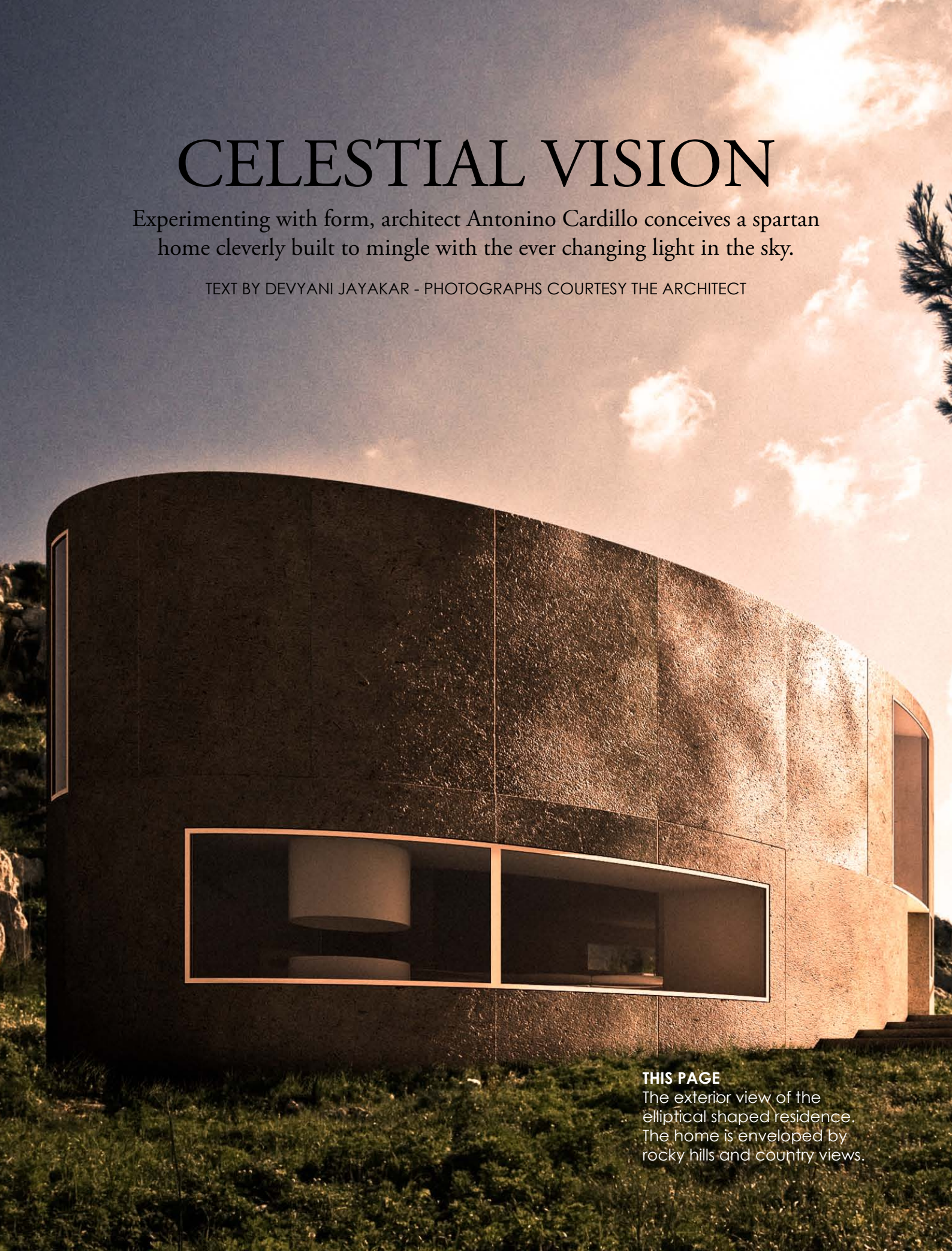
CELESTIAL VISION

Experimenting with form, architect Antonino Cardillo conceives a spartan home cleverly built to mingle with the ever changing light in the sky.

TEXT BY DEVYANI JAYAKAR - PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY THE ARCHITECT



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The exterior view of the elliptical shaped residence. The home is enveloped by rocky hills and country views.

Utterly in command of considerable technical challenges, 32-year old architect Antonino Cardillo gives a virtuoso performance displaying great skill in this 2 level bungalow in the hills outside Rome. Magnetising the eye from the very moment you view the enormous sweeping curves in the living room, the architecture appears to be the harbinger of an epochal change in Italy's post-imperial design history. Like a futuristic fantasy, his work has the signature overtones of that icon from the pantheon of greats — Zaha Hadid — only more masculine. Jana Martin in her review of Antonino's work in Moli View, observes, "there is something very organic, unstatic, dynamic and male about this house. The house has the swagger of a concrete bull."

Articulate about the history of architecture, Antonino himself says with supreme hubris, "Too much respect for the past is smothering the potential of Italian architecture." Evidently, he believes we cannot constantly elaborate on forms from the past. He argues, "What we regard as 'traditions' have not themselves been immune to the geographical influences and external pressures of their times. What we see today is the culmination of a continued historical and geographical process." Impassioned about modernity, he feels that it has become the dominant aesthetic category. Fixing transitory popularity with a level gaze, he continues, "In recent times the spread of the print media has stimulated the creation of many photogenic buildings, which when visited, reveal themselves as ephemeral, incapable of going beyond the enthusiasm of the moment to reach that timeless state that distinguishes the great architecture of history." What endures when the dust settles, is in a different league.

Named Ellipse because its shape is not round, but dilates into a geometric elliptical tower, this house has a double wall on its perimeter, made from progressive monolithic castings of lightweight concrete. The flooring is of large travertine tiles made opaque without any chemical products, using special processing by Italian firm Marmi Ghirardi. In the internal space between the two walls, an ample interspace cleverly contains stairs to the bedroom, bathroom, boiler, storerooms and cupboard, serving the occupants of the house and contributing to stabilising the temperature of the large central hall. Jana Martin says, "The power of Cardillo's massive curves is that they impose a watch¬ful silence on the interior: the walls overwhelm the space instead of containing it; they don't define it so much as cancel it out."

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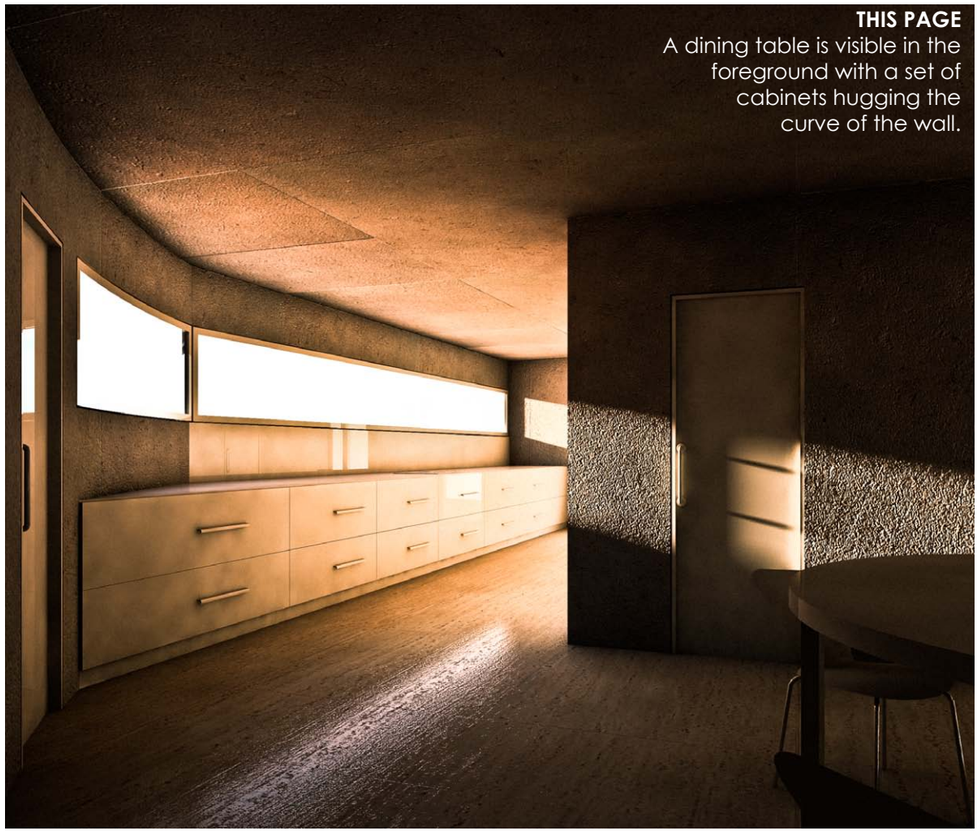
The large central hall has sweeping curves that impose a watchful silence on the interior spaces.



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A dining table is visible in the foreground with a set of cabinets hugging the curve of the wall.

All around, deep excavations in the outside wall offer unexpected views of the rocks and the wood on the outside, breaking up the sky into a multitude of quadrants. Over the course of days, nights and seasons, the windows register the changing colours on the outside, welcoming in the low, warm, extended light of the sun at dawn and dusk. Thus the light of the sky makes a mutable architecture, recording the passing time. The light colours the space, and in supporting these changes, the tones in the house remain a monochromatic neutral leaning towards grey. There is no potpourri of colours and textures.

Does Antonino feel reduced by the taint of utility? The design appears tangential to actual living. I confess that I am victim of a twinge of uneasiness, and ask myself whether I would be able to live in a space such as this for any length of time. Merchants of ostentation, take a backseat. In a world of minimalistic design, this house seems to demand an uncompromisingly minimal lifestyle from its occupants. It looks like it might work for people in transit. Er...could you even empty out the contents of your pocket on a tabletop at night, without taking away from the integrity of its 'look'? As a home in which the owners could want to put down roots, you wonder, what was Antonino thinking? Is the Spartan design more suited to a public space, rather than a residential one? Great architecture can communicate, move and inspire. But more than anything else, it has to be functional. However big the idea, finally you've got to make it work. Critic Matt Hussey says, "Is this house just a very shrewd example of how shapes and colours interact when placed next to each other? Where do all the people go?" The unrelenting stylising says this isn't a space to be lived in. Rather, it's a place to be seen in.

In response, Antonino says, "Ellipse isn't a conventional house. It's made for very special people -

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The Ellipse House is built on a massive scale with a multitude of shapes and curves that incessantly play with each other.

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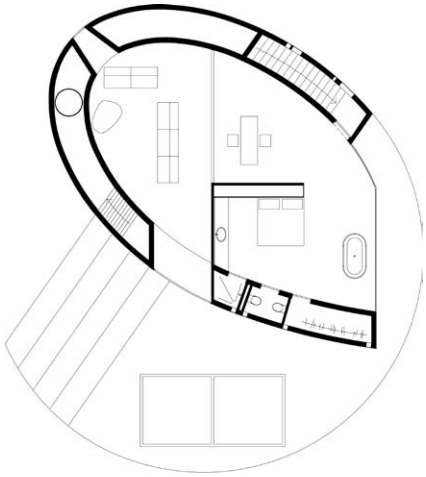
A view of the dining area on the ground floor, also visible in the seating outside the bedroom on the floor above.

people who believe that they can exchange the television for the celestial display. In some way, it is like a return to a primitive state. The main focus in Ellipse is on the ever-changing light of the sky. This building is made like an astral observatory in which its walls record the changing weather. Like music, this aesthetic experience is obtained by the passage of time. Weather, and its mutable colours are impressed over the curved walls, moving ordinary life beyond everyday routines. So Ellipse house isn't for conformistic or hedonistic people, but for people who are constantly searching." Point taken.

Jana Martin says with feeling, "The bigger, more "blank" and unornamented the building, the more you tend to pay attention to elements like light. And light is architecture's dance partner. Despite the grand thickness, the obvious exercise in math and shape, the building plays with light. Ellipse 1501 functions as observatory. It makes slides of the moon. It considers the Earth's place in the universe." Ellipse 1501 is a dwelling in which everything is deliberately built on a massive scale, with the sky itself like an exhibit in a museum. Confronted with this virtuoso display, if you feel diminished within this house, it is in the same sense that you would feel humbled in the vastness of a cathedral, in the proximity of a greater presence. With the silent drama of the heavens themselves bearing witness, it is a house in which to think, perchance to dream.



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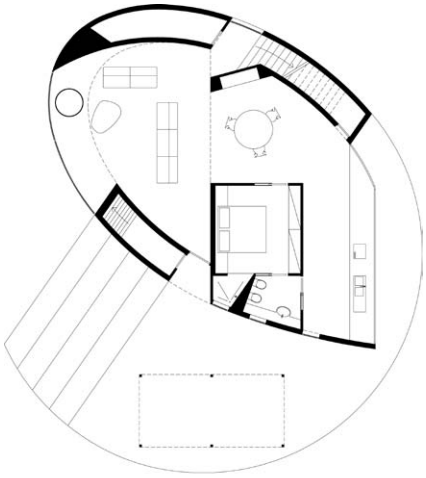

GROUND FLOOR