



The bold, emphatically forward-looking architecture that transformed museums has spread to schools, churches and bedrooms. It's often dazzling, but can you live in it?

Tomorrowland

A special issue on architecture.

Apartment

Ost/Kuttner Apartment

New York

Built 1997

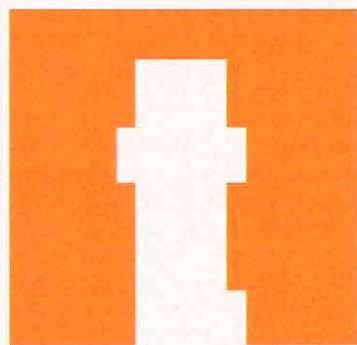
One couple

In a place made of sprawling, undulating plastic, it can be hard to tell where the bedroom ends and the bathroom begins.

A Living Blob

By Austin Bunn

Photographs by Lars Tunbjork

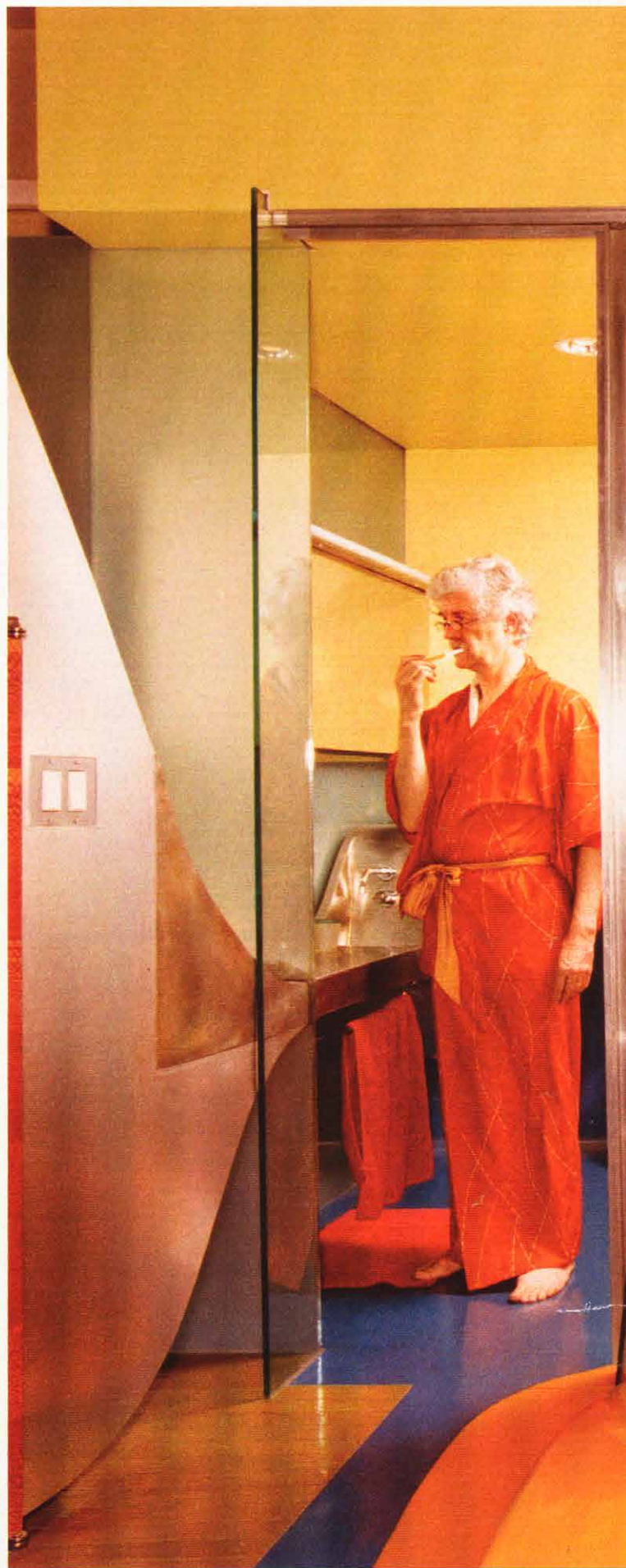


The tour of Beatrix Ost and Ludwig Kuttner's 1,600-square-foot Upper West Side *pied-à-terre* begins, appropriately, in the bathroom. From the outside, it is a frosted-glass cube. One side faces the living room so that, from the couch, you could

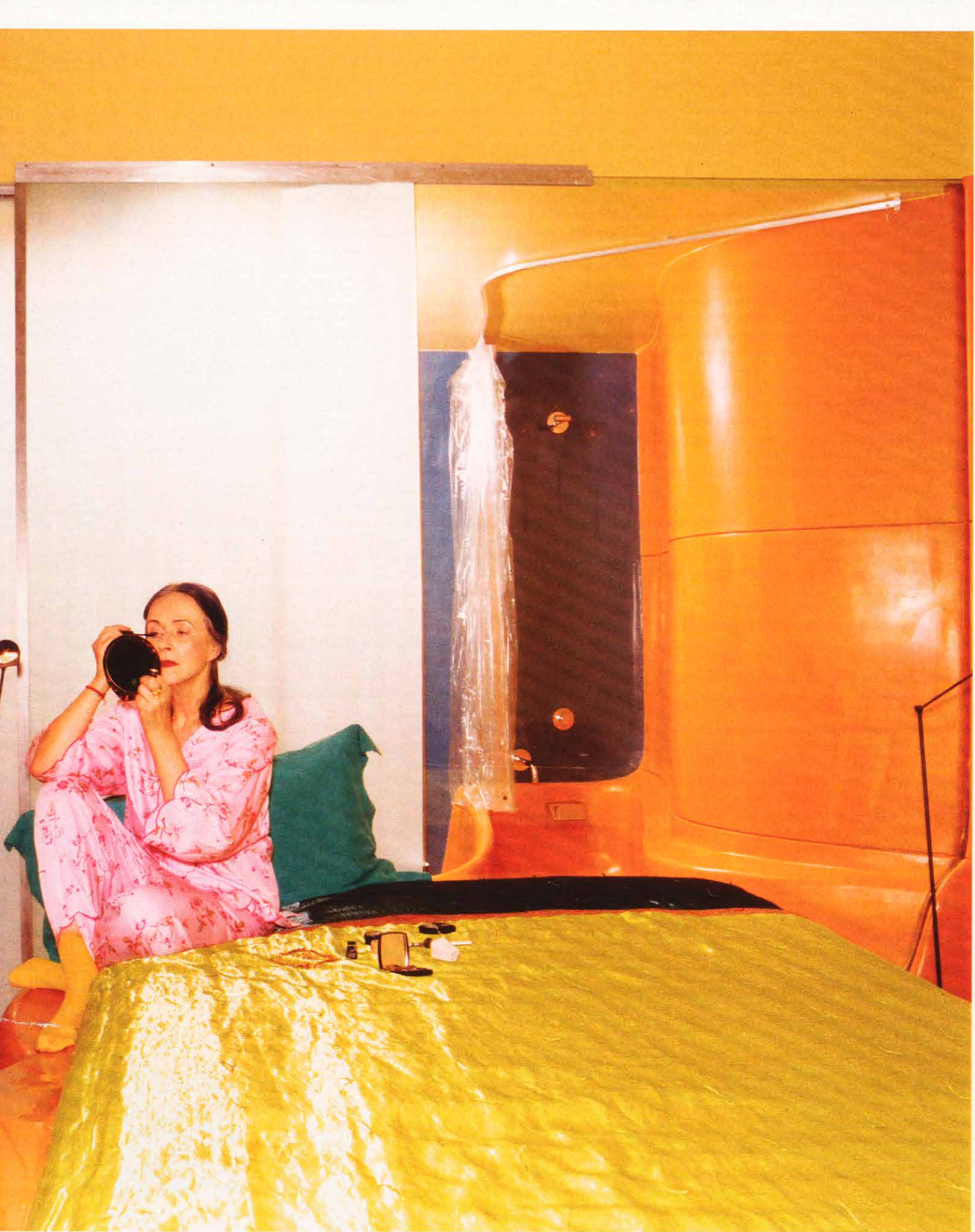
watch a ghostly silhouette Water Pik and floss. Heading into the master bedroom, you angle around an enormous, brushed aluminum teardrop — which is also a sink and a closet, but we'll get to that later — and it becomes clear that Ost and Kuttner are still very much in love. They have to be. A floor-to-ceiling glass pane, albeit with two modest milky areas, stands between the bed and the toilet and the shower, making modesty definitely not the point. Where most of us tend to prefer the privacy of walls, Ost and Kuttner have a window. "It's nice," Kuttner says about the partition. "Instead of being lonely and remote from each other, we can be close. For the same reason, we only have one bathroom sink — so we're always together."

When I ask Ost if it's strange to wake up with her head against the glass where her husband's shower water is splattering, she looks at me quizzically. "No, it's not strange," she says, in a slightly reproving German accent. "It just is."

What is strange in the Ost/Kuttner apartment is just about everything else. When they purchased the apartment in the mid-



Marriage of bed and bath: Kuttner (left) and Ost in their "blob" apartment.



“If something is beautiful today, why would you get tired of it tomorrow? People want to move onto the next when they are tired of themselves.” Ludwig Kuttner, co-owner

With blobs like these, who needs walls? A shower lurks behind the orange blob to the right of Ost (standing).

90's, Ost and Kuttner, the 57-year-old president of the apparel company Hampshire Group, were dead-set against the stark glass minimalism of 20th-century Modernism. They wanted something more contemporary and playful. What they got looks like a continuous puddle of plastic, stretching from the shampoo rack to the bedroom slippers.

In a single sweep of burnt-orange, the wall of the shower flows into the lip of the tub and then spills onto the floor, running out of the bathroom, where it shapes a platform for the mattress. You really could say the tub is also the bed. Taken together, the two rooms have the feel of boudoir subcontracted to Nickelodeon. Ost, an elegant, 60-year-old artist and writer, says, "We call this place Cleopatra's submarine."

Spend any time in the Ost/Kuttner apartment, and you have to get over your sense that shapes need edges or have a responsibility to end. "We wanted to explore an apartment that wouldn't go back to walls and doors and standard room sequences," says Sulan Kolatan, the architect who, with her husband and partner, William Mac Donald, designed the space. "We wanted continuities." So the bathroom sink stretches into a wall and fattens into a storage cabinet. The second shower in the apartment — also orange ("I wanted honey, but they couldn't quite get there," Ost says) and bulbous as a tree trunk — spreads from the stall across the kitchen as the base melts in waves.

Kolatan and Mac Donald will tell you that the design of O/K apartment — critically acclaimed and still featured regularly in design magazines — is not random, nor organic, and most definitely not inspired by natural metaphors, an idea Kolatan calls both "sentimental" and "horrifying." What the apartment is, more precisely, is blobby. If traditional architecture has been the practice of clean lines inside the rectilinear box, blob architecture is messy, roiling and deeply, shamelessly plastic. It is a result of the confluence of software cribbed from the 3-D animation in-

dustry, new materials like carbon fibers and composite resins and architects gone curve-happy.

Kolatan and Mac Donald have already finished the designs for a blobby, 1,800-square-foot addition to a farmhouse in Connecticut — one of the first large-scale, domestic blob experiments — that looks, roughly, like a barn blowing a bubble. Instead of wood, the extension will be made of a fiber-reinforced composite. "The exterior will have the consistency of a 1970's Naugahyde couch," Mac Donald says. "The owners will be able to sunbathe on their roof."

blobitecture is as loose and idiosyncratic as the blobby forms it yields. For the O/K apartment, Kolatan and Mac Donald scanned in spoons, pillows and couch upholstery and then permuted them in 3-D software beyond recognition. "The computer does precooking for us," Kolatan says. The liability, then, is what's called "the stopping problem," which is to say: what keeps architects from permutating and extruding forever in undulating waves of fiberglass? Is no blob ever finished, only abandoned?

The closest analogy, says a New York based architect and blob-experimenter, Eric Liftin, is psychoanalysis. "It's not a typical architectural task of 'Here's a problem and here's how I will solve it,'" Liftin says, "but a series of continual associations that get at something useful." Working from "little moments" of inspiration — like spoons — means that the work is more jazzy than most architects are comfortable admitting. "No architect is ever going to say that their work is 'arbitrary,'" Liftin says. "It's supposed to be rigorous. But a lot of the data is essentially arbitrary."

Beatrix Ost and Ludwig Kuttner spend most of their time in the counterpoint of blobitecture — a 200-year-old Jeffersonian villa on 500 acres in Virginia designed by a craftsman who worked on Monticello. The house is symmetrical; every room has a twin. Ost and Kuttner grew up in postwar Germany, and they spent years as nomads in Manhattan, bouncing from TriBeCa lofts to the West Side to

Philippe Starck's Paramount Hotel. In the mid-90's, they purchased two adjacent apartments near Central Park and decided to fuse them into one — the O/K apartment. Ost and Kuttner didn't need much persuading from Kolatan and Mac Donald to experiment with plastics. The couple's son Oliver designs and drives race cars made of the same composites.

But engineers, and the general public, may take more convincing. One of the most surprising aspects to curvilinear, blobby designs is how strong they are. "Everybody looks at a straight, 90-degree-angle wood wall and thinks, That's the normative condition that must be the strongest," Mac Donald says. "But it isn't necessarily so." Kolatan points to the advent of new materials that have flipped the physics of strength. "There is a history in 20th-century construction to believe in heavy-strong materials," she says. "But now we're entering into a whole other phase of composite materials — like titanium, or the carbon fiber that the stealth bomber is made of — that are 'light-strong.'" Recently, Kolatan and Mac Donald submitted one of their curved composite shells to a "bend test" at the Columbia engineering school. The shell withstood a load of nearly 12,000 pounds. "It had a great resilience," Mac Donald says. "One of the guys there said we should have cracked a bottle of Champagne against the prow."

For Ost and Kuttner, the lived experience of blobitecture escapes the severity of Modernism without indulging in cartoon. It's expansive and accepting, in the way that a loose curve is more human than a line. "People ask, Do we ever get tired of the design," Kuttner says. "But if something is beautiful today, why would you get tired of it tomorrow? People want to move onto the next when they are tired of themselves." Ost settles at her kitchen table covered in junk mail, Post-its and a bouquet of lilacs shedding on the floor. "I have a friend in Munich who says: 'Please never bring me red roses. I can't put them anywhere,'" she tells me. "In her mind, she is so stuck with her design. But our apartment is the kind of place where there's no such thing as the wrong flowers." ■

Austin Bunn last wrote for the magazine about diabetes.



