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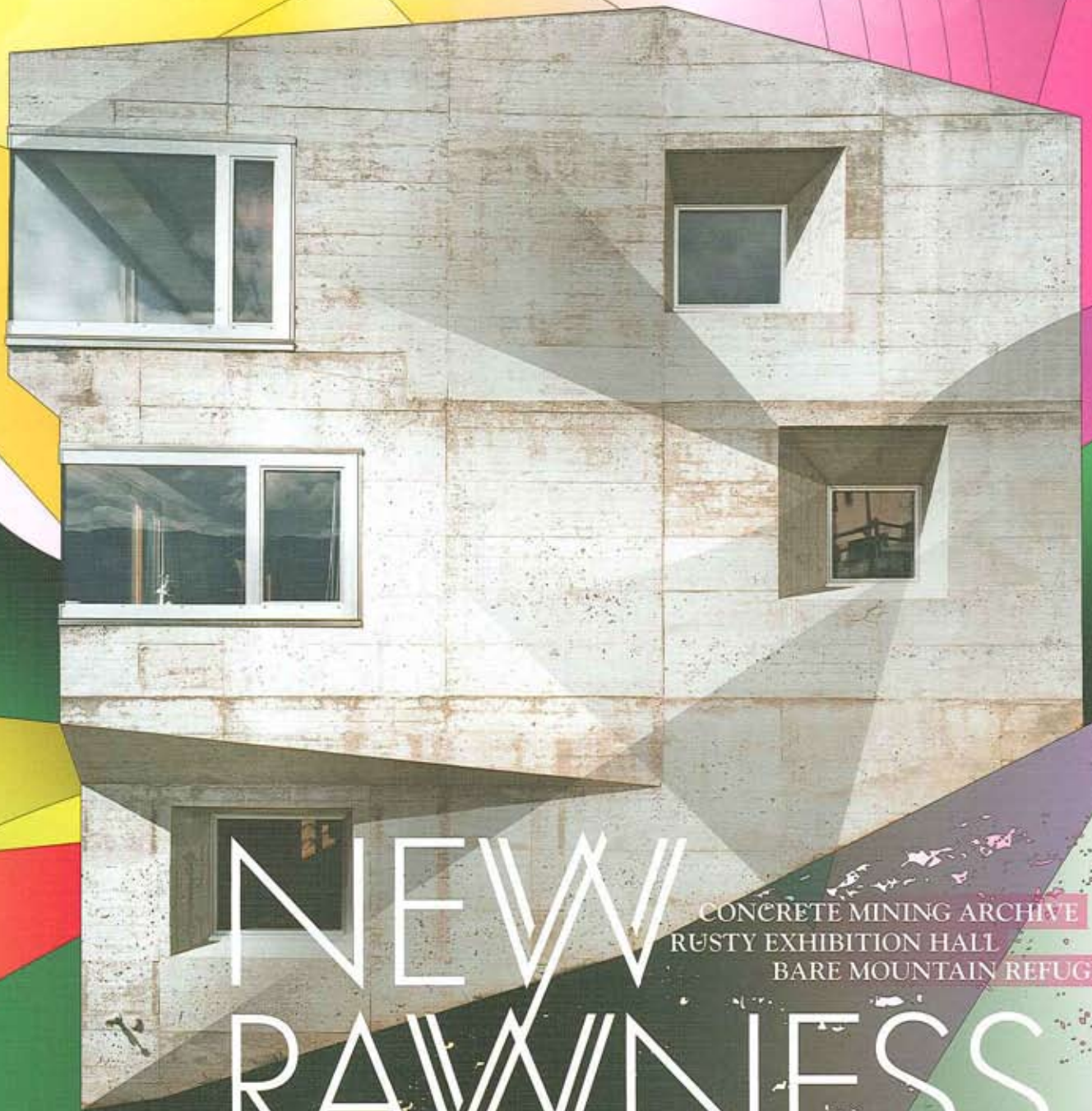
ANOTHER
ARCHITECTURE

WINNER
EUROPEAN DESIGN
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'A truly 21st century magazine'
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European award for excellence in design

MARK #14
JUNE / JULY 2008

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BY THE MAKERS OF
FRAME



NEW
RAWNESS

CONCRETE MINING ARCHIVE
RUSTY EXHIBITION HALL
BARE MOUNTAIN REFUGE





CHARLES BESSARD AND NANNE DE RU IN THE ROTTERDAM OFFICE OF THEIR ARCHITECTURE PARTNERSHIP. ON THE WALL BEHIND THEM IS THEIR LOGO, WITH THE FRENCH ROOSTER ON THE LEFT AND THE DUTCH LION ON THE RIGHT.

NOTHING
GROWS
IN THE
SHADOW OF
BIG TREES'

**NANNE DE RU AND CHARLES
BESSARD WORK APART TOGETHER
UNDER THE NAME POWERHOUSE
COMPANY.**

TEXT DAVID KEUNING
PHOTOS JEROEN MUSCH

NANNE DE RU AND CHARLES BESSARD are perfectionists. We'd been angling for an interview with them for some time, but they kept putting us off. Construction on their first big project, a villa in Bennekom in the Netherlands might have been completed, but they needed time to put the finishing touches to the interior decoration. There are, says De Ru, 'to my great relief, no hackneyed design classics like an Eames chair'. There is, however, a table of their own design, and the architects did have a hand in the selection of the rest of the furniture. 'We put three years of toil and sweat into this project. Having it written up prematurely would not do it justice.'

This uncompromising attitude is also a hallmark of the work of the two young architects, who have been collaborating together since 2004 under the name Powerhouse Company in an unorthodox way: Bessard lives and works in Copenhagen, De Ru in Rotterdam. They visit each other once a month. The rest of the time their Skype link is permanently open. This way they share the benefits of a creative partnership but not the pressures inherent in the travails of everyday practice. They came up with this arrangement a long time ago, when they were both studying at the Berlage Institute in Rotterdam.

When did you first meet each other?

De Ru: I think it was in 2000, right?

Bessard: September 2000. We come from very different backgrounds. I graduated back in 1993, at the École Spéciale d'Architecture in Paris. Then I worked in Paris and London for seven years before I moved to Rotterdam. Nanne graduated a year before we met.

What kind of projects did you do?

Bessard: The last project I did in Paris was the refurbishment of the Trocadéro, which now houses the Cité de l'Architecture et du Patrimoine. I worked for Jean-François Bodin, who is a specialist of museums. It was quite crazy. I was project leader for the library at that time. After having worked on it for 18 months really intensively, the roof of the Trocadéro burnt down. The budget for the library went up in smoke and my part of the project was cancelled. I was really pissed off, we had designed every detail, up to the furniture. It was enough. After four years of French bureaucracy and not having anything happen, I decided to go to England. I entered Sheppard Robson. It

was a fantastic experience. In three years we built two buildings in central London. Big office blocks, on the intersection of Euston Road and Tottenham Court Road. Glass façades, very high-tech. Not necessarily my cup of tea, but still, very interesting.

Why did you go to Sheppard Robson?

Bessard: I had a few offers, but I was interested to work in a very large commercial practice. Generally speaking, French architects are very bad at management. Sheppard Robson, on the contrary, is a perfect example of management. They're extremely professional. It was great to see how it's all organized, coming from my background. After the Berlage, I went to Jean Nouvel. First I spent some time at the main office in Paris, and then I moved to their office in Copenhagen to work on the Denmark Radio Concert Hall. I was confronted with a lot of French problems again.

Such as?

Bessard: As I said, management is not a French tradition. The way the projects are run results in a very tense atmosphere.

De Ru: It's a critical office. It's not a French thing. It goes for most of these practices; also for OMA; I worked at OMA's think tank AMO after the Berlage. All those offices are very creative, but the work pressure can mount to high levels.

Bessard: The English way of working is much more casual and relaxed. France, or Paris anyway, is very stressed. People are on their nerves all the time, especially when something goes wrong. It's a part of the Parisian attitude I really got sick of. Another thing I liked at Sheppard Robson was the devotion to details, it almost becomes industrial design. We did steel castings, tailor-made lifts and so on. They have this high-tech architectural tradition. We try, in our own office, to keep that attitude. Not the high-tech aesthetics, but the craftsmanship is important to us.

What about you Nanne, where do you come from?

De Ru: I first went to the College of Technology in Amsterdam. It was a very conscious choice, I was totally into Bauhaus at that time. Learning how to design wasn't my first concern, I wanted to study building techniques before anything else. I regretted my decision as soon as I started. It was so much more boring than I had imagined. In the

VILLA 1 BENNEKOM / THE NETHERLANDS 2008

De Ru: 'The site was a big piece of forest at the end of a dirt road. It had been on sale for a long time. There was a little wooden dacha on it. You were allowed to build on it, but not more than 200 m² or 600 m². The clients wanted a house of 1400 m², more than twice the limit. But after studying the zoning plan and the zoning regulations, it turned out that we could build an outbuilding and a full cellar underneath. That could definitely go up to 1400, so we went ahead and started designing it.'

'We talked a lot to the client about architecture. He had very eclectic ideas. He liked Farnsworth house by Mies van der Rohe, as well as Palladio's Villa Rotonda, because of the big hallway. He had visited them both. And in Norway he had gone to this open air museum in Oslo. He liked the old farms there because when you come in, you are immediately in the middle of the house and there is a big fire place. So he had all these ideas about space, but they were very contradictory. He liked old farms with no windows and modern houses with maximum transparency at the same time.'

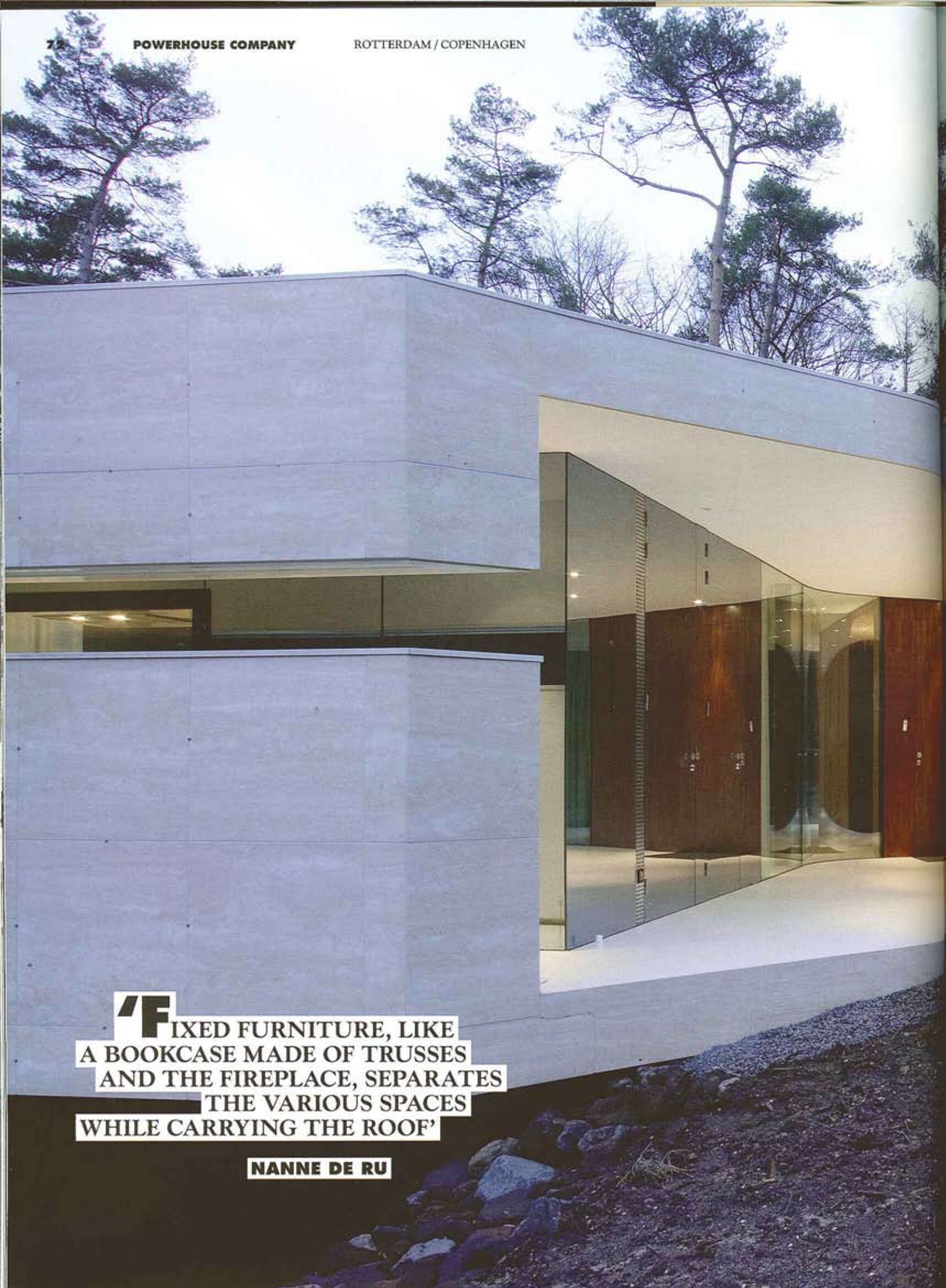
'We put half of the programme in the basement and designed the upper floor with the light in mind, with the study on the north, the kitchen to the southeast and the living room to the southwest. A central hallway with a huge fireplace is right in the middle. The top floor is extremely transparent. Fixed furniture, like a bookcase made of trusses and the fireplace, separates the various spaces and carries the roof at the same time. We struggled with the basement, because we had limited light. We put the guest bedrooms in one wing, the master bedroom in another and the garage in the third. It's a very practical layout. The contrast between the basement and the top floor causes a palette of spatial experiences.'



'WE LIKE THE BRITISH
HIGH-TECH TRADITION. NOT
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CRAFTSMANSHIP IS
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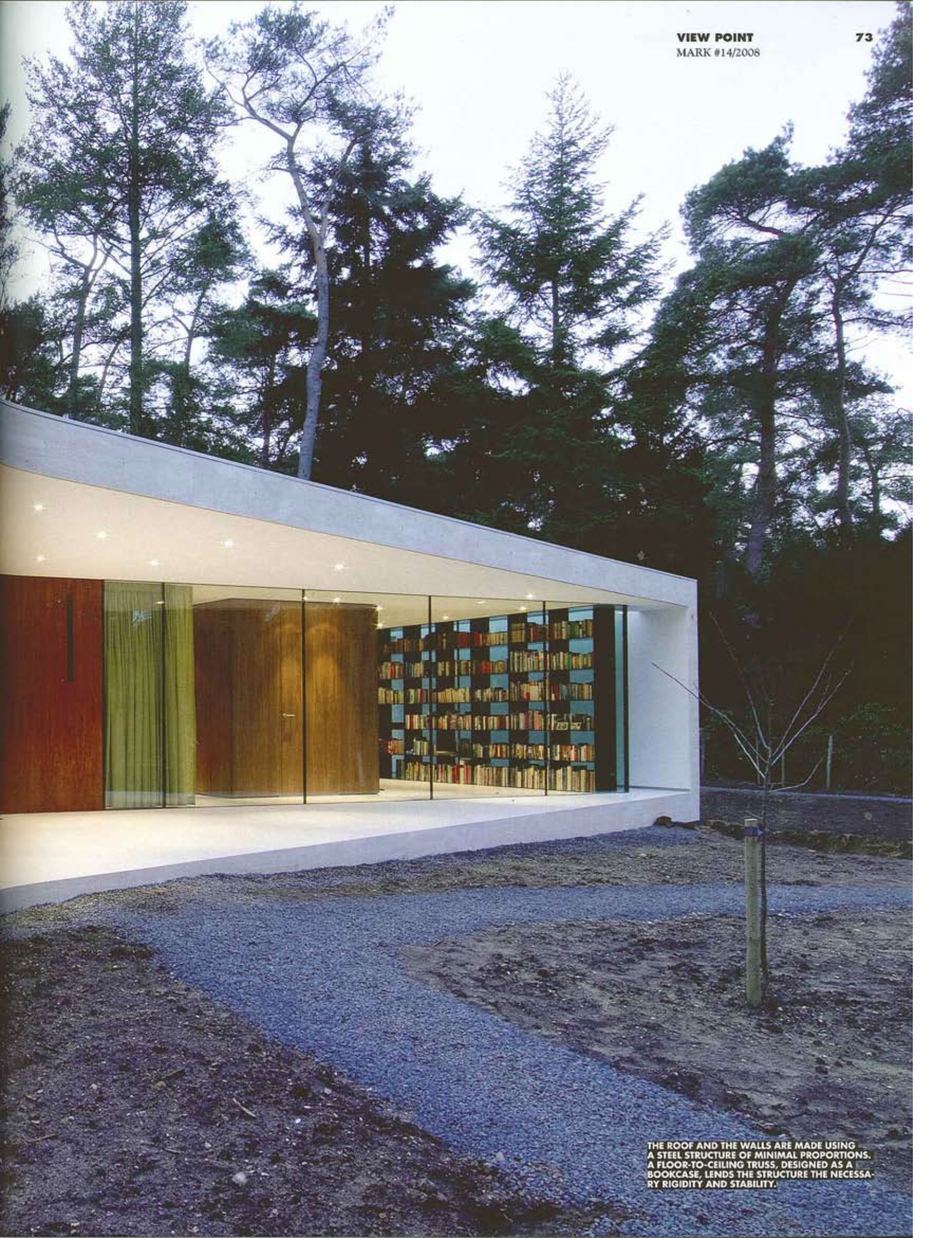
CHARLES BESSARD

THE ACCESS ROAD TO THE HOUSE LEADS NOT TO THE FRONT DOOR, BUT DIRECTLY TO THE UNDERGROUND GARAGE. THE OCCUPANTS, AFTER ALL, RETURN HOME MORE OFTEN BY CAR THAN ON FOOT.



'FIXED FURNITURE, LIKE
A BOOKCASE MADE OF TRUSSES
AND THE FIREPLACE, SEPARATES
THE VARIOUS SPACES
WHILE CARRYING THE ROOF'

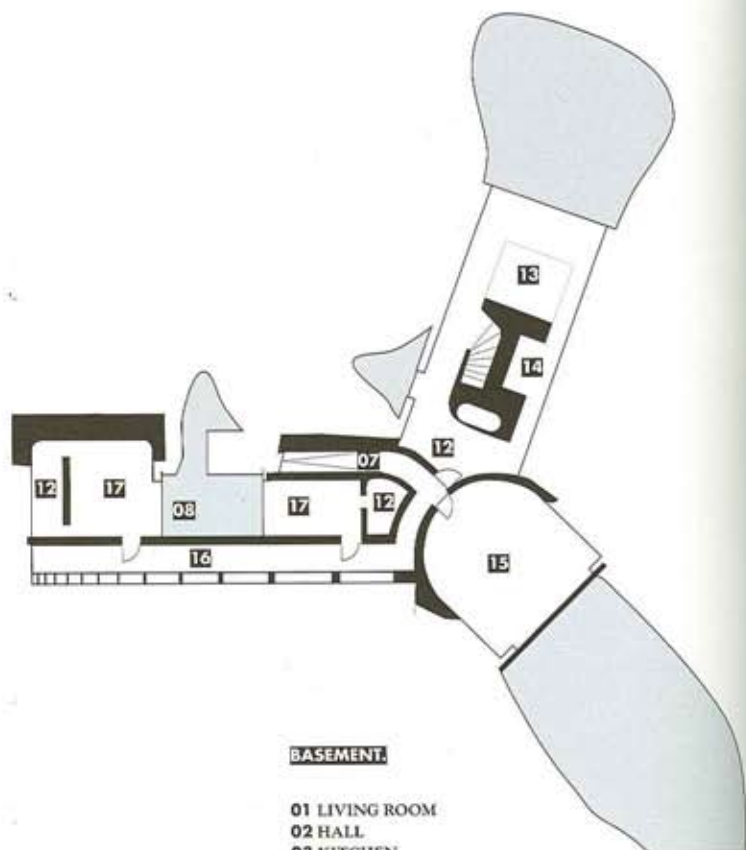
NANNE DE RU



THE ROOF AND THE WALLS ARE MADE USING A STEEL STRUCTURE OF MINIMAL PROPORTIONS. A FLOOR-TO-CEILING TRUSS, DESIGNED AS A BOOKCASE, LENDS THE STRUCTURE THE NECESSARY RIGIDITY AND STABILITY.



GROUND FLOOR.



BASEMENT.

- 01 LIVING ROOM
- 02 HALL
- 03 KITCHEN
- 04 STUDY
- 05 TERRACE
- 06 STUDIO
- 07 RAMP
- 08 PATIO
- 09 TOILET
- 10 ENTRANCE
- 11 STAIRCASE
- 12 BATHROOM
- 13 BEDROOM
- 14 WALK-IN CLOSET
- 15 GARAGE
- 16 STORAGE CORRIDOR
- 17 GUEST ROOM

beginning, you get a lot of stuff that you don't see the point of, like concrete calculations, construction site layout, scaffolding plans. But now I benefit a lot from this. You get to know how contractors work, and how you should approach them. After the College of Technology, I worked for One Architecture for about a year. Then I went to the Berlage and that's where I met Charles. Those were two great years. I made a point of spending most of my time there on researching and writing.

Why would you want to write?

De Ru: For me, wanting to become an architect has always been about the full spectrum of craftsmanship. To detail, to build, to plan, to design, to write and to theorize. At the Berlage, we were not allowed to design anything for our final thesis. We had to do research, so I studied a lot on Dutch architects Van Eesteren and Van Lohuizen. I went through their entire archive. They turned out to be very laborious architects who measured everything in the world around them, up to the way the cars move in the streets. They used these figures to make rational plans for the functional city. We now know those cities as icons of brutality, but their designs were very sensible and quite lovingly put together. At the same time, Charles was studying on Le Corbusier's archive and his Contemporary City for three million inhabitants. That sparked a debate between us about the way we should deal with the modern heritage and the way we perceived our own practice. That's when we started discussing the possibility of a practice together. When you're not allowed to design, you speak about it all the time. It's like when you're dieting: you start discussing recipes. In spite of

our plans for a practice of our own, going to AMO was a logical choice. Rem Koolhaas did a master class at the Berlage and he approached me to come and work for him. But I made a vow when I started there: I wasn't going to stay there for more than two years. I strictly kept my promise.

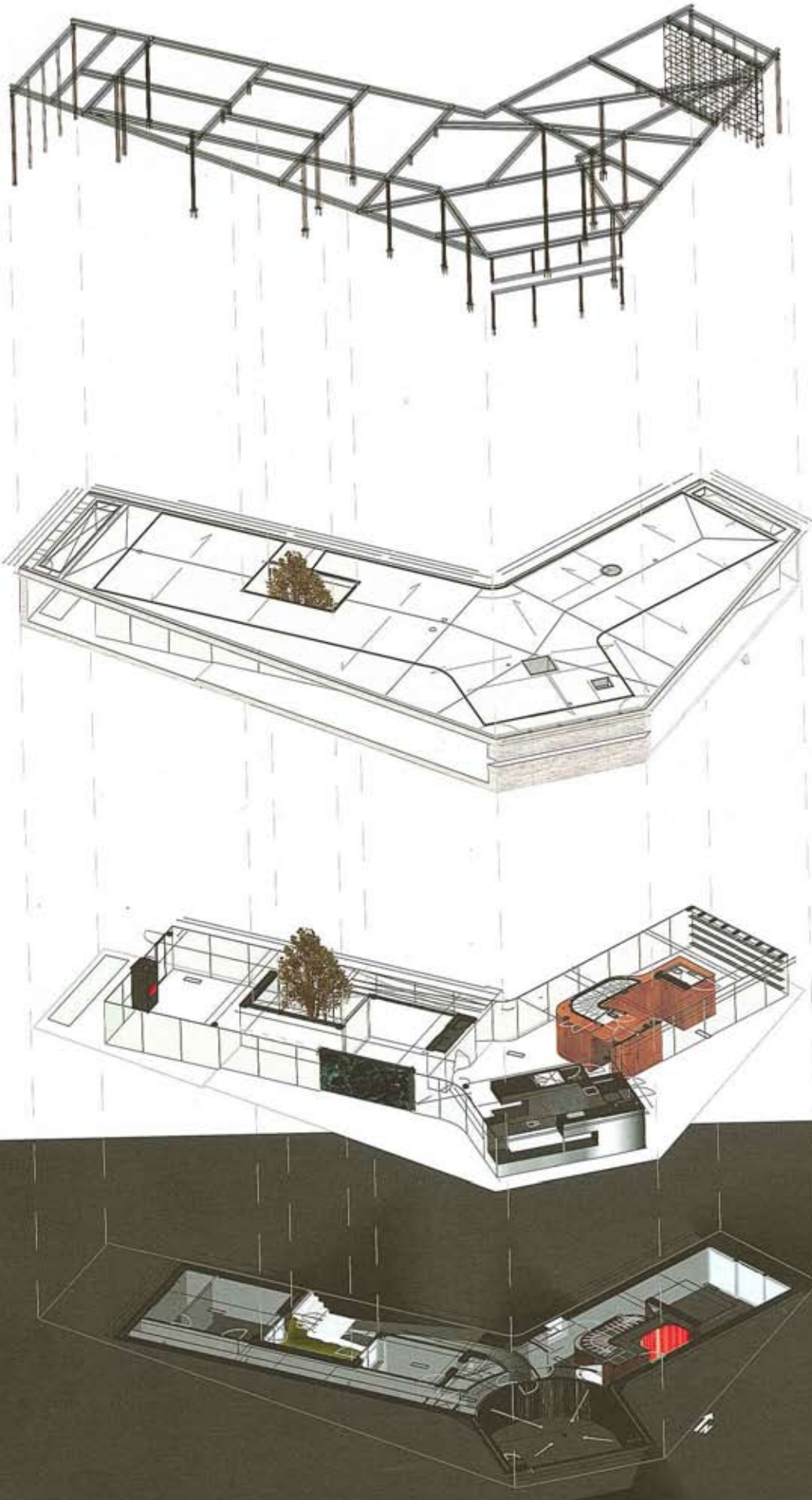
Why did you make that vow?

De Ru: Two years is just a very good time to be somewhere. You learn a lot and get a routine at the same time.

Bessard: There's a nice quote from sculptor Constantin Brancusi. He once got the chance to work for Auguste Rodin and he refused because, as he said, 'nothing grows in the shadow of big trees'. It is very nice to be close to these really great architects, but they're very powerful and can actually vampirize you when you're young and flexible and looking for your own identity. They have a whole constellation of extremely talented people around them. It puts you in a bubble that is very fertile and stimulating. But at a certain point you need to be able to cut the cord.

And then, in 2004, you started your own office, with your own logo. I suppose it is a combination of the French rooster and the Dutch lion?

De Ru: That's correct. We designed it ourselves. They are heraldic animals with a mythical dimension. And it shows that we try to combine two heritages without mixing them into something unrecognizable. They keep their own qualities but combine to form a new image. This paradox was our main question from the start: how can we obtain maximum personal freedom and



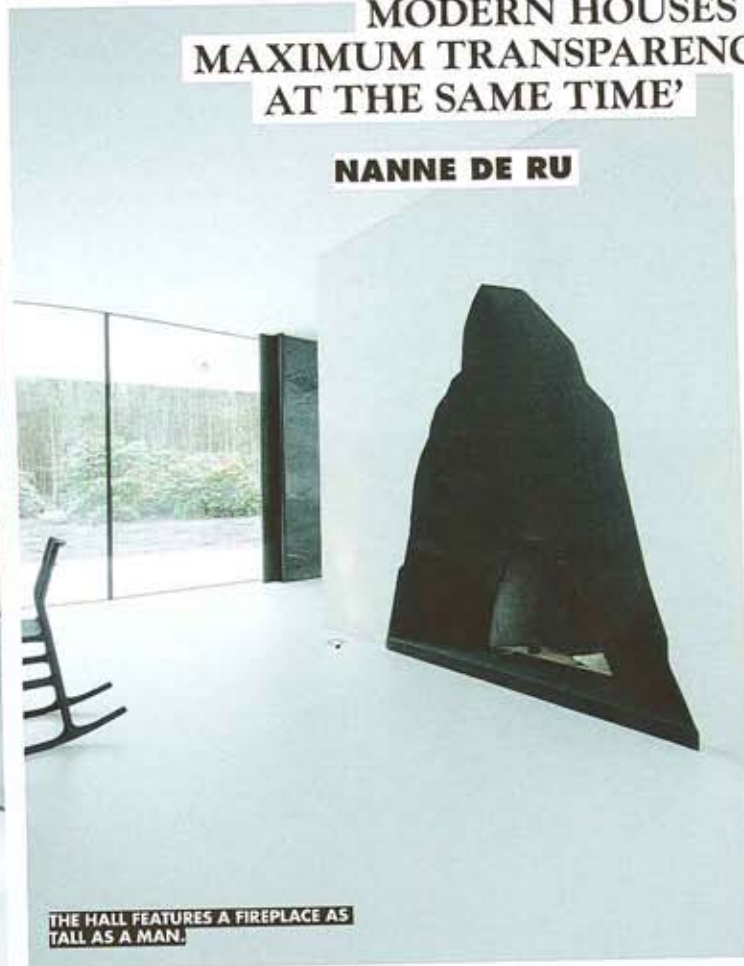


'THE CLIENT LIKED OLD FARMS WITH NO WINDOWS AND MODERN HOUSES WITH MAXIMUM TRANSPARENCY AT THE SAME TIME'

NANNE DE RU



AN INVERSION OF WHAT ONE USUALLY SEES: THE SLIDING DOOR IN THE GLASS WALL OF THE LIVING ROOM IS MADE OF MARBLE. WHEN CLOSED, THE DOOR SEALS TO A STEEL CRUCIFORM COLUMN WRAPPED IN RUBBER.



THE HALL FEATURES A FIREPLACE AS TALL AS A MAN.



THE TOP FLOOR IS A MODERNIST GLASS BOX, WHICH COMPLETELY EXPOSES ITS INTERIOR AT NIGHT.



A SLATE-CLAD KITCHEN CABINET SUPPORTS THE ROOF, SO THAT THE WALL BEHIND THE KITCHEN COUNTER COULD BE CUT OUT ACROSS ITS ENTIRE WIDTH. THE WALL SECTION ABOVE IT SEEMS TO FLOAT.



THE HALL ALSO SERVES AS A DINING ROOM.

'HOW CAN WE OBTAIN PERSONAL FREEDOM AND ACHIEVE COMMON RESULTS AT THE SAME TIME? WORKING APART TOGETHER IS OUR SOLUTION'

NANNE DE RU

achieve maximum common results at the same time? Working apart together is our solution.

What is Powerhouse more than two separate companies working on different projects, apart from the fact that you are friends?

Bessard: We are in different countries, but it feels like we are working at two different ends of one room. Every day we have the video link via Skype. We have the headset on and open most of the day, so it's more close than a collaboration between two separate offices. You could compare it to a relationship. You should always be elevated by the surprises of one another, and if you work together all the time you get to know the other too well. You start to blend into neither the one nor the other.

De Ru: I played the piano a lot when I was younger and I almost went to a conservatory to become a jazz pianist. One thing I learned about improvisation is that when musicians improvise together, they only rarely drown each other out. They listen to each other really well. Architects tend to do the opposite when they work together. We try to design the same way musicians improvise, and we need some distance for that.

Are you each responsible for the commissions you bring in?

Bessard: Yes, the two companies are financially independent. We work around a joint venture for each project. It's a very light administrative set-up. It's logical that when a project takes place in France or Denmark, I take care of it. The same goes for Holland and Nanne. Architecture is for a large part still a very local profession. The contact with the client and the contractor, the legal regulations, the regular visits to the site. I cannot make detail drawings in Dutch, just as Nanne cannot make them in Danish or French, so it doesn't make any sense to work on that together. But at the beginning of a design process, we work

on the assignment on a 50/50 basis. That's one side. The other side of being apart is that you get acquainted with twice as many people. When you're in the same place you meet the same people. We double our markets, we double our networks.

How does it work practically? How often do you visit each other?

Bessard: Low-cost airlines are essential to our way of working. I come at least once a month to Rotterdam and the same goes for Nanne and Copenhagen. As for the financial part, we charge each other as consultants. From the beginning of a project we agree on the percentages.

You actually charge each other?

De Ru: Yes. It's a very straight way of collaborating because you always know exactly what you do for each other. It's clear who brings in a commission, and he proposes a way to share it. It's a model we developed in the first year and it really works well, because it means we're never worried about what the other guy is doing. We both have quite strong characters. We're both Leos, despite our logo. And the distance allows us to be free in all the practical aspects of running an office. I really don't mind whether he buys a very expensive printer. Moreover, I cannot see who he is hiring in Denmark, and he cannot see who I am hiring here. In Holland, we work only four days a week. Fridays I am usually closed. Charles always works five days a week. We never discuss this kind of stuff.

So what do you discuss?

Bessard: We only discuss architecture. And we'd like to keep it that way.

www.powerhouse-company.com



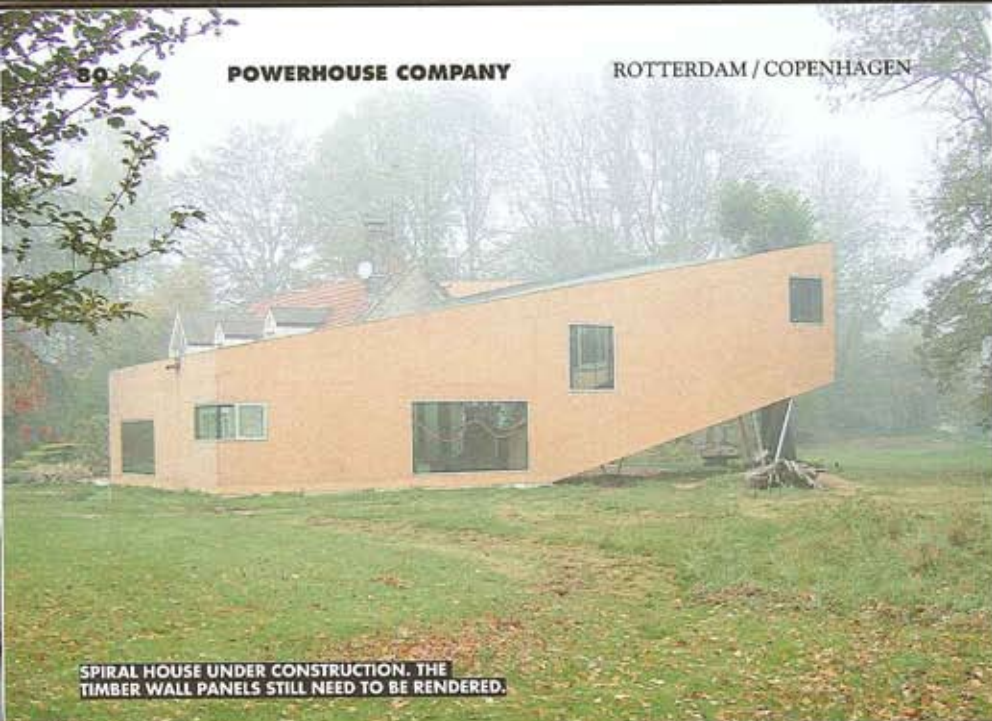
THE BEDROOMS IN THE BASEMENT ARE BATHED IN NATURAL LIGHT BECAUSE THE GROUND AROUND THE VILLA HAS BEEN PARTIALLY EXCAVATED.



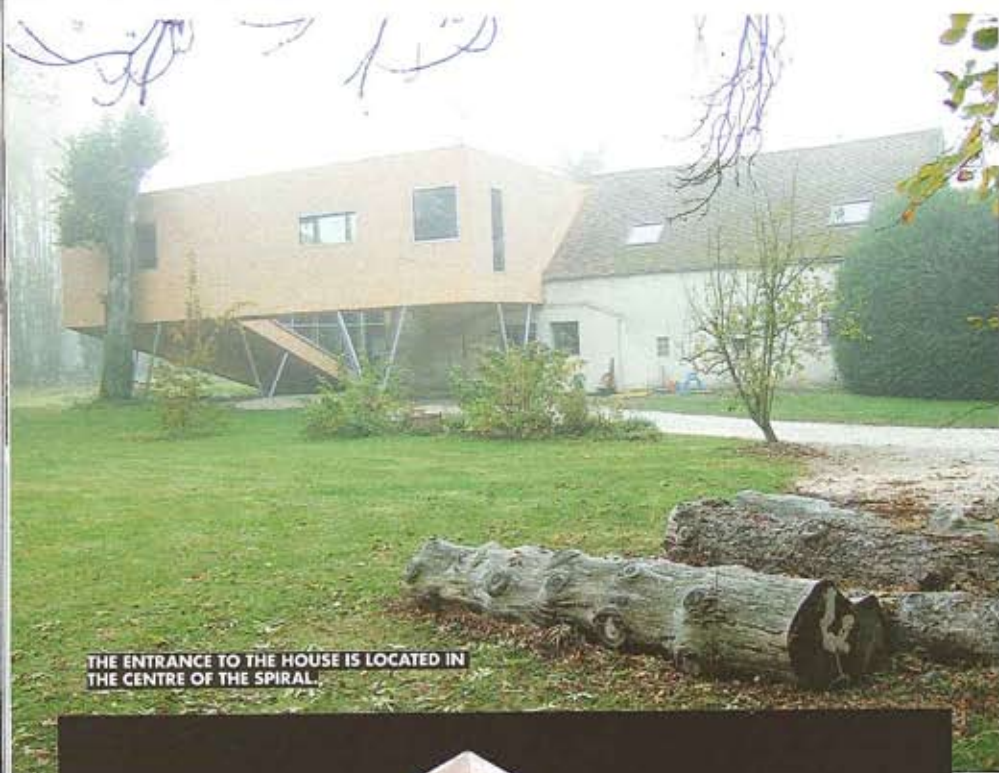
THE UNDERSIDE OF THE STAIRCASE TO THE CELLAR FORMS A SUNKEN CEILING FOR THE BATH.



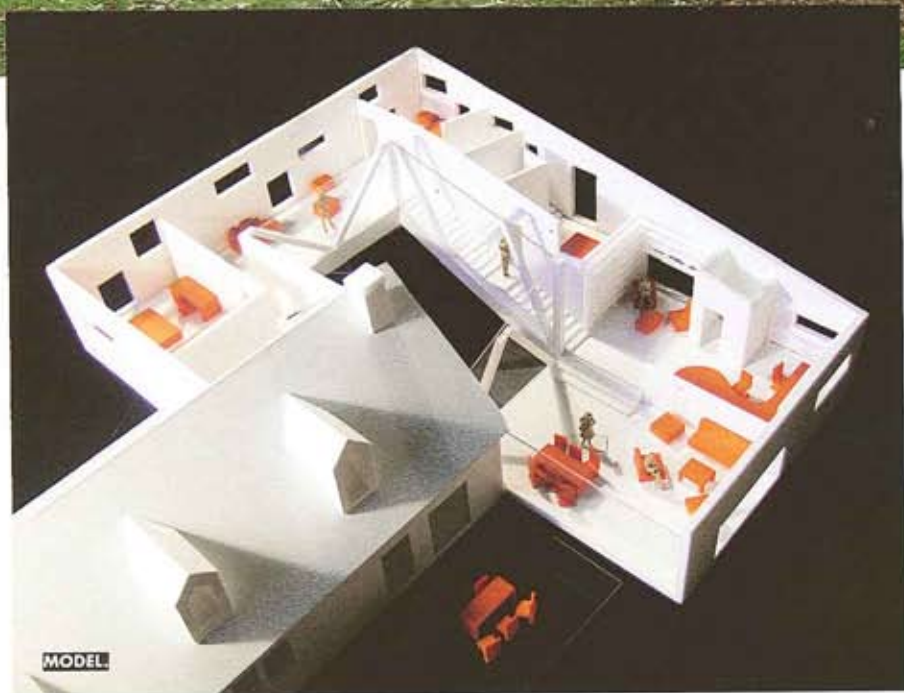
THE GARAGE, THROUGH WHICH THE OCCUPANTS USUALLY ENTER THEIR HOME, IS A UNIQUE SPACE, WITH SILVER-COLOURED WALLS AND A REFLECTIVE BLACK FLOOR AND CEILING.



SPIRAL HOUSE UNDER CONSTRUCTION. THE
TIMBER WALL PANELS STILL NEED TO BE RENDERED.



THE ENTRANCE TO THE HOUSE IS LOCATED IN
THE CENTRE OF THE SPIRAL.



MODEL

SPIRAL HOUSE

BURGUNDY / FRANCE

2008

Bessard: 'Spiral House is an extension of an old farm house on a beautiful plot of about 30,000 m², with a little river running through it. The existing house had been refurbished by the clients a couple of years ago, but they wanted extra space to receive guests. He is one of the best wine producers in Burgundy, where I originally come from, and he wanted a house he could talk about.'

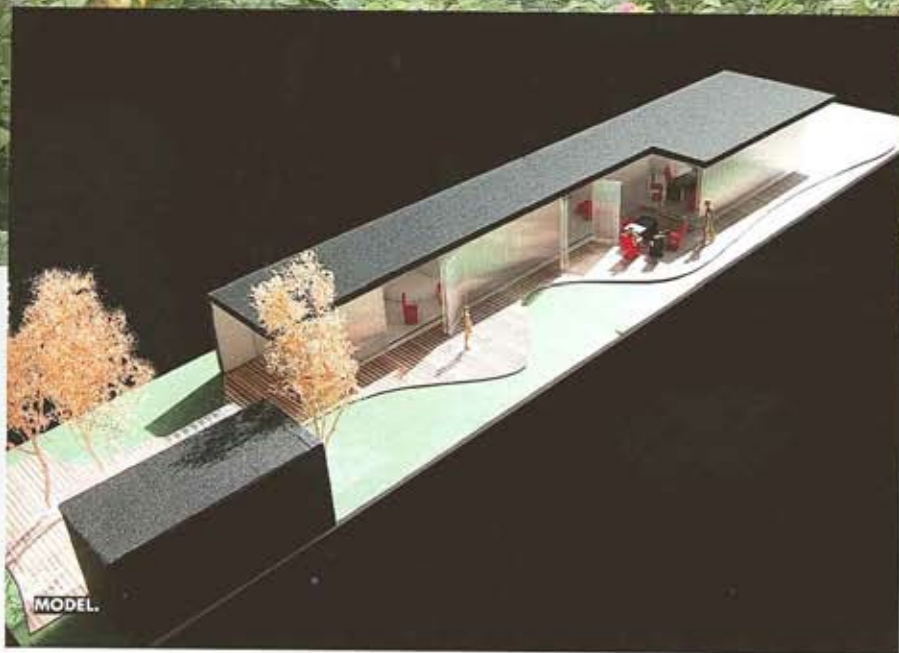
'We noticed two things. First of all, the house was standing alone on this huge plot, with no relationship to the garden. The other thing was, the clients wanted to fully separate the private rooms in the existing house, where they could make a mess, from the reception rooms in the extension. They didn't want to mix the two. But we said to them: hospitality is also about opening up a little bit. So instead of making this very clear distinction, we made it a progressive scale.'

'We organized the programme from public to private, it spirals up. The sequence starts with the living room. A few steps up there are the smoking room and the library. Then you go up to the guest rooms, and then there's a play room for the kids and you're already in the private parts of the house. The kitchen and dining room are on the ground floor of the existing house. You enter the house through the patio, where you have the house rolling up around you.'

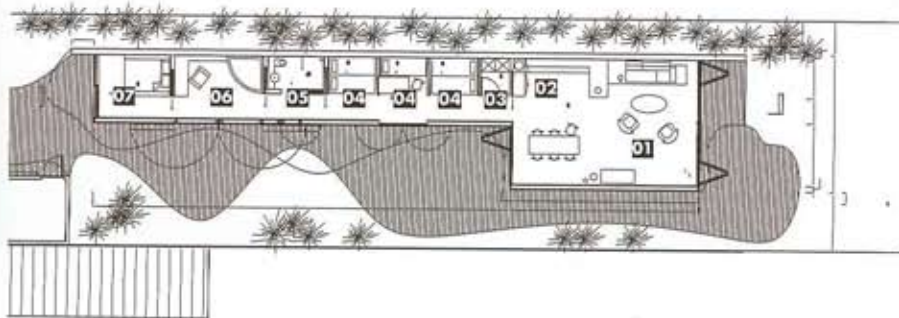
'The façade has a bronze colour. It's simple traditional rendering, with Moscovit quartz particles in it. It has a glittering effect. The clients managed the building site themselves. They wanted to work with some specific contractors that they knew from other projects and the budget was mid-range, enough for a good but standard house. It meant that we couldn't assume that we had full control of the execution. So we radicalized the spatial arrangement and reduced the importance of the detailing, so the architecture could resist eventual execution errors. We worked out every detail, to make it as easy as possible for them to build, while keeping a complex geometry.'



LIVING ROOM IN THE FRONT.



MODEL.



FLOOR PLAN.

- 01 LIVING
- 02 KITCHEN / DINING ROOM
- 03 UTILITY
- 04 SLEEPING ALCOVE
- 05 BATHROOM
- 06 SPA
- 07 BEDROOM

XX LONG SUMMERHOUSE FUNEN / DENMARK 2007

Bessard: "The summer house is on the island of Funen. It's on a strange plot, 10 m wide and 100 m long. The project had a very low budget, especially for Denmark where the costs for labour are incredibly high. To meet the budget and compete with standardized offers, we worked with material normally used for warehouses and spent a lot of time simplifying the details to the utmost. Cheapness without compromising quality can only be achieved at the expense of additional work for the architect, and that is something that clients do not necessarily understand.

"The site has a direct view to the sea and that is its main asset. With a limited size of 110 m², we decided to make a very big living room with a panoramic view to the sea and minimal cabins for the bedrooms. They work like a line of bungalows connected to each other by sliding doors with direct accesses to the garden. Most of the time, the house is only occupied by the parents in the weekends, and in that case the sliding doors are all open, transforming the bedroom wing into one big space. But sometimes they also spend longer holidays there inviting up to three or four couples at the same time. In that case the sliding doors can be closed and the bedrooms can be used like independent bungalows.

"The client for this summer house owns a transport company with a large fleet of trucks. Accustomed to managing, he wanted to manage the contracting and the building site himself as well, but in the end it was the contractor who imposed his choices . . . that was very frustrating."