landscape a golden glow, and as the sun slowly sets, it becomes mirrored, transfigured.

'I am fascinated with the idea of the holiday home,' says van Berkel. 'The essence of the house was that it needed to be like a dacha, a place for holidays. There are so many different layers that people who come and see it cannot put their finger on what makes it different from an American home.' ViLA NM's roots may be in Europe, but the building resists definition.

Labour of love

'Small-scale projects like these are very scarce today,' says van Berkel. 'It has become almost impossible to do them because of the high

building costs.' Thanks to Tsimmer's belief in ViLA NM, as well as his capital, van Berkel's design has been realised, but it was a labour of love. The project was first discussed way back in 2000.

Van Berkel describes their first meeting as a slightly surreal experience. '[Tsimmer] was very open to experimenting with how the design weaves together living, working and sleeping,' he recalls, adding that Tsimmer gave him a cheque on the spot.

Tsimmer bought a 13-acre plot of land with magnificent views. The Russian was raised in the Urals and wanted a dacha for his new frontier. Tsimmer was one of the former Soviet Union's fledgling capitalists. He organised Moscow's first ever rave and even opened American-style doughnut shops. Coming to America in the early 1990s, Tsimmer soon built an empire exporting products such as frozen chickens back to the old country at a time when the post-Soviet economy was in meltdown and queues for food a regular TV news staple.

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Design twist

The flat-roofed 300 square-metre villa is split into two parts – one follows the slope of the hill, the other rises above it. The central vertical axis forms



The internal knotted movement evokes the interlocking spirals of UN Studio's celebrated Mercedes-Benz Museum in Stuttgart.

a twisted shape that contains the bathroom, kitchen and fireplace. The twist is central to the design, providing not just column-free space for unobstructed movement but structural support for the first-floor cantilever. Expansive perimeter glass walls and large windows allow the family to enjoy 360° views of the surrounding landscape.

Modernist design

ViLA NM's signature internal knotted movement evokes the interlocking spirals of UN Studio's celebrated Mercedes-Benz Museum in Stuttgart, completed in 2006 and conceived as a revamping of Frank Lloyd Wright's rotunda at the Guggenheim Museum. 'I like to think of ViLA NM as a further extension of the Mobius House, but there are more links between it and the Mercedes Benz Museum. The twists in the house were also used in the Mercedes Benz Museum.'

Van Berkel's work is marked by the influence of computer-age technologies that have enabled him to mould an elastic world where boundaries between work and play, public and private, have all but melted away.

'What is wonderful today is that you can play with the transformative principles of

architecture,' says Van Berkel. 'You can start to liberate your stylistic references and make designs far more elastic.' This approach also reinterprets the material organisation of a building and what a structure actually is.

With its swooping interiors and androgynous design, ViLA NM comes closest to realising van Berkel's dreams. Yet, unlike a lot of contemporary architecture, van Berkel's designs never take themselves too seriously. ViLA NM is playful, sexy and fun. The house is a complex design simply evoked. 'There is a light-hearted quality to the design,' says van Berkel. 'The golden windows, the endless reflections and mirrored landscape – Tsimmer is a Russian obsessed with gold.'

Hints of what lie beneath the exterior are evident as you approach ViLA NM's entrance from a dirt road that leads up to its position at the top of the hill – the carport is tucked under the cantilevered bedroom wing. This is where the exterior wall of the south end lifts up in a gentle curve to meet the soffit above the entrance. The impact of these contortions is evident on the outside, but only truly appreciated once inside.

The American rural retreat has long influenced modernist architects. 'I knew Philip Johnson,' says Van Berkel. 'He always joked about the inclusiveness of his Glass House and how the most important part was the fireplace. Its one-brick column carries the whole construction, with a fireplace and toilet integrated into it. Frank Lloyd Wright visited the Glass House once and asked to use the bathroom and Philip pointed to the fireplace. "Am I supposed to shit in the fireplace?" Frank said.'

However, whereas the Modernist structures of the first half of the 20th century emerged out of basic rectangles that sat above the earth, ViLA NM takes a different, almost anarchic approach. Its curved middle section marks a departure into new territory at a crucial point, particularly given that the south elevation of van Berkel's design

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Ben van Berkel

DESIGN DUO

ViLA NM is a fittingly dramatic first US project for UNStudio's van Berkel and Caroline Bos, who last year won the Jencks Award for their contribution to the theory and practice of architecture internationally. Van Berkel studied architecture at the Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam and at the Architectural Association in London. In 1988, van Berkel and Bos set up an architectural practice in Amsterdam.

The Van Berkel & Bos Architectuurbureau designed the Karbouw office building, the Erasmus bridge in Rotterdam, Museum Het Valkhof in Nijmegen, the Moebius house and the NMR facilities for the University of Utrecht, among others projects.

In 1998 Ben van Berkel and Bos established a new firm: UNStudio. Recent projects include the Theatre Agora in Lelystad, the Netherlands and the Light House in Aarhus, Denmark. Van Berkel also teaches, and is currently the professor of conceptual design at the Staedelschule in Frankfurt am Main.

appears to pay homage to Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House (1951) as well as Johnson's Glass House (1949). 'I am interested in going beyond what I call the collage of the Modernist model,' says van Berkel. 'I don't like the idea of collage architecture with different, separated ingredients but prefer one where all the ingredients of architecture blur into each other.'

One result of blurring the design elements was to create ambiguity in interpretation. 'In architecture we still work in fragments and bring them together, instead of trying to find an integral coherent quality where you cannot really put your finger on where the scenes are in the design.'

The architectural twist that van Berkel describes as a 'super integral addition' transforms the spatial reality of ViLA NM's interaction with the land surrounding it, while simultaneously creating a radically different

a passageway that gradually opens and twists abruptly to connect the two ends of the house. One of the floors twists to become a wall, while a wall metamorphoses into a ceiling. A striking twisting stair lightly falls through this space from the living room above. The tautness of the curves, the sensuality of the surfaces and the sheer animation of spaces contracting and expanding brings to mind a womb-like refuge. On reaching the top of the stairs you are confronted with sweeping panoramas of the mountains. A second set of stairs leading up to the bedrooms completes the swooping interior movement. While there is generous light from the windows, ViLA NM offers areas to retreat to, in marked contrast to Modernism's ceaseless striving for light and transparency.

'ViLA NM is a kind of critique of the modern open house,' says van Berkel. 'It is as accessible, but you can also hide.'

VILA NM LOOKS EITHER LIKE IT FELL FROM THE SKY OR WAS RAISED FROM THE EARTH.

interior. 'It is a house with a twist on many levels,' says van Berkel. 'This twist not only brings people together in the house, it is a play on the landscape around it, which is almost absorbed into ViLA NM.'

The rectangular form twists at midpoint, then rises snake-like up at one end to hang as a canopy over the carport. Around the back of the house, the form twists again to follow the slope of a hill. 'If you walk around the house, the view of the landscape is one of the most important factors determining how the house comes together,' says van Berkel.

Radical approach

Such attention to a building's impact reflects how van Berkel's design philosophy has evolved. He studied architecture at the Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam and at the Architectural Association (AA) in London. In the mid-1980s he was a student of Zaha Hadid's, which was followed by work at Santiago Calatrava's practice. 'I was fascinated when Calatrava lectured at the AA and talked about architecture as an engineer,' he reflects.

Critical approach

The entrance from the carport brings you into the kitchen, the walls of which are made from polycarbonate panels embedded with LED lights. Leaving the kitchen you pass into

Many levels

Van Berkel wants the house to communicate design on many levels. 'I think it plays with the complex and the sober and the serenity of the surroundings,' he says. 'There is a transformative quest for spatial qualities in the house.'

'While the volumes of ViLA NM are complex, the space is very simple. The house is effectively a play between the two,' says van Berkel. 'I have discovered that creating complex sections and structures using certain limited geometrical elements can create calmness, like the music of Phillip Glass or Pierre Boulez. Geometry can let you play with particular rhythms in the design.'

Van Berkel brings an uninhibited playfulness to the design of ViLA NM through eccentric touches, from a bathroom decked out in marble to the stereo speakers set in the swimming pool.

He likes to create 'after images' – spatial memories that only reveal themselves after time. 'We are too concerned with the iconic,' he says. 'I am arguing that architecture is important, but also not important.'

Van Berkel wants his designs to inspire people, and not just those lucky enough to live in a house designed by him. And there is one reaction he seeks above all others. 'I want them to come back,' he says, 'as they would with a good piece of writing to read something again and understand it.' ■