

# the icon house

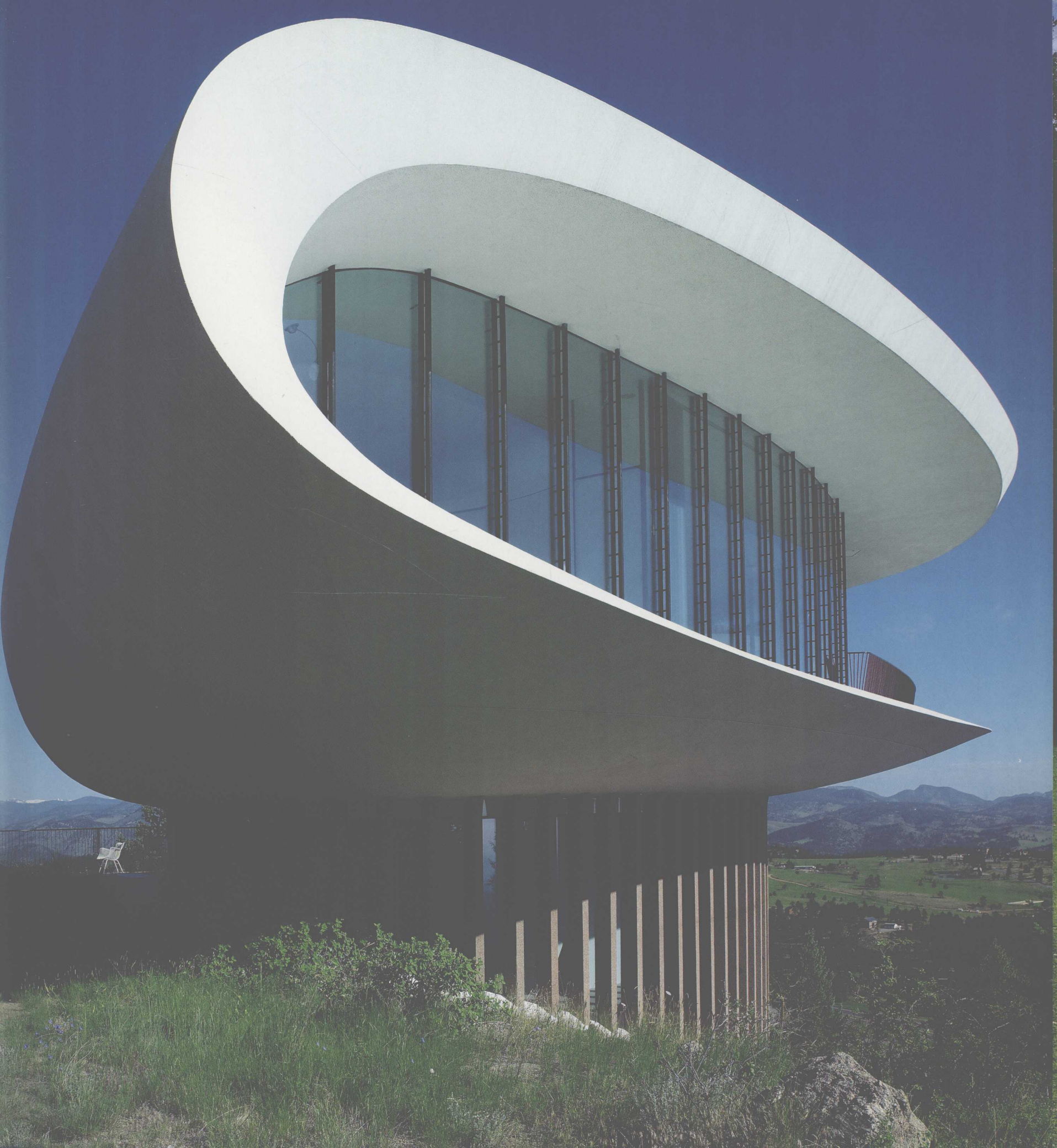
architectural masterworks since 1900

dominic bradbury  
with photographs by richard powers

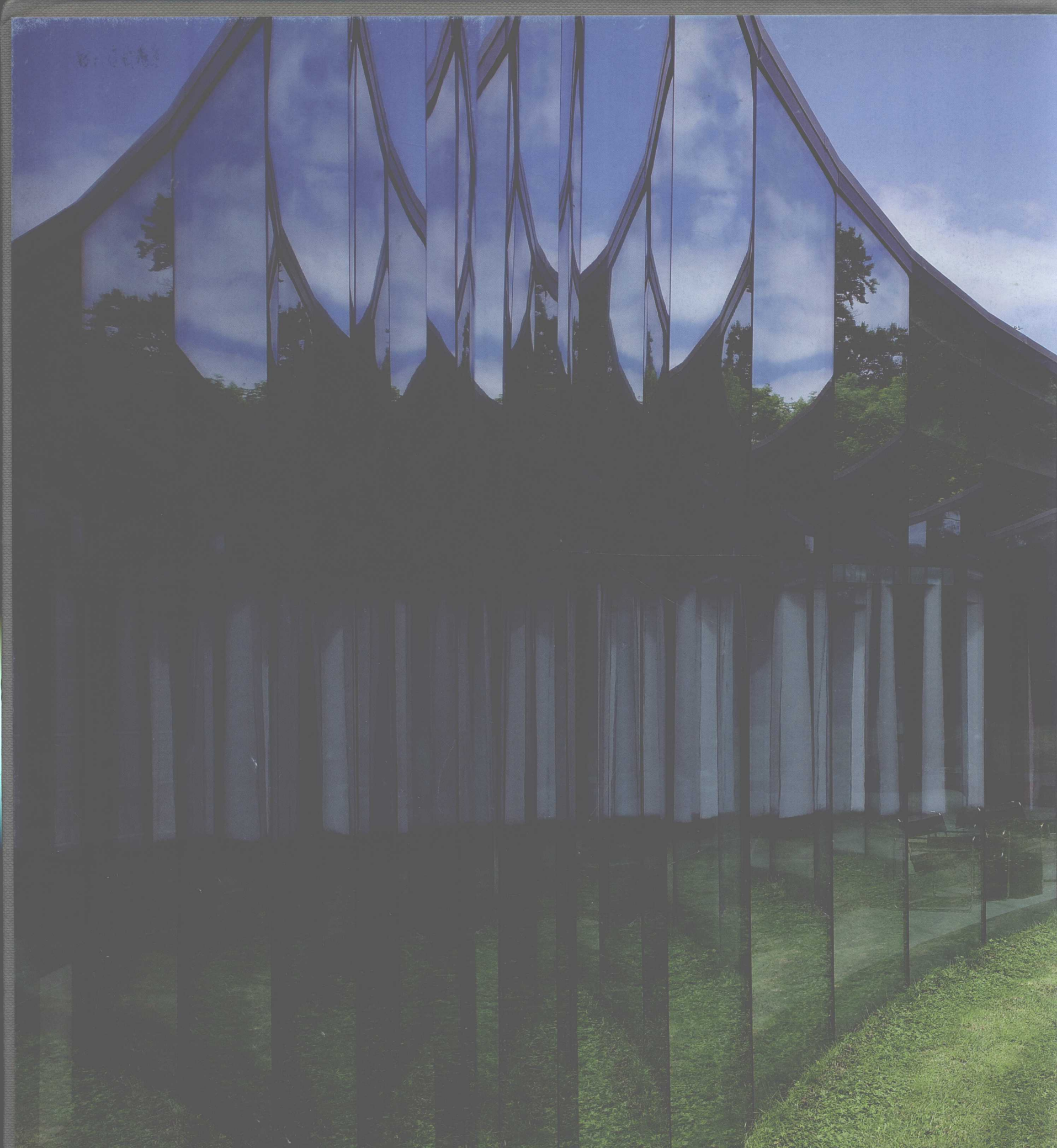


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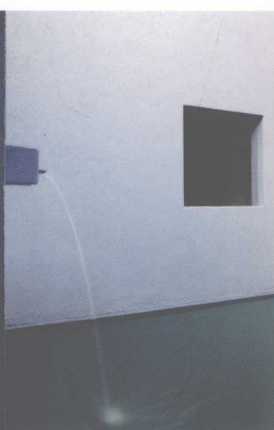
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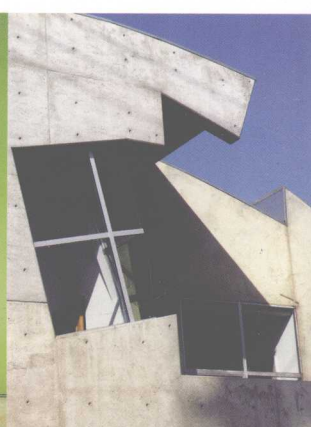
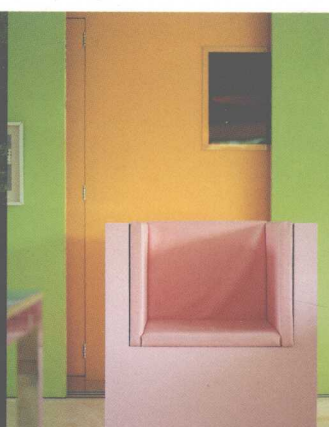
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## INTRODUCTION

**O**f all the kinds of architecture in the world, it is house and home that we relate to most easily and generously. At heart we know that a house is much more than a machine for living. It has an emotional charge and depth, it is among the most personal expressions of our own characters, and it is a place of refuge and escape as well as day-to-day experience. It might also be a place of work, an art gallery, a nursery, a playhouse, a leisure palace.... It is a building to be shaped according to the way in which we function and wish to order our lives.

No wonder, then, that the idea of the bespoke home, a house tailored exactly to how we want to live, is such a dream and – for many – a hard-won luxury. Rather than sandwiching ourselves into a regulation box, we recognize the value of creating a home perfectly suited to our own way of living, working and playing, with a true sense of cohesion and a custom-made layout – a home that is also, of course, an object of beauty and pleasure.

For the architect, the domestic house has a particular resonance and charge, for many of the reasons above and more, even if it is not a home for the architect him- or herself. A house commission instantly becomes an intensely personal project and forms a unique bond between client and designer, a collaboration that carries over time.

Many of the houses in these pages represent close communion between architect and client, within a particular kind of relationship that is sometimes harmonious and easy, sometimes fraught and demanding. One might think of the troubled bond between Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Edith Farnsworth, or the up-and-down adventures of Frank Lloyd Wright and Edgar J. Kaufmann, or the positively beguiling role played by Robert Mallet-Stevens's Villa



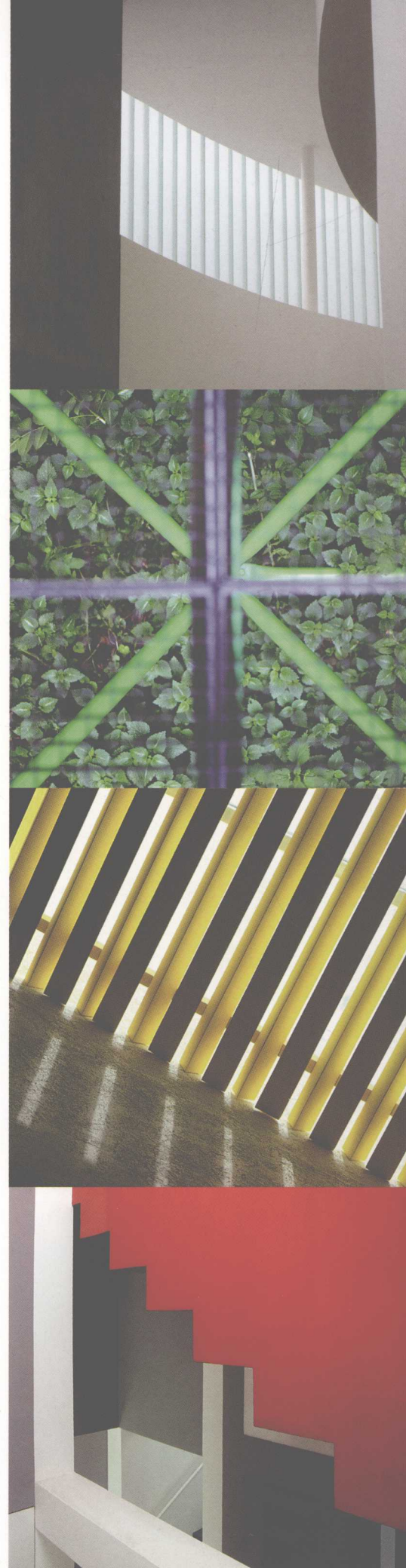
Noailles in the lives of its parents; add to them the famously tense narrative of the creation of Peter Eisenman's House VI, which stretched the patience of client and architect close to breaking point.

To build a house is truly an adventure and a learning process that carries intense emotional and intellectual power. It requires a sense of daring, even bravery, with all the risks attendant in such a project. It is all the more fascinating for being a story that runs over months and years, often shared with a stranger. In this sense, the architect holds a godlike position, rather like that of a surgeon or doctor, with the power to transform lives for the better, while also seeking to succeed and progress on his or her own terms.

'The residential commission allows one to formulate ideas and develop a set of principles that, one hopes, will inform future work for a long time to come,' architect Richard Meier has written. 'As an expression of architectural ideas they are an essential type. Formally they are likely to offer the most intimate scale at which to work. And symbolically they have always maintained a potent force, both as a vivid representation of lives lived inside their walls and as a powerful influence over the changing course of architecture over centuries.'

For the architect, then, a self-penned home becomes a doubly charged achievement. The architect's own home – and you will find many in this book – inevitably becomes a profoundly important artistic and crafted expression that is much more than simply a home; it is also a manifesto statement. We often talk of the architect's own home as a laboratory of ideas, a test bed, and one that in so many cases has a defining impact upon its creator's career. One thinks of Berthold Lubetkin's Bungalow A, Rudolph Schindler's Los Angeles residence, Philip Johnson's Glass House, Werner Sobek's family home in Stuttgart, and others.

To some extent, the same might be said of that classic parental commission to the architect son or daughter – 'build us a house'. Generally this involves an unusual degree of latitude and indulgence, allowing the architect a rare freedom to explore the themes and ideas that mean most to them within a loose brief and a generous spirit of





understanding that often helps to define the architect's future direction. In this context, we remember houses by Harry Seidler, Robert Venturi, Charles Gwathmey and Richard Rogers.

It comes as no great surprise, then, that the house holds such a distinct and honoured place in our imaginations, and that a home can have more of an influence on the way we think about and perceive architecture than a grand museum or an attention-grabbing super-structure. The iconic houses of the past have a truly magical grip on our collective consciousness, becoming part of the essential language and shorthand of architecture itself.

Houses such as Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye, Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater and Richard Neutra's Kaufmann House are now key markers in our understanding and appreciation of the twentieth-century home. More than this, they are essential to our knowledge of architecture more widely, and of twentieth-century culture and the great artistic movements that it embraces.



**1900** VICTOR HORTA (1861–1947)  
HOTEL SOLVAY BRUSSELS, BELGIUM

Victor Horta was one of the first architects of his generation to begin actively to question the past and look for a fresh way of doing things without relying on the conventions and traditions of historical precedent. He became one of the greatest impresarios of the Art Nouveau movement. He was also convinced of the need to create totally cohesive buildings that combined architecture with an integrated approach to interiors and furnishing.

His Hotel Tassel of 1893 showed the early possibilities of this approach. With its ornate, organic lines and sculpted beauty, it was arguably the first complete Art Nouveau house.

Many of Horta's clients were from the wealthy Brussels elite, and in 1894 he was commissioned to design a new home for the recently married industrialist's son Armand Solvay, still in his twenties when he first met Horta.

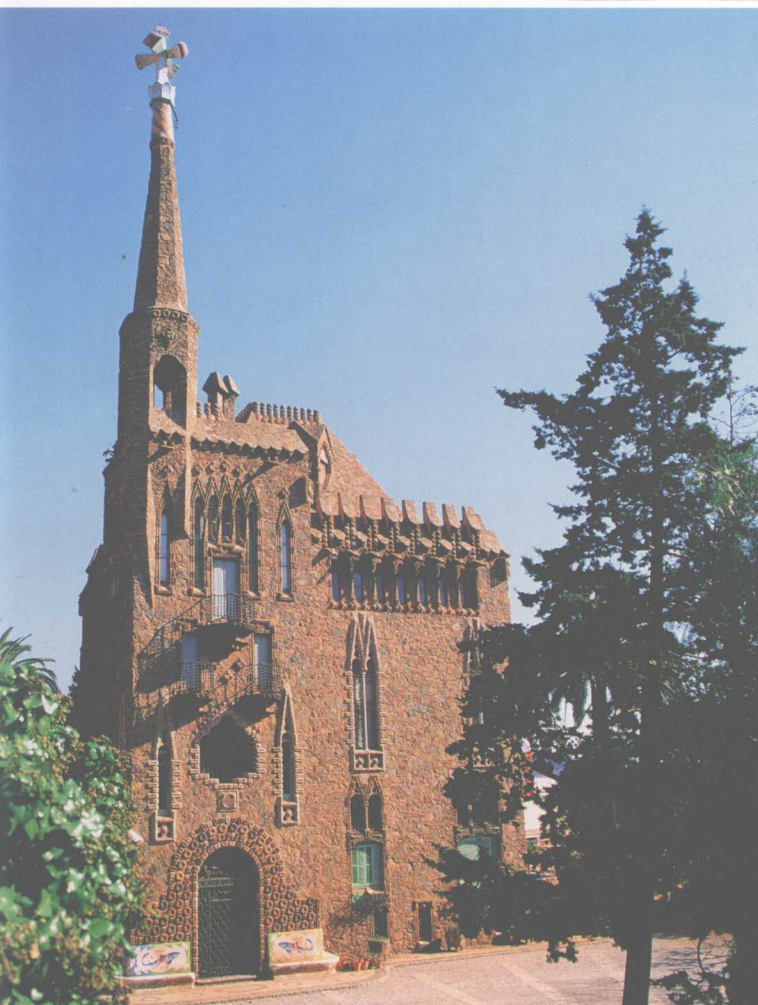
Hotel Solvay's sinuous façade is dominated by two vast balcony-crowned double windows, with the entrance subordinately positioned to one side. Inside, the magnificent staircase splits in two as it ascends to the reception rooms. Horta turned his hand to every detail, including the door bell. This is a house of sophisticated spectacle that truly belonged to the new century.



Such buildings, and the many others assembled in this book, are iconic for many different reasons. They are, above all, experimental and innovative. Indeed, they are often revolutionary, questioning the very precepts of what a house should be and do. Their influence has spread well beyond their original intent and rippled out into the wider world.

Many have been instrumental in establishing a new architectural paradigm, or providing a pivotal reference point for a defined architectural or stylistic movement. All have provided benchmarks in their architects' careers, often becoming the creator's best-known work, as with Staffan Berglund's Villa Spies or Charles Deaton's Sculptured House.

For the most part, such houses are also a highly considered response to a particular site and landscape, as well as to the challenges laid down by a client's particular needs. Overall, they build into an extraordinary map of the shifts, changes and evolutions in recent architecture.



## 1905 ANTONI GAUDÍ (1852–1926)

VILLA BELLESGUARD BARCELONA, SPAIN

One of Antoni Gaudí's first commissions was for street lamps; his last was the epic (and still unfinished) Sagrada Família Cathedral. In between came a series of extraordinary dreamlike buildings that confirmed Gaudí as one of the most original architects of his day. In particular, his apartment buildings, such as the famous Casa Milà (1910), have become part of the fabric and character of his native Barcelona.

Gaudí's most powerful single-family house is Villa Bellesguard (also known as Casa Figueras). Like so much of his instantly recognizable work, this fused Neo-Gothic and Art Nouveau ideas within one distinctive style.

The building sits on the site of the ruins of a medieval Catalan palace and was commissioned by Maria Sagués, a merchant's widow. Drawing from nature and history, Gaudí created a typically flamboyant statement based around a cubed form reaching up to a sculpted and crenellated roof line containing the attic level, plus a slim viewing tower.

The structure of the house is brick, but this is only a base for the organic flourishes of interior and exterior. Slate, stone and stone paste were used to coat the building. As a single home, it is one of Gaudí's most concentrated and complete achievements.



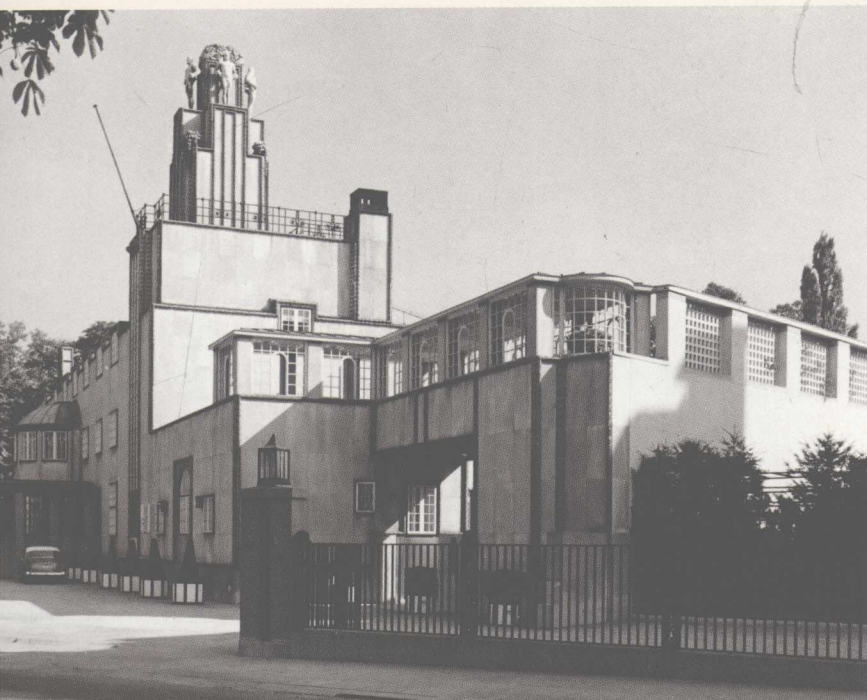
## 1911 JOSEF HOFFMANN (1870–1956)

### PALAIS STOCLET BRUSSELS, BELGIUM

A former pupil of Otto Wagner, and a co-founder of the influential Wiener Werkstätte movement dedicated to designing accessible works of craftsmanship, Josef Hoffmann was a Viennese architect whose most famous creation was actually built in Brussels.

The Palais Stoclet was commissioned by the financier and patron of arts Adolphe Stoclet. He and his wife Suzanne were originally intent on building a house in Vienna, where they were then living, but on the death of Stoclet's father they were called back to Brussels and the plan changed. Hoffmann went to work in Belgium, creating a vast mansion that also housed the Stoclets' growing collection of art and artefacts, including startling pieces from Asia and Africa. The Stoclets entrusted Hoffmann with the entirety of the house, and he created a vibrant *Gesamtkunstwerk* – a cohesive artistic vision that included both exteriors and interiors.

From the outside, the house suggests a cubist outline, with a tower rising dramatically to one side, but it is coated in slabs of white Norwegian marble and edged in copper detailing. Inside, no expense was spared either, with the dining room dominated by friezes by Gustav Klimt. Palais Stoclet stands as one of the great pioneer houses of the early twentieth century.



This map is infused with an exoticism that comes of the gradual cross-pollination of ideas and concepts from all around the world, a process that has swiftly gathered pace in our age of mass communication. More rapidly than ever before, ideas become internationally known and can grow into global movements.

From turn-of-the-century Arts and Crafts – exemplified by Baillie Scott's Blackwell or Greene & Greene's Gamble House – right up to the groundbreaking formal experiments of UN Studio, Ushida Findlay, Ken Shuttleworth and others, these famous houses carry us through a rich diversity of architectural expression.

Arts and Crafts placed an emphasis on artisanry and a partial return to pre-industrial-age values of a simpler way of life, rooted in respect for craft and tradition rather than mass production. Yet at the same time – within a transfixing two-way process – Baillie Scott, Edward Prior, Charles Voysey, the Greene brothers and others were very much looking forwards as well as back.

We see the beginnings of a challenge to convention, tradition and the formal way of living exemplified by the Victorian house, with a tentative push towards more flexible and informal living spaces. At the same, Prior, Lutyens and others were creating innovative floor plans laid out in butterfly formation, while at Voewood, in Norfolk, England, Prior also began experimenting with the structural possibilities of concrete.

These early twentieth-century houses are intriguing precursors of the truly revolutionary changes that gathered pace in later years. Most



fascinating, in many ways, are those architects whose work in retrospect seems to overlap the great tectonic plates between the continents of past and future, positioned on the very cusp of modernity and Modernism. These were architects such as Adolf Loos, Otto Wagner, Josef Hoffmann and Henri Sauvage, who questioned the Victorian reliance on ornamentation as an indulgence, while pushing for formal and structural innovation.

Thus we see the first appearance of the multifunctional living area – or ‘universal space’ – and the beginning of radical experimentation with modern materials. By the late 1920s we have architects such as Pierre Chareau and Auguste Perret using glass, concrete and steel as never before, while, as the revolution gathers pace, Schindler and others begin to question and rework the whole way in which we structure and organize the home.

Yet in the early twentieth century we also have the flamboyant experimentation, drama and even excess of Art Nouveau, as exemplified by Victor Horta and Antoni Gaudí, drawing rich inspiration from sinuous natural forms. This gives way to the inter-war glamour and optimism of the Art Deco movement, which – at times – begins to splice with the early exploration of Modernism. The interiors of Seely & Paget’s Eltham Palace in London represent the epitome of Jazz Age Deco, while Eileen Gray’s pivotal E-1027 house in southern France – while being an icon of early Modernism – is also lifted by Deco influences, with its dynamic outline and terraces reminiscent of the great ocean liners of the 1920s.



## 1912 OTTO WAGNER (1841–1918)

### VILLA WAGNER II VIENNA, AUSTRIA

Like Josef Hoffmann, Otto Wagner was active in the Vienna Secession movement – sometimes labelled an Austrian/German version of Art Nouveau – but was also one of the early prophets of Modernism. His work pushed towards a more disciplined architectural language, with less reliance on ornament and a greater emphasis on form, function, materials, clarity and rationality. He stood at the cusp of a new architecture, and buildings such as his Postal Office Savings Bank (1912), with its steel and glass construction, suggest the shape of things to come.

Villa Wagner II – a summer villa for Wagner and his family, surrounded by verdant gardens – reflects the architect’s fascination with the possibilities of new materials and methods of construction, employing reinforced concrete, sheet glass, aluminium and glass mosaic. The crisp rectangular form facing the street is punctuated with ordered sequences of windows, while a band of coloured glass tiles contrasts with the white render.

Inside, on the middle level of the three storeys, Wagner designed a prototypical multifunctional space to serve as living and dining room. This key room was an early expression of the move away from the highly formal and traditional floor plan of spaces rigidly delineated according to function.



## 1919 CARL LARSSON (1853–1919)

LILLA HYTTNÄS/LARSSON HOUSE SUNDBORN, SWEDEN

As an artist, illustrator, designer and writer, Carl Larsson helped, perhaps more than anyone, to define the popular idea of Swedish style. Though he was not an architect, the home he shared with his wife Karin and their many children had an international impact.

Larsson came from a very poor family background and raised himself up through his own talents. His outlook – and that of his wife, who was also an artist and textile designer – was wide-ranging and well informed. When Karin's father gave his daughter and son-in-law a small timber cottage in the village of Sundborn in central Sweden, they radically transformed it with a highly personal version of Swedish Gustavian style, also bringing in elements from other design cultures.

The Larssons were given the cottage in 1888 and it evolved in phases, the couple working closely with local craftsmen to complete major additions in 1890, 1900 and 1912. Arguably, the evolution of the house only ended with Larsson's death in 1919. His watercolours of the house, published in his many books – particularly *A Home* (1899) – carried the Larsson style outwards, and their work remains much praised and imitated, particularly as it was never grand or pretentious but always attainable and romantic.

By the 1930s the Modernist revolution was underway and the architectural tenets that had been applied to the home were being rethought. New materials and advanced engineering helped introduce a wholesale reinvention of the home, as the modern pioneers sought new answers to old questions. The Bauhaus émigrés – Walter Gropius, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Marcel Breuer – were massively influential in this process, and famously spread their thinking to Harvard and East Coast USA as they left Germany behind. On the West Coast, too, Richard Neutra, Charles and Ray Eames, and others were establishing a brand of Californian Modernism, with a fresh emphasis on fluid spaces and a close relationship between indoor and outdoor living. Scandinavian Modernism – as exemplified by Alvar Aalto and Arne Jacobsen – offered a warmer, softer approach with a greater reliance on natural materials, closer





to the organic approach of Frank Lloyd Wright in the United States.

Many of these figures were also 'renaissance men', making their work all the more cohesive and rounded. They were writers and theorists, they painted and drew, lectured and taught. Their houses often drew on their talents for designing furniture, lighting and interiors to create a fully integrated work.

In this respect – and many others – the multi-faceted Le Corbusier towered over his contemporaries. His influence on the shape of twentieth-century architecture has been immense, with his approach and philosophy making a huge impact on many figureheads of the time. His Villa Savoye of 1931 was controversial for many reasons, not least because it leaked and became unliveable for the family who commissioned it. But the impact of the house was ultimately epic, crystallizing Le Corbusier's famous Five Points of Architecture, including the free plan, or universal space, and the idea of liberating walls by using supporting pillars – or pilotis – to carry the weight of the house.

Gradually the key components of the Modernist home were established by the movement's pioneers and their iconic buildings – the multifunctional living room, the fluid indoor-outdoor relationship, the curtain wall with its banks of glazing, the raised living space, or reinvented piano nobile. Such ideas were key to a gradual but wholesale change in the way we design and order our homes, based on the desire for a fresh and more informal way of living that promotes a sense of light and space, and vivid connections – where appropriate – to the exterior and to the landscape.



## 1924 GERRIT RIETVELD (1888–1964)

SCHRÖDER HOUSE UTRECHT, NETHERLANDS

Gerrit Rietveld's architectural career was dominated by the spectacular success of his Schröder House – a building that came to define the Dutch avant-garde. Rietveld was commissioned to design the house by Truus Schröder, a young widow who ultimately became his creative collaborator and lover.

The rendered brick-and-timber house constituted a break with tradition in terms of form and structure, but it was also spatially radical, coping imaginatively with restrictive planning codes and Schröder's exacting requirements.

Rietveld encouraged an active engagement with the flexible, adaptable space, creating sliding partitions to open out or separate the whole of the upper floor. His skills as a furniture designer were also expressed in a number of bespoke, integrated designs.

Schröder House stands at the heart of an extraordinary and lasting creative exchange (he eventually moved in and lived out his final years here). It is also the most powerful architectural manifesto statement of De Stijl, the movement in which Rietveld was such a leading light, promoting a fresh modernity based on geometric abstract form. Schröder House, with its use of sculpted primary shapes and colours, made a truly remarkable statement for a Utrecht street corner in 1924.



What seemed revolutionary in the 1930s has now become commonplace, as even period homes are reordered to cater for a more relaxed mode of family living. These ideas have flourished not just because they were innovative, of course, but because they fit with a modern lifestyle, with reassessed notions of comfort, and with a shift in emphasis between 'private' and 'communal' space within the home. Formal separate dining rooms, for instance, have less and less importance compared to one fluid space where we can cook, sit and eat with our families. Servant and maid quarters have given way – for most of us – to compact utility and service areas. Rich sources of light and 'outdoor rooms' have become essential elements, rather than secondary considerations.

As the Modernist sub-term 'International Style' once suggested, the principles and components of Modernism were quickly disseminated and publicized across borders. In the post-war years, especially, the media and architectural press became increasingly important for the



**1927** KONSTANTIN MELNIKOV (1890–1974)  
MELNIKOV HOUSE MOSCOW, RUSSIA

'Through a supreme sense of balance and a steadfast tension, it tunes itself in order to listen to the pulse of modernity,' said Konstantin Melnikov of his mesmerizing family home and studio. This towering, enigmatic fusion of fortress and grain silo was to become a landmark of intense and resonant power.

It was one of the few private houses to be built in Moscow during the post-revolutionary era, and was a startling statement of a new kind of architecture. Melnikov had found favour with the authorities over the success of his Soviet Pavilion at the Paris World's Fair of 1925, and so was helped to secure the land to build the house

(in later years he was regarded with suspicion by the regime).

The two-storey brick-and-timber building went through a number of design phases until Melnikov fixed upon the idea of two fused cylinders. The front cylinder is dominated by a vast opening window, drawing in light and air and almost doubling as a balcony, while the rear cylinder is peppered with hexagonal windows. The semi-open-plan sleeping rooms contain organic pedestal beds that emerge from the floor. Melnikov House, suffused with avant-garde energy, has become a symbol of twentieth-century Moscow.