

LA. style

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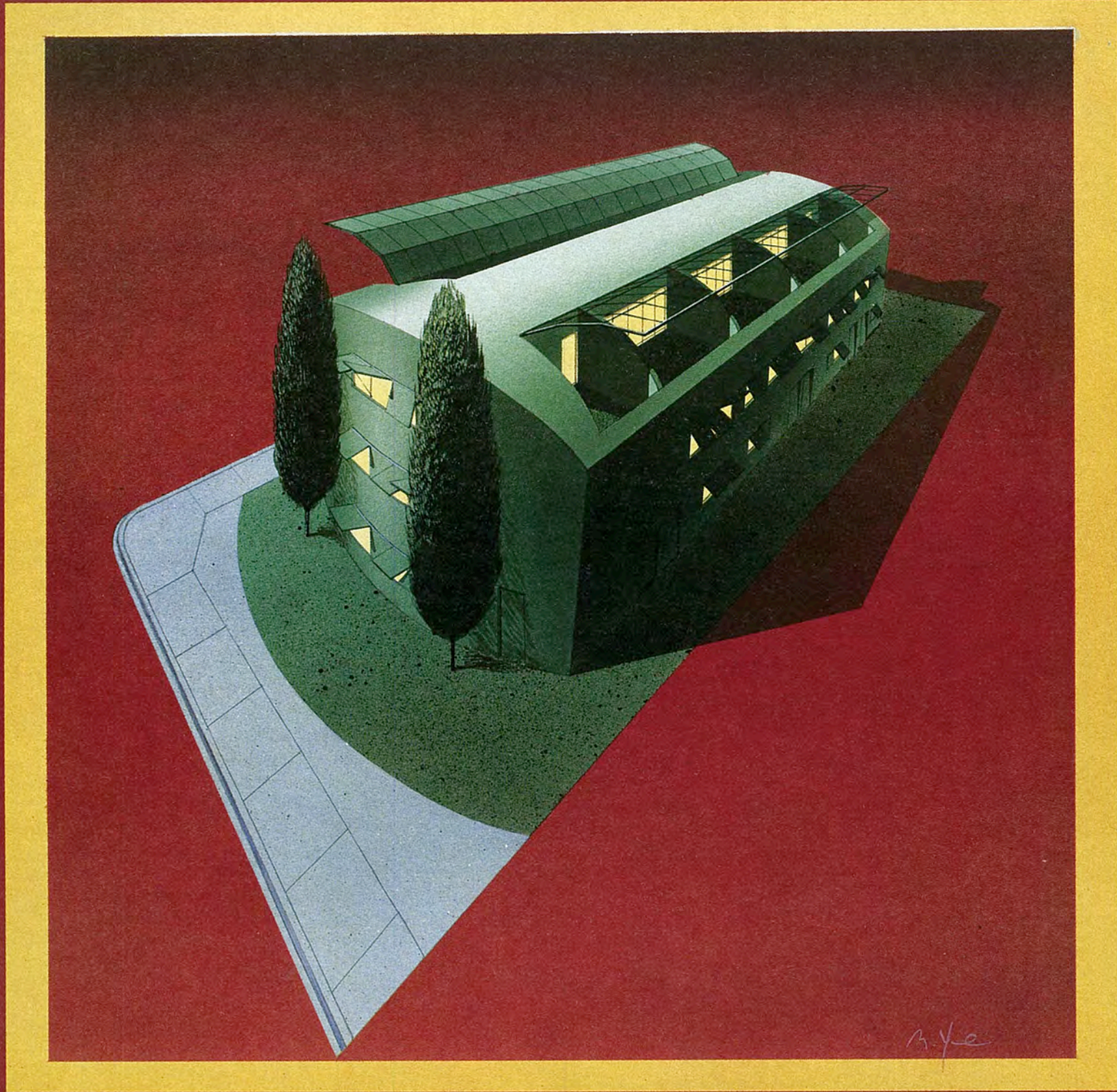


WINGER COUNTRY

DEBRA DOES DALLAS. . . AND HOLLYWOOD

By KRISTINE MCKENNA





RENDERINGS BY MASAAKI YAMADA

Architect Philippe Starck makes his West Coast debut....

A new kind of green architecture may soon sprout on Venice Boulevard, four blocks from the beach. This sharp-edged, green-stucco block of six townhouses will mark the West Coast debut of Philippe Starck, who was lured here by Kotaro Shimogori, a Japanese-born, CalArts-trained designer with ambitious plans for neighboring blocks and a restaurant in Hollywood.

Not since Jean Cocteau responded to Diaghilev's command "Astonish me!" has France produced a talent as original, fertile and witty as Starck's. Over the past decade, this reclusive, self-taught designer has redefined chairs and washbasins, bar stools and lemon juicers and a host of other objects we take for granted. His theatrical restaurants in Tokyo and Madrid vie with the Royalton and Paramount hotels in New York to entice and beguile the public, while infuriating sober professionals. "Object-making, not architecture," they sputter. Responds Starck: "It's easy to make a functional shell to keep out the rain. I try to create something with energy and surprise. I want to be a catalyst and make people think about buildings and the objects they use."

Venice was born as a make-believe, stage-set version of a real city, and it continues to foster originality, even as L.A. at large retreats into dull respectability. For Shimogori it was a congenial place to live and work; a place to dream of things that never were, and ask, "Why not?" Two years ago Kenji Izumi, a local developer, commissioned him to design a brochure. Shimogori told him how much he admired Starck's work, and Izumi offered to finance a residential development. The dreamer faxed Paris with a modest proposal, scarcely daring to hope for a response. To his delight, Starck faxed back immediately and they met in New York to discuss the details. "The timing was good," says Shimogori. "Philippe had enjoyed working with the Japanese, and was looking for a fresh challenge. He had done only one

house—in Paris in 1985—but I had absolute faith in his abilities. A true creator can do anything."

"I love Venice because there is a human scale, which is very rare, especially in the USA," says Starck. "I live in a place like Venice, close to Bordeaux, with the same strong relationship with the ocean." He welcomed the opportunity to design condos as a good compromise between "inhuman" apartment blocks and "ridiculous private houses," and to explore "the interesting potential of this type of construction." And he accepted the constraints. "It is so easy to make something good when you spend a lot of

money," he observes. "If you don't have a lot, it encourages you to be more rigorous, less mannerist."

Shimogori gave him two distinct programs, each for six units, on sites that were two blocks apart, and specified the maximum allowable envelope. Starck began sketching. For the site nearest the ocean, he designed a cluster of blue boxes; separate, three-story townhouses, with underground parking. This, the pricier of the two projects, will be developed by Izumi as soon as the market improves.

The second project is now likely to be completed first; half the units have been presold and ground should be broken within the next few months.

Starck's first design drew on the swelling, organic forms and seamed copper cladding of the Nani Nani commercial building in Tokyo—so christened after the bewildered client repeatedly asked, "Nani? Nani?" (What is it?). "You must respect the way the neighborhood works," declares Starck, "but in style you should be free." Within the block are six units of varied size, each with a ground-floor garage and office-bedroom, and a loftlike living space and two balconies above.

Another developer had tried to build an overscaled block on one of these sites and had been foiled by community opposition. Shimogori had a better strategy. He took the first sketches door-to-door, winning the support of the neighbors and the encouragement of local officials. He thread-



Sybaritic: A model bedroom is furnished with Starck pieces.

...and Venice will never look the same again. BY MICHAEL WEBB

A concern with detail extends to the design of the door handles.





With a respect for the neighborhood but in a style that's free, Starck's steel-troweled block promises to startle and enrich the street.