

ALASTAIR GORDON

SPACED OUT

CRASH PADS, HIPPIE COMMUNES, INFINITY MACHINES, AND OTHER

**RADICAL ENVIRONMENTS
OF THE PSYCHEDELIC SIXTIES**



4 SOFT CITY

"CHANGE YOUR SURROUNDINGS AND CHANGE YOURSELF."

—SIM VAN DER RYN¹



A wave of young design rebels abandoned conventional practice and set out to translate their experiences into spatial versions of psychedelic flux, what one critic called "LSDesign."² They wanted to liberate architectural space the way musicians like Jimi Hendrix were liberating rock music, to create scenarios in which interiors, even whole buildings, would appear as cellular entities, detached from conventional engineering, floating, almost nonexistent. "The new design ambiguity corresponds to current spaced-out highs by aiming at expanded consciousness through expanded spaciousness," wrote design critic C. Ray Smith. "It is the architectural nirvana of the drug culture."³

Even a mainstream journal like *Progressive Architecture* acknowledged LSD's potential as a design tool when it published interviews with several architects who had tried the drug.⁴ "Cobwebs, blocks, and binds just disappeared," said Henrik Bull, who solved problems that had been plaguing him for months. "Anything was possible," he said. "The designs were much more free."⁵ Eric Clough had a similarly liberating experience when he found himself turning into protoplasmic jelly and merging with the immediate environment. During the next hour he drew plans for a mandala-shaped building as rapidly as he could.⁶ All architects reported a heightened awareness of spatial relations and the dissolution of territorial boundaries. "My ability to flow easily with life was enhanced, and therefore my creativity," said Clough, but no one seemed quite sure where all of this might lead. How would the new hallucinogens change the built environment? What would a psychedelic house or city look like?

The idea was to turn everyday architecture into spectacle, to alter scale and break

down the tyranny of conventional, right-angled spaces. Lines of sight were skewed. Disorienting illusions were created with mirrors, converging panels, ramps, and staircases that led nowhere. Wall surfaces were penetrated with circular openings, oddly shaped cutouts, setbacks, and boxlike protrusions. Floors were landscaped into mounds and valleys of thick, fuzzy carpeting, ideal for crawling, tripping, making love, or otherwise recapturing an infantile relationship to the ground plane.

"We are gradually moving away from a possession-oriented mentality toward a possession-less, psychic, mind-oriented mentality," proclaimed Norma Skurka, design editor of the *New York Times*.⁷ The crash-pad aesthetic—with its sense of primitive shelter, shared space, and lowness to the ground—filtered up into mainstream culture (minus the funk and vermin), influencing everything from college dorms and suburban dens to the habitats of prosperous bohemians. Home design was no longer about upward mobility or keeping up with the Joneses, but was seen as an agent of personal transformation. "Change your surroundings and change yourself," wrote architect/activist Sim Van Der Ryn.

A person no longer inhabited a room, apartment, or house, but rather, an *environment*. "Uptight thinking and seriousness are nonexistent in today's underground environments," noted Skurka. Apartments were equipped with noise-reduction insulation and muffled zones of introspection. Ted Hallman wove one hundred pounds of fuzzy yarn into a cavelike "Centering Environment" for meditation. Ralph Hawkins created a soundproof booth lined with fresh moss in which participants could sit in solitude and cast the *I-Ching* electronically: "Formulate, or call into being,



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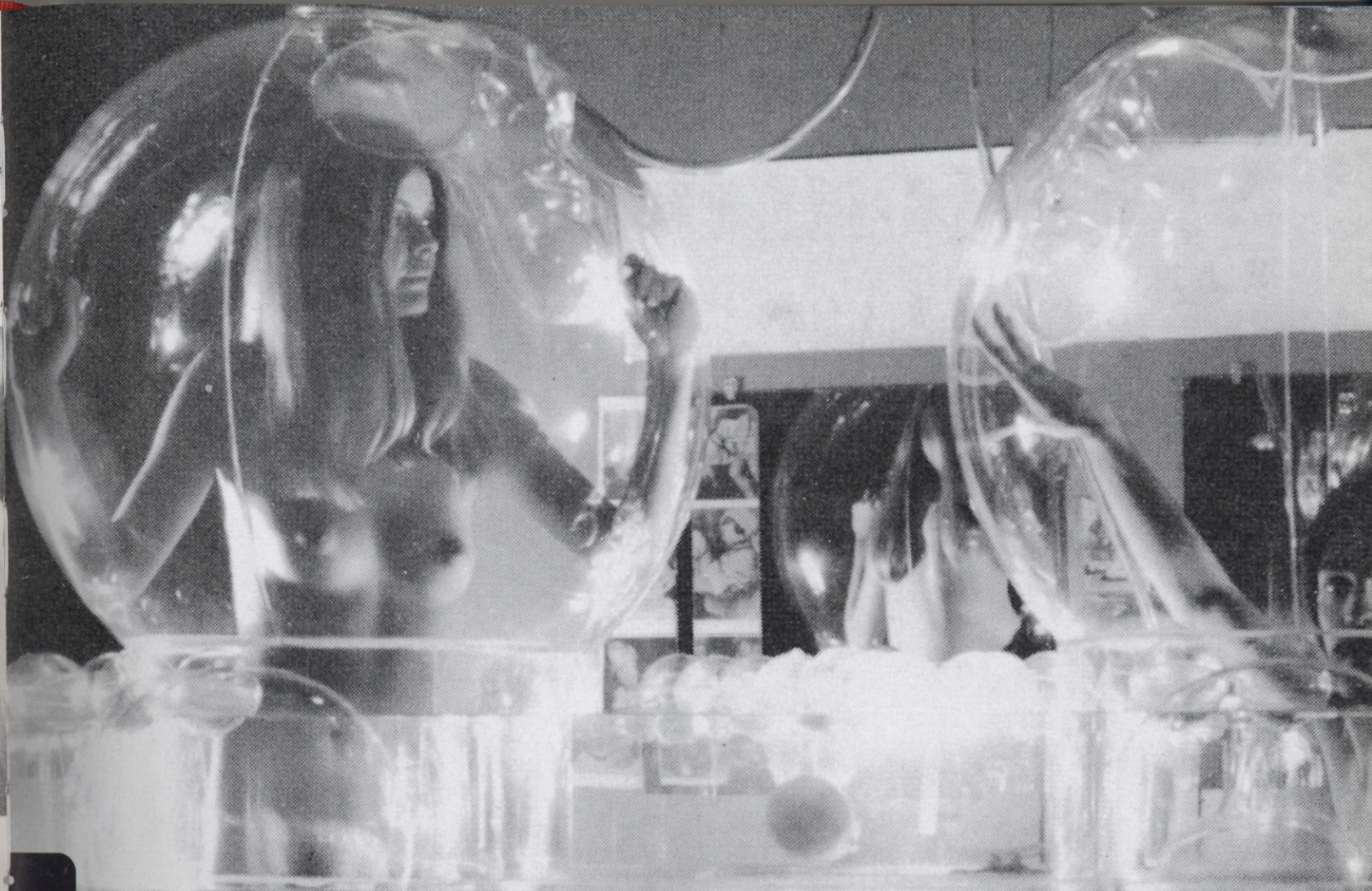
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The trend in all-enveloping furniture went beyond mere relaxation.

ABOVE: Neke Carson, Man-Moon Fountain, 1968.

OPPOSITE
UPPER LEFT: Ted Hallman, "Centering Environment," 1969;
UPPER RIGHT: "Envirom," Sim Van der Ryn's inflatable ring of transparent vinyl; LOWER: John Storyk, "Relaxation Well," 1968.

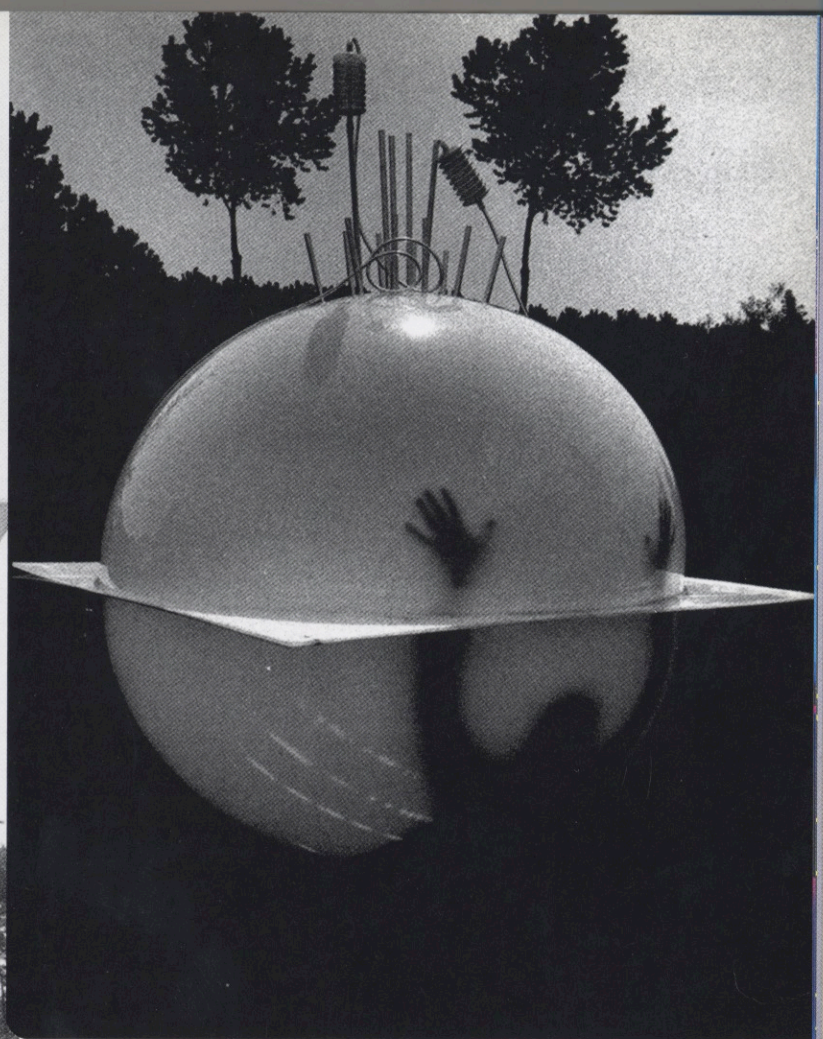
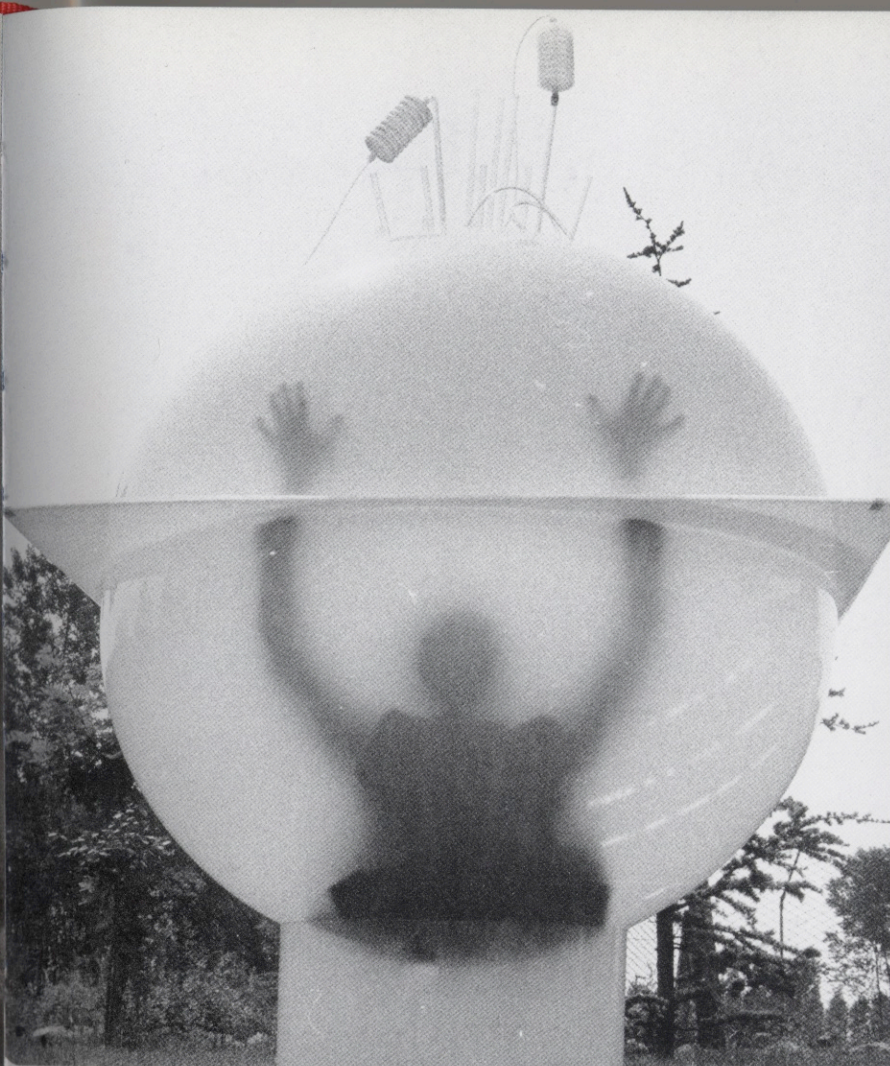
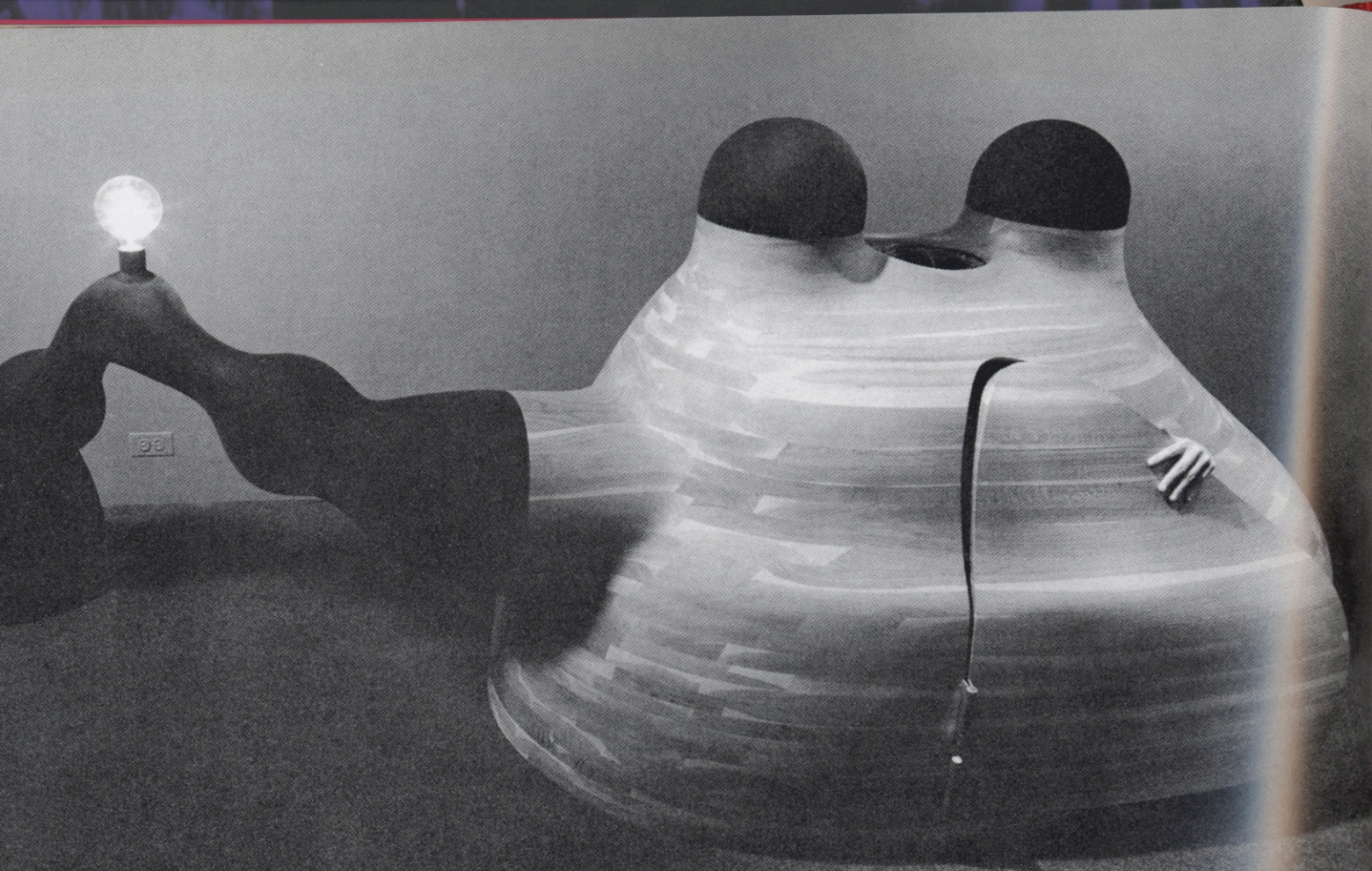
PREVIOUS PAGE
Aleksandra Kasuba, The Spectral Passage, M.H. De Young Memorial Museum, San Francisco, California, 1975.

your question or state of uncertainty while meditating in the chamber."⁸

If there was furniture it tended to be built in, hidden, or clustered together in multiuse islands or foldaway devices. Conventional seating gave way to soft and amorphously shaped blobs that conformed to the human body. "Sofas are already soft, limp forms that you gather around you and hug," wrote Skurka.⁹ Contoured seating was submerged beneath floor level in conversation pits and sunken living rooms. Van Der Ryn created "Envirom," an inflatable ring of transparent vinyl that accommodated as many as twenty in a healing circle, group grope, or sensitivity session. (Envirom could be purchased through the *Whole Earth Catalog* for \$60.)¹⁰ Charles Hall, a design student at San Francisco State University, invented a new sleeping concept called the "Pleasure Pit," a vinyl bag filled with water and held in place by a wooden frame. His friends tried it out and raved about their sexy, sloshing encounters, so Hall went into production and patented what came to be known as the

waterbed.¹¹ In Neke Carson's "Man-Moon Fountain," plastic bubbles were filled with gurgling water to mimic the sound of a mother's amniotic fluid.¹² John Storyk, designer of Cerebrum, created a private version of his downtown sensorium by filling a "relaxation well" with cubes of foam rubber that enveloped the sitter in a state of spongy suspension. French designer Gérard Torrens produced similar effects with "Relaxiare," a hollow chaise longue filled with polyurethane balls.¹³ The trend in all-enveloping furniture went beyond mere relaxation, however.

Wendell Castle's "Enclosed Reclining Environment for One" was a blob-shaped chamber carved from laminated oak that was entered through a little Hobbit doorway. The interior was a snug, carpeted space with just enough room to enfold a single person in soul-searching solitude.¹⁴ "When you get inside, it's almost like being in your mother's womb," said one visitor, while another compared it to a "free-form coffin."¹⁵ This was the desired response: to feel one extreme or the other: birth or death.



Environments for Contemplation.

ABOVE: *Ugo La Pietra*, Plastic Environment for Experiencing Optical Phenomenon, 1969.

OPPOSITE *Wendell Castle*, Enclosed Reclining Environment for One, 1969.

FOLLOWING PAGES
 P. 92: *ALEPH*, Stroboscopic Crystal Waterfall Environment, 1969. P. 93: UPPER LEFT: *Malitte Seating*, *Roberto Sebastian Matta*, 1966; UPPER RIGHT: *Verner Pantan*, *Phantasy Landscape*, 1970; LOWER LEFT & RIGHT: *ALEPH*, Stroboscopic Waterfall and Egg Environment, 1969.

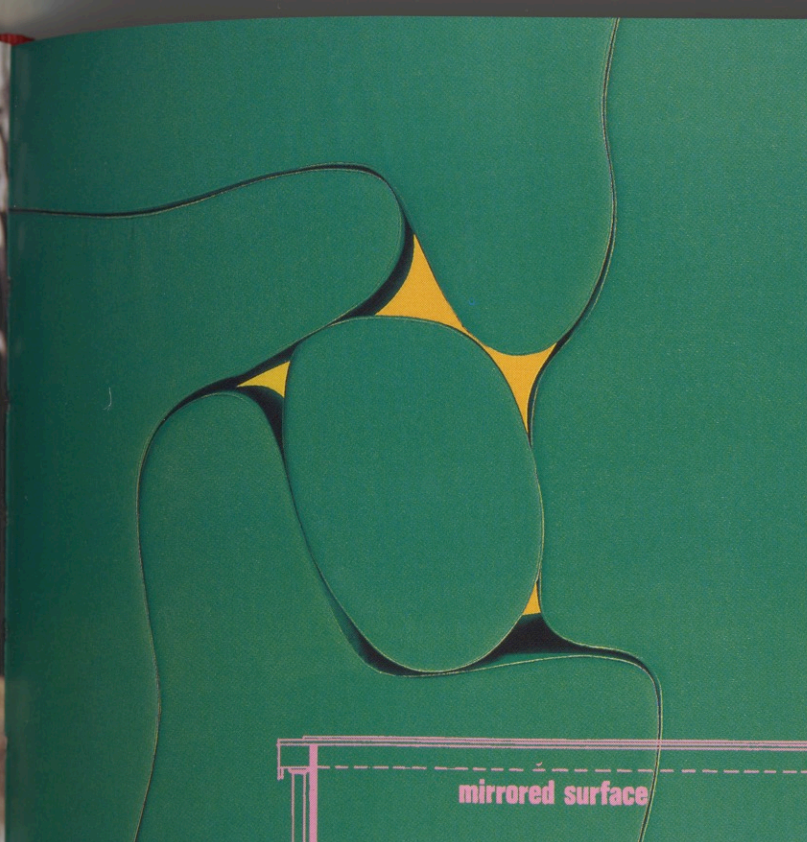
P. 94: *Tom Luckey*, *Rotating Barrel Room*, *Warren*, *Vermont*, 1967; P. 95: *Aleksandra Kasuba*, *mirrored floor of Sensorium*, *Walk-In Environment*, 1971.

As a child in Denmark, Verner Pantan had a recurring dream about a womb room filled with colorful cushions. His padded environments of the sixties were, in a sense, an attempt to recapture a similar feeling of prenatal bliss. "The soft, warm protective cave evokes impressions of the mother's belly, of intra-uterine contentedness," wrote a visitor to Pantan's "Phantasy Landscape," in which floor, walls, and ceiling merged with undulating bands of psychedelic color illuminated from within.¹⁶ "Hot" colors glowed from the center, while deep blues and violets cooled the extremities.

The all-white environment—"whiter than ever before"—was another kind of birth/death statement that signified new beginnings.¹⁷ (Procol Harem sang about "a whiter shade of pale" and the Beatles packaged their ninth album in a plain, all-white sleeve.) Whiteness dissolved the architectural envelope while creating a theatrical foil for shadows. "People take on a hypnotic air in the almost weightlessness of the all-white orbit," observed C. Ray Smith.¹⁸

Billboard-sized "supergraphics" were painted onto walls and ceilings with exaggerated numerals, arrows, and chevron patterns intended to abolish boxlike space through optical distortion and trick perspective. "Supergraphics ultimately blast the inhabitant into an outer space," reported *Progressive Architecture* in 1967.¹⁹ Mylar, a shiny polyester film introduced by DuPont in 1952, became especially popular for its shimmering effects. Peter Hoppner turned his own studio into a "silver happening" with Mylar scales dangling from every surface.²⁰

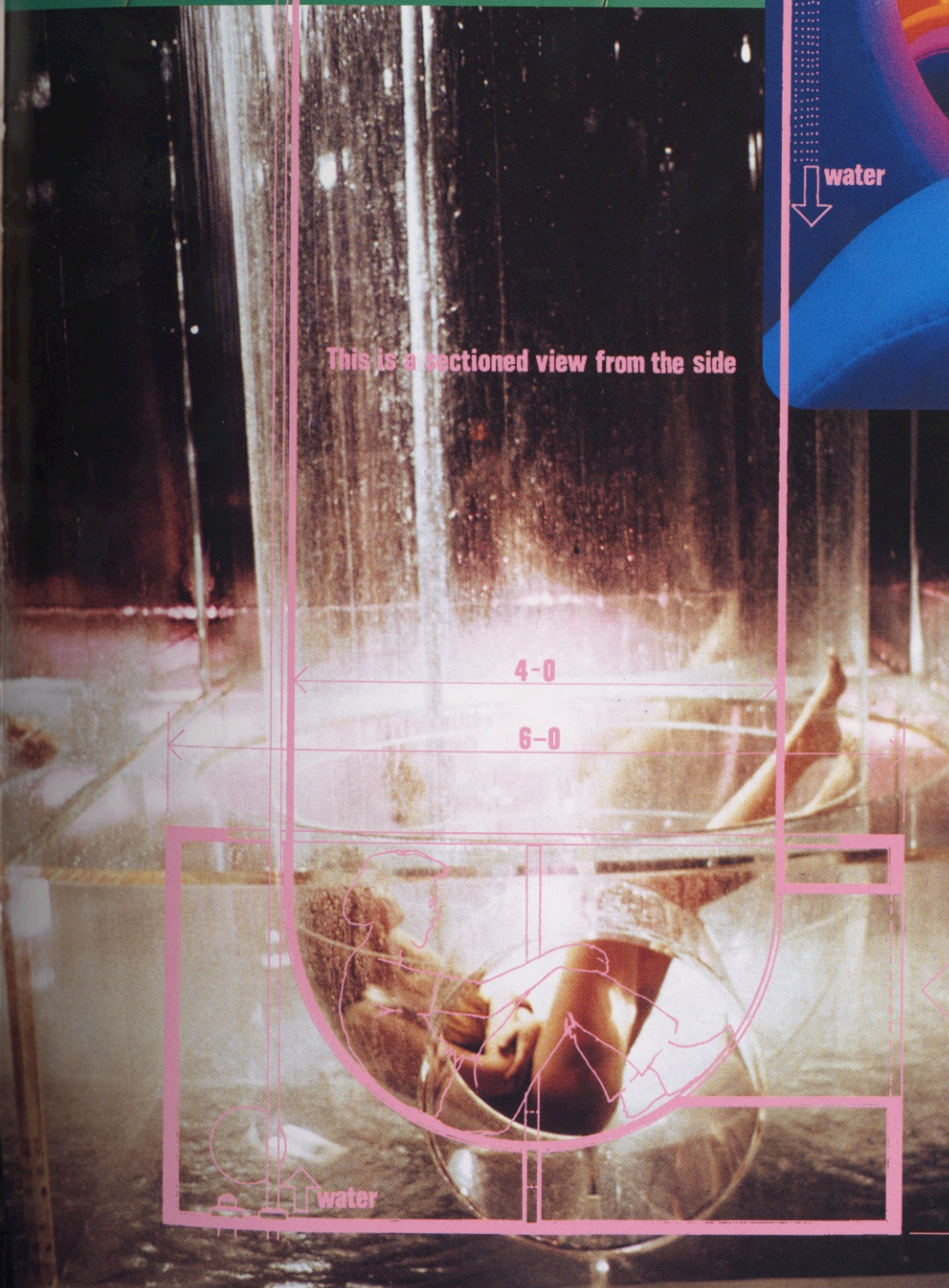
Many of the same effects that had been introduced at multimedia happenings and discotheques were now adapted for domestic use. Projectors and kinetic light sculptures splattered interiors with "electric wallpaper." "Painting with light is a kind of housing-without-walls," wrote Marshall McLuhan, who envisioned an architecture of pure multimedia.²¹ C. Ray Smith transformed his own apartment with projected slides. One day the Sistine Chapel, the next day a sunset seen from beneath fall foliage, "when guests come, the lambent light of a lingering meteor."²²

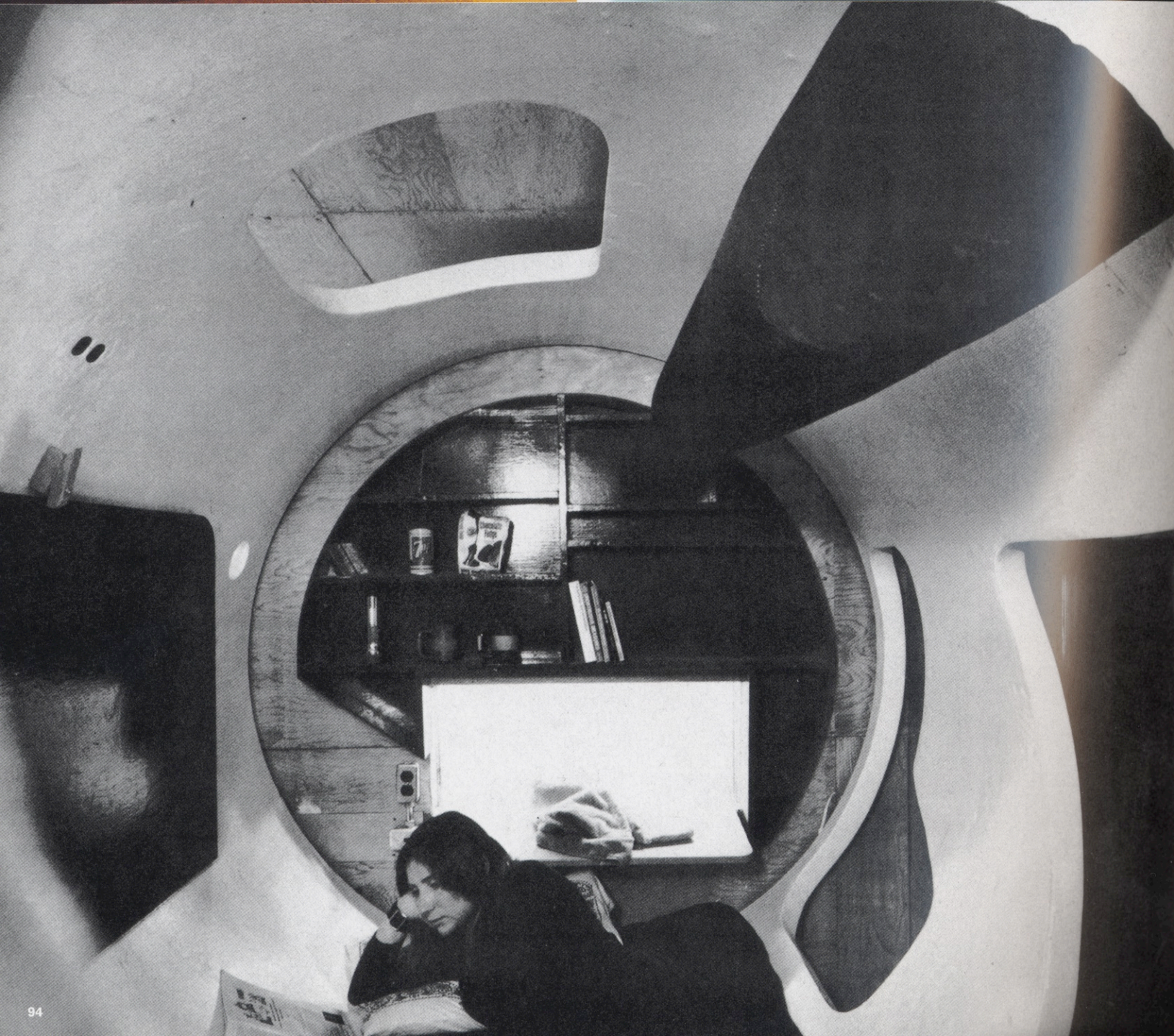
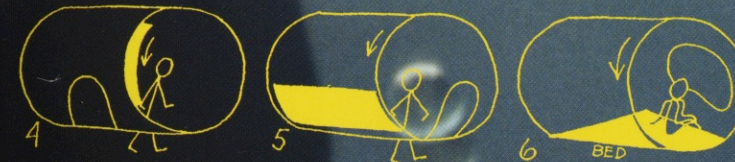
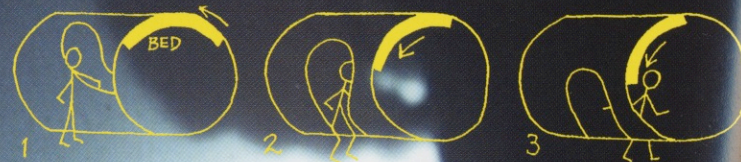


mirrored surface

water

This is a sectioned view from the side

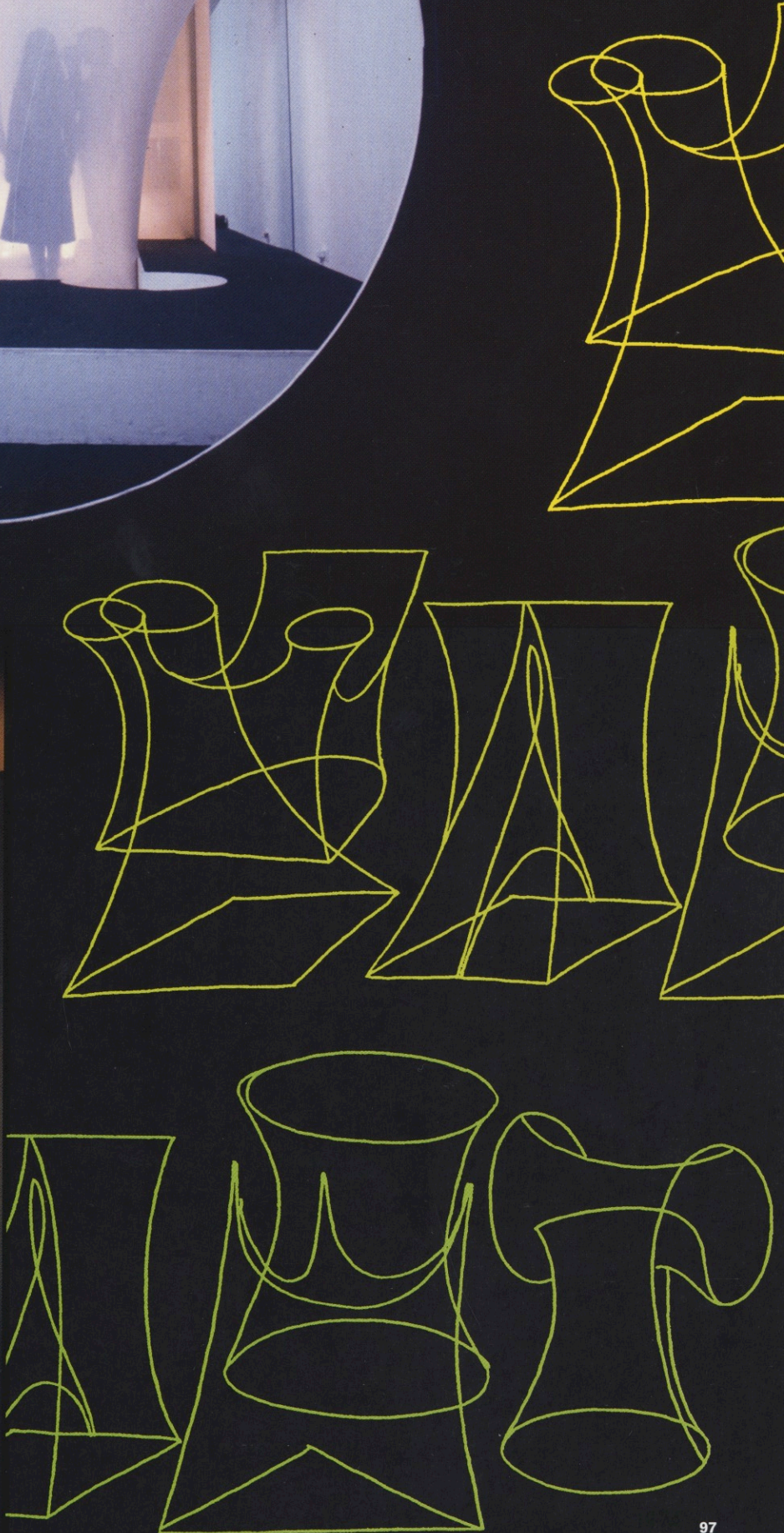




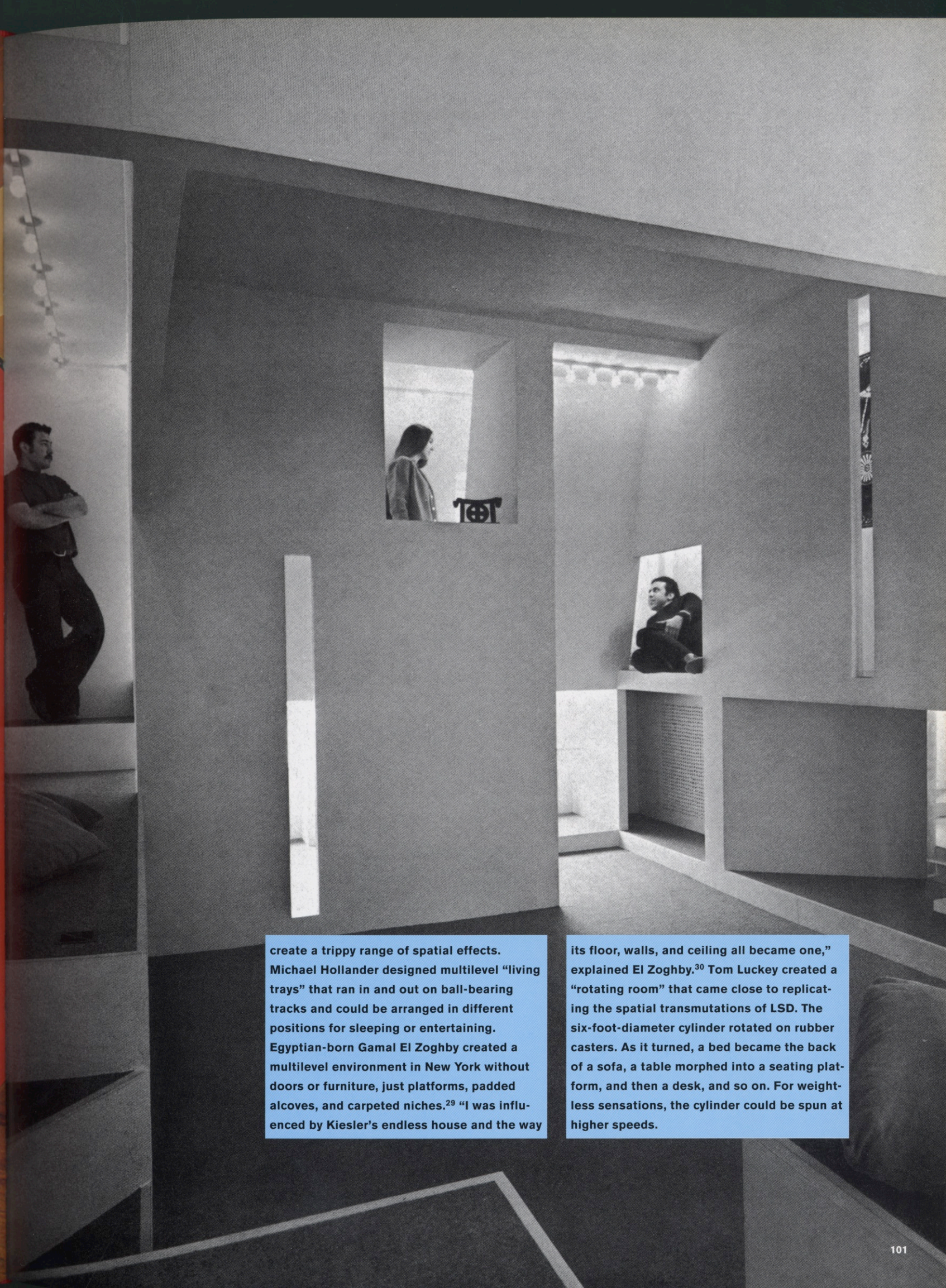
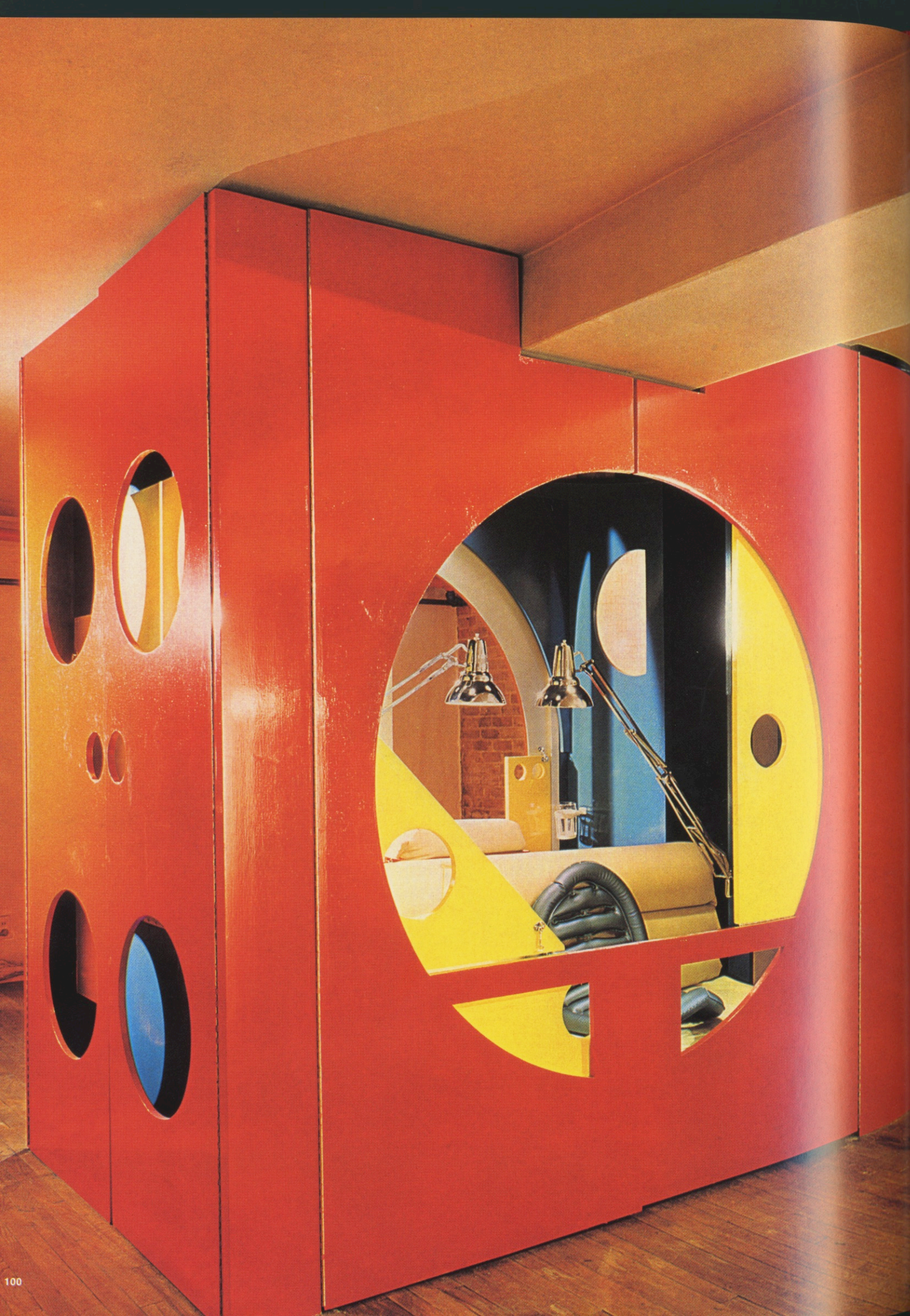
David Sellers and Tom Luckey, former architecture students at Yale, transformed a house in Vermont into a “spooky space landscape” with randomly placed steps, ramps, and narrow terraces that ascended to the ceiling. All surfaces were covered with a sheath of wooly orange carpeting.²³ Quasar Khanh did away with all furniture and turned his own apartment into a “carpeted funhouse,” with shocking-pink shag and sunken recesses.²⁴

Space could be made to twist and torque with scrims of stretched fabric, as with the “Live-in-Environment” of Alexandra Kasuba, a Lithuanian-born artist who turned a New York brownstone into seven cocoonlike chambers she called “Space Shelters.”²⁵ “The intent was to abolish the 90-degree angle,” said Kasuba, who stretched a continuous membrane of translucent white nylon between floor and ceiling and shaped it into softly flowing partitions. “Not a single curve was willed,” said Kasuba, who relied on a completely intuitive process of design and fabrication. “Each shape acquired its volumetric expression as if on its own volition.”²⁶ One space, called the “Greenery,” was covered with beds of real moss. Another, called the “Sensory,” was a spiraling tube of fabric with a mirrored floor that reflected light from above. Here, one or two people could sit in contemplation and experience the changing spectrum of “color odors” that wafted up from a concealed nozzle.²⁷ At the far end of Kasuba’s fallopian maze stood the “Sleeping Bower,” a domelike chamber made from yak hair knitted into a cellular pattern that one visitor compared to the hive of an “exotic, heavenly insect.”²⁸

There was a widespread fascination with “microenvironments,” rooms within rooms, and toylike contraptions that promised to turn the routines of daily life into total theater. Lester Walker’s “Supercube” (1967) was a multicolored, kinetic sculpture with a bed at its center and walls that swung out to







create a trippy range of spatial effects. Michael Hollander designed multilevel "living trays" that ran in and out on ball-bearing tracks and could be arranged in different positions for sleeping or entertaining. Egyptian-born Gamal El Zoghby created a multilevel environment in New York without doors or furniture, just platforms, padded alcoves, and carpeted niches.²⁹ "I was influenced by Kiesler's endless house and the way

its floor, walls, and ceiling all became one," explained El Zoghby.³⁰ Tom Luckey created a "rotating room" that came close to replicating the spatial transmutations of LSD. The six-foot-diameter cylinder rotated on rubber casters. As it turned, a bed became the back of a sofa, a table morphed into a seating platform, and then a desk, and so on. For weightless sensations, the cylinder could be spun at higher speeds.



WIND-BAGS

The bubble was one of the operative metaphors of the sixties, from bubble gum and bubble furniture to bubble fashion, bubble architecture, and bubble economics. Bubbles were transparent, lighter than air, and hovered with graceful symmetry. They moved and merged in unpredictably skittish ways. Hippies delighted in their swirling surface colors.³¹ Thoughts were suspended in comic-book bubbles and, according to Edward Hall's theory of "proxemics," people existed in their own self-contained bubble zones. (When the proxemic bubble was ruptured it could lead to alienation and conflict.³²)

The bubble's soft and cellular structure suggested a division of space that was somehow innocent yet generous in its complexity. Buckminster Fuller was intrigued by the beauty of the bubble's "sphericity." It was lightweight and highly adaptable as either a single cell or in clusters. "It is ephemeral—elegantly conceived, beautifully manufactured, and readily broken," wrote Fuller, whose admiration resulted in a patent for the geodesic dome, a structure that came as close to the bubble's elegant sphericity as modern engineering allowed.³³ Architect Peter Stevens saw the bubble as a model for new communities and an antidote to all that was oppressive in traditional architecture. Within the froth of

common dish soap, he saw "miniature rooms," each one different from its neighbors yet perfectly interlocked with those neighbors.³⁴

The vinyl inflatable, a more durable version of the soap bubble, became ubiquitous at Be-Ins, rock concerts, and antiwar demonstrations. Inflatables fit the spatial needs of the new consciousness. (*When in doubt, blow something up... with air.*) They were lightweight, inexpensive, sexy, and utopian. They personified the trend toward mobility and expendability. All you needed was a roll of vinyl sheeting, a pair of scissors, and strong tape. Add an electric fan and a naked hippie, and you had an instant happening. "Dogs bark, kids gather, old ladies get uptight, cops drift by, youths take off their clothes," noted Stewart Brand.³⁵

"You name it, someone is blowing it up right now," wrote the British critic Reyner Banham, who understood the confluence of forces at play when he proposed the "Environment-Bubble" or "un-house," in which Fuller's theory of "ephemeralization" (doing more with less) and McLuhan's retribalization were cross-pollinated.³⁶ The astronaut sits across from the caveman, trading stories within a transparent igloo. In place of an open fire stands a high-tech service core for climate control and communication.³⁷

Bubble architecture.

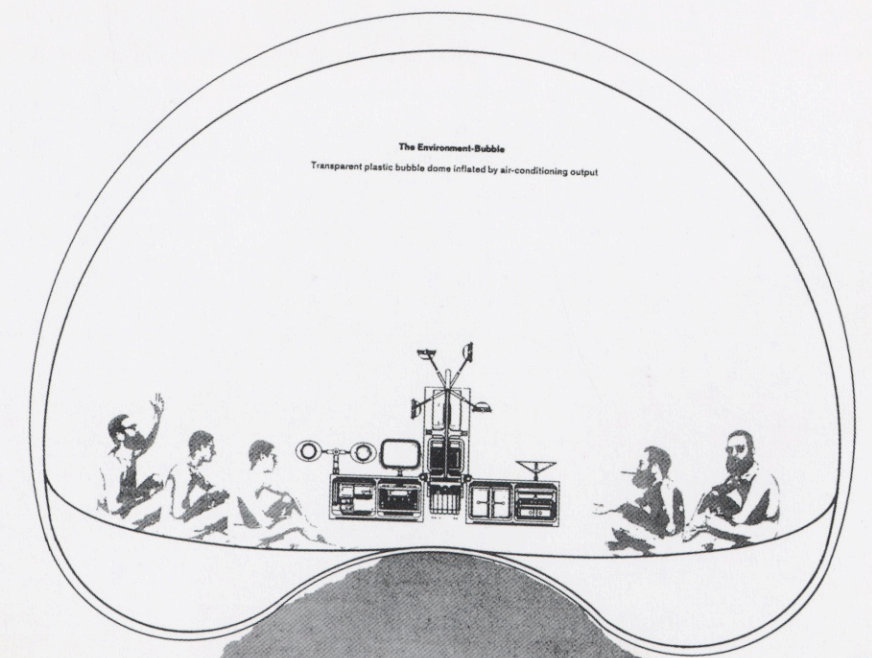
ABOVE: Jersey Devil, inflatable environment, 1970;
RIGHT: Reyner Banham & Francois Dallegret,
The Environment Bubble, 1965.

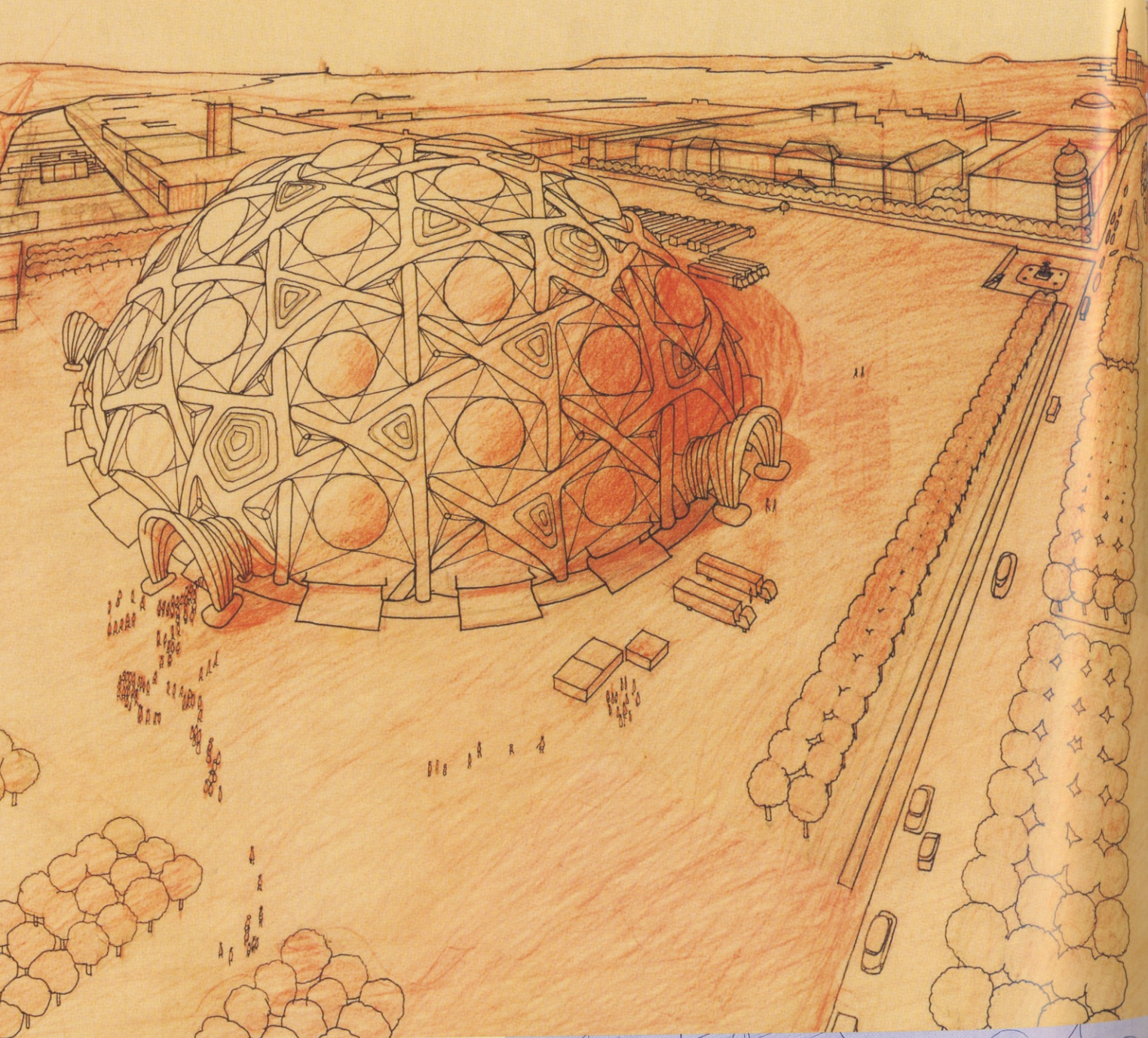
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P. 96: Kasuba, Color Structure (blue), Potsdam, NY, 1973;
P. 97: UPPER: Kasuba, Stretched Fabric Environment
for Teresa Sevilla, 1970; LOWER: Kasuba, Walk-In
Environment, 1971; LINE ART: Kasuba, The Spectral Passage.

P. 98: Kasuba/Silvia Heyden, Sleeping Bower, Walk-In
Environment; P. 99: Kasuba, Walk-In Environment.

P. 100: Les Walter, Super Cube, 1967; P. 101: Gamal El
Zoghby, Multi-Level Living Environment, 1969.



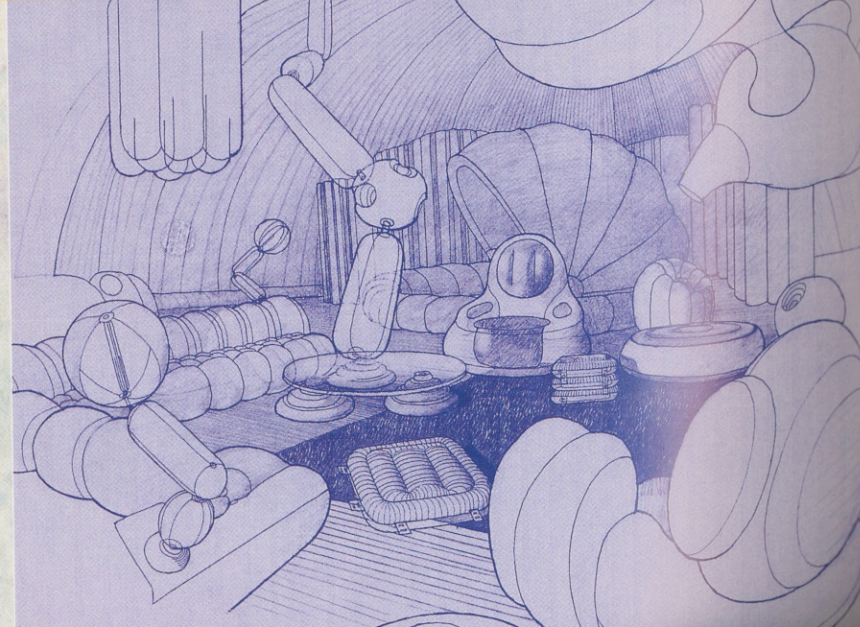
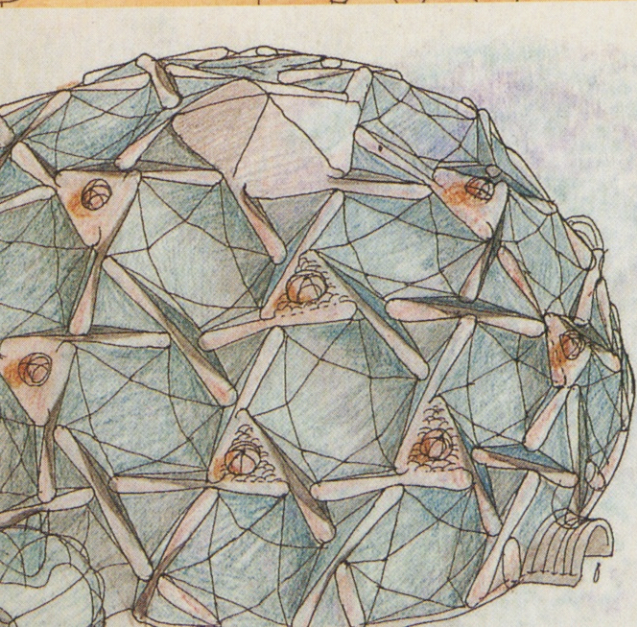


ABOVE: *Quasar* (Nguyen Manh Khanh), Pneumatic Apartment, Paris, 1968.

OPPOSITE
UPPER: Jean Aubert, Travelling Theater for 5,000 Spectators, 1967; LOWER: Aubert, Pneumatic House, 1967.

FOLLOWING PAGES
P. 106: *Ant Farm*, Enviromints, 1970; P. 107: UPPER: *Ant Farm*, The World's Largest Snake, Inflatocookbook, 1970.

P. 108: *Ant Farm*, 100' x 100' Pillow, San Francisco, 1969; P. 109: UPPER & LOWER: *Ant Farm*, Dream Cloud, tie-dyed parachute on beach, "AstroDaze," Freeport, Texas, 1969.



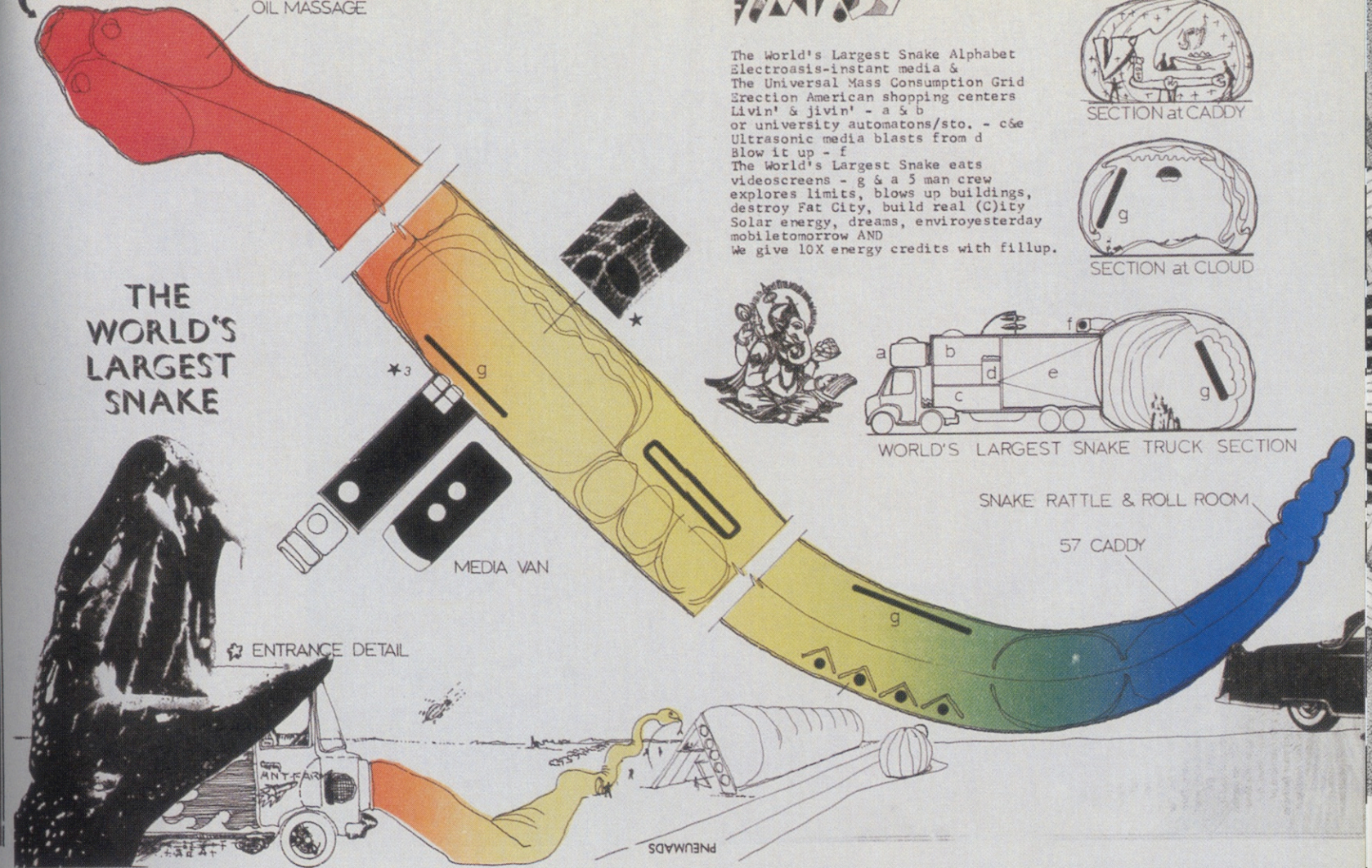
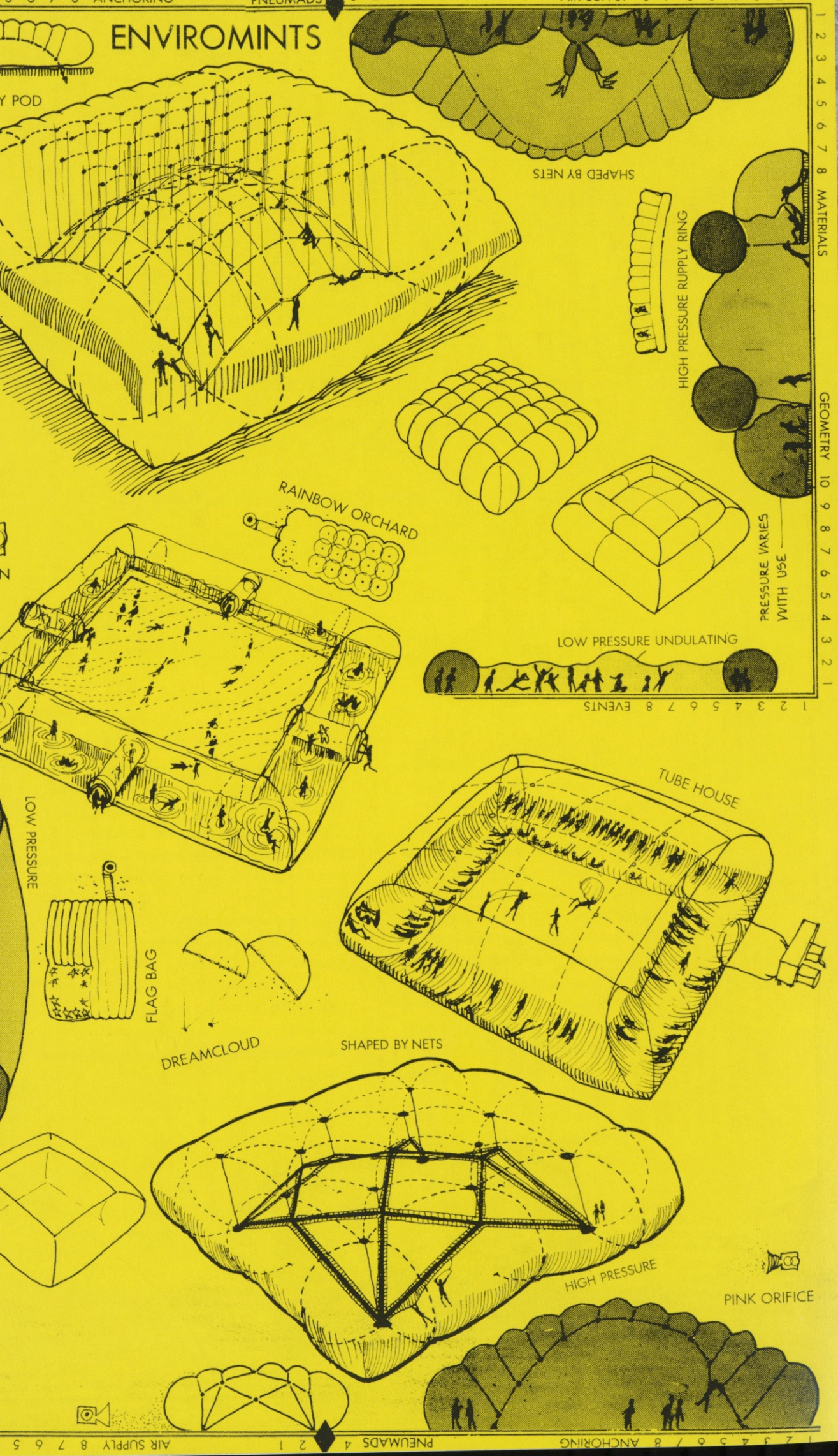
The Utopie group in Paris proposed a whole world of inflatable structures, from housing units to vast traveling theaters. Archigram's Peter Cook offered plans for a "Blow-Out Village" that deployed itself like the ribs of a giant umbrella spreading beneath a bubble of clear plastic. Mike Webb's "Cushicle" was a nomadic-dwelling bubble that could be worn like a suit and inflated whenever needed. "It enables an explorer, wanderer, or other itinerant to have a high standard of comfort with a minimum effort."³⁸

More in the realm of event than architecture, these bubble buildings were symbolic of the untethered urgency of the times. "All that is solid melts into air," wrote Karl Marx, and in post-Beatles consciousness, everything seemed transitory and floating, literally filled with air.

The baggy membranes groaned and fluctuated, catching reflections and flickering light, blurring the lines between inside and outside. With a seeming life of their own, they bobbed lazily in the sun or shuddered from sudden

gusts of wind. Shadows of a passing cloud, or shifts in temperature or humidity, could make their skins shrink or bloat like a jellyfish. "Every slight change—even a heated conversation—brought compensating movement in the skin," reported Banham after visiting one such inflatable in 1967.³⁹

Quasar Khanh took the bubble aesthetic to the extreme with his "Pneumatic Apartment" of 1968, in which walls, floor, ceiling, even furnishings were made from inflatable vinyl. Haus-Rucker-Co. created transparent bubble environments that combined space-age mythology with a kinky sense of humor in projects like *Mind-Expander I*, a plastic pod with insectlike markings designed for intimate introspection. "You and she get into the time of the rythmometer [and] follow the red and blue lines on the dome."⁴⁰ In the summer of 1970, Haus-Rucker-Co. erected a giant air mattress in Manhattan that blocked traffic and created an instant spectacle (and front-page news) as hundreds of passersby climbed on



The World's Largest Snake Alphabet
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board and rolled around like infants.⁴¹ Eventstructure Research Group (ERG) of the Netherlands designed similar "pneumatic media devices" that interacted with the natural environment, such as an air-inflated "tunnel-bridge" across a river in Germany or PVC tetrahedrons made for "waterwalking" across a lake.⁴²

While wary of the craze—he referred to inflatables as "Monumental Wind-bags"—Banham did admire their friendly, floppy sense of reciprocity: "Quite unlike the relationship with the static shell of a traditional building where you can beat your fists on the walls and scream and get no more than an echo for response."⁴³ Stewart Brand described them enthusiastically as "person-flinging giddiness makers."⁴⁴ Others reveled in their unpredictable movements, recognizing something akin to the *mouches volants* and flowing boundaries of early acid narratives. "Their walls are constantly becoming the ceilings and

the ceiling the floor and the door is rolling around the ceiling," wrote one admirer.⁴⁵

"The inflatable responds to the vibrations of the people, amplifying their existence instead of repressing it," proclaimed the pneumatic pioneers of Ant Farm, a guerilla cadre that traveled across the United States, putting on antiwar performances, using walk-in bubbles as props.⁴⁶ Their mission, as they saw it, was to stimulate a shift in psychic orientation: "Searching out a means, a spatial expression of alternatives to the rigid architectural paths we were led down as children."⁴⁷ Their standard event structure was a fifty-foot-by-fifty-foot vinyl pillow inflated with a fan and tethered to the ground with ropes and nets. It could be packed in the back of a truck and reassembled whenever needed.

Ant Farm's book-length manifesto, *Inflatocookbook* (1970), was bound in a floppy vinyl cover and filled with visionary projects like a giant inflated snake and the Truckin'





A moment of pneumatic suspension.

ABOVE: Ant Farm's inflatable 50' x 50' Pillow, Freestone, California, 1969.

OPPOSITE

All Ant Farm. UPPER: Clean Air Pod, Berkeley, 1970; LOWER LEFT: ICE 9, 1971; MIDDLE RIGHT: Spare Tire Inflatable, Freestone, 1970; LOWER RIGHT: 50' x 50' Pillow, temporary offices for the Whole Earth Catalog, Saline Valley, California, 1969.

University, a "friendly, self-help, mobile, truck environmental-event setup for turning on friends and faraway people."⁴⁸ Truckin' University was never built, but students at Antioch College realized a similar concept called the "Nomadic/Pneumatic Campus" that was designed as an alternative to the typically oppressive classroom setting. Open-air "micro-environments" floated freely beneath a translucent mountain of white and yellow polyvinyl. (Partially sponsored by Goodyear, the forty-foot-high bubble could accommodate as many as three hundred students.)⁴⁹

In their ghostly temporality, the plastic inflatables suggested an idealized kind of equilibrium between inward and outward pressures, a moment of pneumatic suspension, as well as the promise of softer things to come.⁵⁰ But the bubble *bubble* was bound to burst. "Not everyone wants to live in a balloon,"

noted architect Nicholas Negroponte.⁵¹ The inherent vulnerability of their thin membranes made the windbags impractical for long-term habitation. "When the sun goes behind a cloud you cease cooking and immediately start freezing," wrote Brand.⁵² A malfunctioning vent, poor anchorage, a simple pinprick, or the malicious stab of a pocketknife could reduce them to pathetic heaps. In addition, a maturing environmental consciousness no longer tolerated toxic, smelly plastics or the wasteful notion of "disposable architecture." Antioch's Nomadic/Pneumatic Campus blew away during a storm and punctured itself ignominiously on a traffic sign. Ant Farm's one-hundred-foot inflatable ended its days as the bad trips pavilion at the Altamont rock concert in 1969 and was thereafter slit open with a sixty-foot gash. The pneumatic moment was over before it fully began.