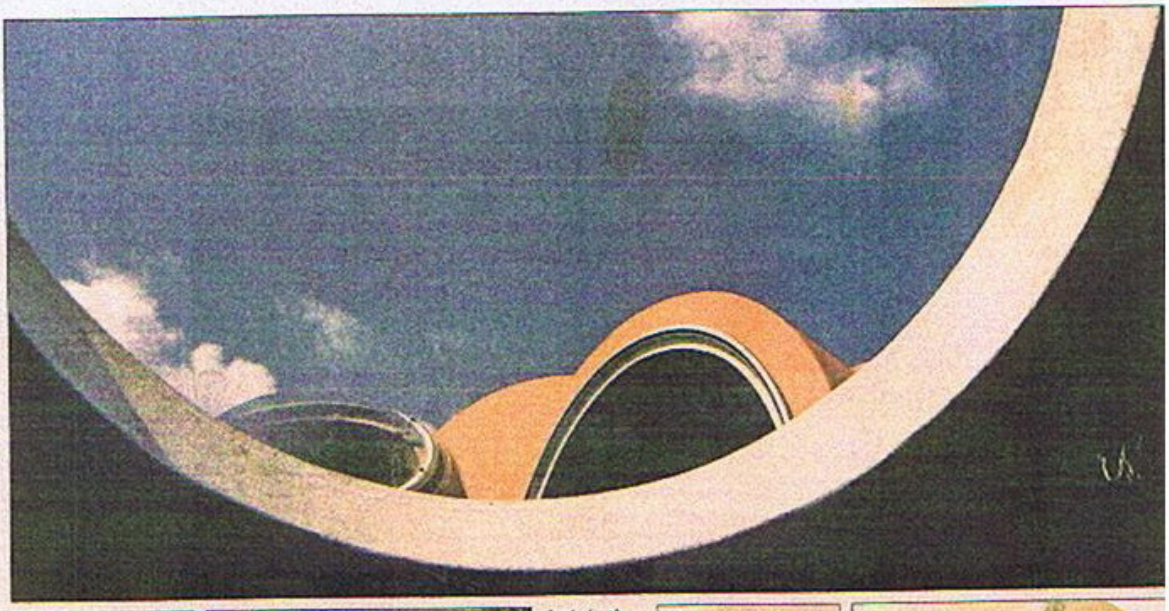
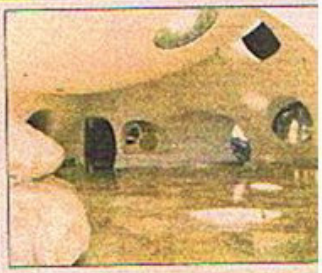


Round and round: parts of Antti Lovag's extraordinary 'bubble house' near Nice, including, left, its enclosed Mediterranean garden and, far right, the honey-coloured marble-clad floors; top, its oval, canvas windows offer light by day and celestial views by night



A piece of French history in the making

It may be a work in progress but Hungarian architect Antti Lovag's 'bubble house' on the Côte d'Azur is already an historic monument and is now on the market, reports Michael Cassell

High on a hillside behind Nice in the south of France stands a house so extraordinary that, only 35 years old, it has already been listed by the French ministry of culture as an historic monument. Despite a 45m (£41m) construction bill the property has never been completed, but it is now on the market and waiting for someone with the vision and money to finish the job.

The house, at Tourrettes-sur-Loup, was designed by Antti Lovag, the Hungarian architect who prefers to be known as an habitologue, a practitioner committed to the concept of organic architecture inspired by the shapes and forms found in nature. For Lovag, now 85, the house has been an all-consuming passion; in fact, he still lives in the grounds so that, when visitors come to see what is affectionately known as "the bubble house", he can personally explain his philosophy.

Now, however, the owner, a French financier in his nineties who has shared Lovag's enthusiasm for the project over many years, has decided to sell, asking for about €5m, or half the sum he has spent on it. Speculators estimate the new owner will need to invest another €5m.

The house is set in 7.5 hectares of land with panoramic views to the sea. It is also totally secluded – a rare achievement on this stretch of the Côte d'Azur. From the outside, its extra-terrestrial presence snuggles into the volcanic rock hillside; a series of bubbles are covered in a rash of oval, convex windows that suck in the Mediterranean light by day and offer celestial views at night. With the entrance an unsightly and unfinished mess, a jumble of the wire mesh, polystyrene and concrete used in the building's construction, visitors need to be imaginative.

The interconnecting domes are arranged on various levels and inside there is little distinction between the shiny, smooth walls and the ceilings. Some of the windows open fully to let in the air; there is no air conditioning in the modern sense, although there are inlets to ensure ventilation. For the winter months there is underfloor heating.

> Experimental 'bubbles' be abandoned like prehistoric creatures and it is in one of these structures that Lovag still lives

There are few straight lines or sharp corners in the massive 350 sq metres of living space. The floors are mainly clad in honey-coloured Carrara marble. Smooth rocks bulge from floors and walls and, at the heart of the house, is an enclosed Mediterranean garden complete with waterfall and stream and planted with palm trees and exotic vegetation. Even one ceiling hangs an aquarium sunk into the floor above.

Much of the furniture has been built into the house to follow its contours. The kitchen is circular and so is the dressing room to the main bedroom suite; cupboards and shelving swirl into recesses, but from sight when not in use. Of course, while this remains and ultra-modern setting, fittings that were mould-breaking 35 years ago now look surprisingly dated.

It will be an interesting challenge for any new owner to update Lovag's futuristic feel. The good news is that the architect is on hand to help finish the project if the buyer agrees. And there is incentive under French law, changes and alterations to the listed property may be possible as long as Lovag is alive. After his death, his legacy cannot be changed.

Outside the house, there is more work to be done. The original plans include a huge artificial lake that would reflect the oval, terracotta outcrops forming the exterior shape of the house. A vast swimming pool carved out of rock is unfinished, and a long, badly repaired drive would probably need to be upgraded.

Tucked away in the trees that surround the house are the remnants of Lovag's creative energy. Experimental "bubbles" he abandoned like prehistoric creatures, and it is in one of these structures that he still lives. Some visitors may regard him and his work as eccentric and wildly expensive, given the need to create on site almost every component belonging to the house.

But to him the property instead reflects the way human beings live and move, rather than forcing them into rectangular spaces. He is a man in love with "freedom, sensuality and well-being" and believes the sort of living space he creates can achieve that. Lovag says he is not unduly concerned about the stability of the next owner "as long as they can enjoy the adventure".

Whoever buys the "bubble house" will not own a unique property – Lovag has designed three others on the same coast, one of them now the summer villa of fashion designer Pierre Cardin. But they will own an eternal talking point and, undeniably, an 20th century piece of architectural history.

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