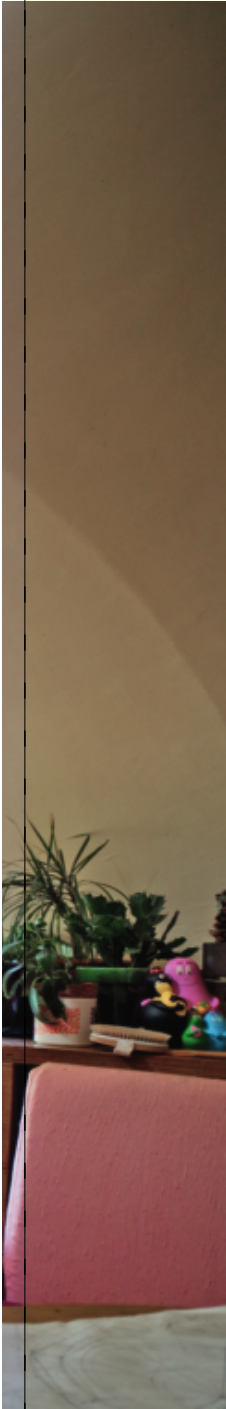


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Antti Lovag



The first time I visited Antti Lovag, in 1999, the house he had been working on for three decades was not finished. Part of it was still under construction, and part of it was already a ruin. It looked like it had entered a bizarre time warp: concrete mixers were lying around the back, rusting in the grass; the wildly proliferating copse of oak trees was encroaching on the spherical plastic windows, gradually blinding them in the process. But the front of the house with its rough concrete bubbles looked as if it had just been completed, and standing expectantly in the forest clearing were a couple of cranes, and a couple of trucks, their tyres deflated. So while one end of the building was already projecting into the future, the other was sinking into the luxuriant natural setting, the ivy entwining its tendrils across the flaking paint. Clearly, building work had ceased some time ago, yet the building site had not been abandoned.

The house under construction was huge, and it looked nothing like any of the residential properties ever built along the Côte d'Azur. It offered approximately 1,200 m² of living space, perhaps even 1,600 m², depending on how you measured it, but in any case it was hard to calculate, given that not a single cubic metre of the property was square-shaped. And was the jungle of palm trees growing inside the house and the genuine stream flowing right through it down marble steps still part of the building's interior?

Before you could even catch sight of this spherical dwelling up on the high plateau of Tourrettes-sur-Loup, with its concrete bubbles and its large portholes, you had to hike your way up a trail that led through boulders and pine trees and a small forest of oak trees. And scattered about that little forest, like in an enchanted landscape, were the strangest of things, all overgrown and literally perfoliated: overgrown spheres of steel, cement mixers, wire mesh, cement *bozzetti*, windows – it all looked like the aftermath of some gargantuan architectural revelry. Some of the concrete components had rolled down the slope, and a couple of twisted

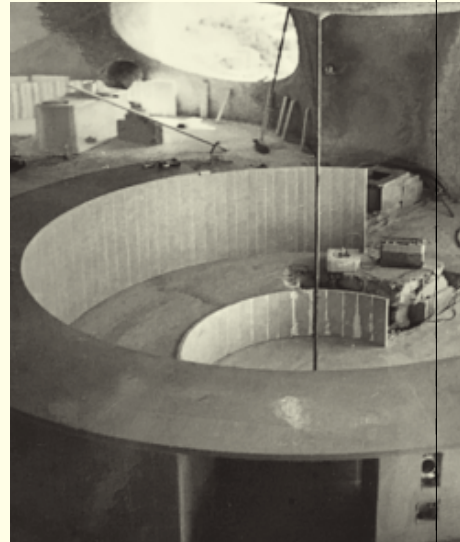
rebars had become overgrown with trees. It would have been impossible to demolish Lovag's field of experimentation as it was now fused with nature itself, a dense meshwork of rejected ideas, burdock, and roots. In fact, it looked as if the prototypes had actually been grown there, rather than built there: the forest itself was a prototype.

These remains were the legacy of an experimental building commune that lived here, on the rock karst in the hilly hinterland above Nice and Cannes, between 1968 and 1980. Antti Lovag told us that up to 40 people had worked there with him on something he didn't call architecture, but "habitology", i.e. the science of home living. It was meant to be a new form of habitation, one that wraps itself around its occupants like a living, intelligent envelope, rather than a rigid cardboard box. Lovag did not want to be the *architékton* – from the Greek ἀρχή (*arché*), i.e. the beginning, the command, and τέχνη (*téchne*), the technique and its execution – but a habitation scientist: someone who rolls steel spheres through the land unconstrained by plans or directions, reassembles them anew, then fixes them with concrete, but always in such a way that they can be complemented, rebuilt, and demolished. The house should react to its occupants like a living organism and be capable of altering its shape accordingly, allowing elements to embed themselves.

Antti Lovag said it was like a cathedral workshop that they had erected there, except that they had no intention of building a cathedral, but a gigantic shell for a new way of life, a building without angled walls, just a jungle and a pool and a couple of bathrooms and lots of bedrooms, a model for what life might look like once civil society had come to an end. The building commune had worked on this world of spheres until 1980. Then the client (the financial speculator Antoine Gaudet) lost interest in the project. The people who had worked on Lovag's small building commune went their separate ways; the grass and the palm trees and the bushes proliferated around the prototypes and all over the building site. Lovag was unemployed, and for someone who only builds bubble houses, the early 1980s were the worst moment in the history of architecture. He decided to move into one of the hut-sized models they had built in preparation, a prototype for the big house, a construct reminiscent of an octopus tentacle that looked like it had crash-landed straight



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- 1 Antti Lovag, Tourrettes-sur-Loup building site, c. 1970
- 2 Antti Lovag, prototype, Lovag dwelling under construction, undated
- 3 Antti Lovag and Pierre Bernard, c. 1970

out of the future onto this rock karst outside Nice. He would live there until his death. Antti Lovag was the only architect in the world I ever knew who, for more than 30 years, lived in the model of the house he actually wanted to build.

By the time we met him in 1999, Lovag had almost been forgotten. His house consisted of a single oval room, with a bed floating on top of a concrete bubble. There were no straight walls and no façade. In the main room, a folding table dangled in front of a seating area; in the corner stood a stove, with a dog dozing below it. And sizzling in the hot fat of a heavy steel frying pan were three chops. It smelt like an ancient charcoal burner's hut. Nowhere did the ultra-archaic and the ultra-modern collide as bizarrely as in Lovag's bubble, which, as mentioned, was actually nothing other than a walk-in model of the building that had been under construction nearby on the karstic hill since 1968.

Lovag was born in Hungary in 1920. He was 48 by the time he was commissioned by Antoine Gaudet and his young girlfriend, an art student, to build an entire world of bubble houses on the rock karst near Tourrettes-sur-Loup in 1968. We are now seated by the fireside; outside, the mistral is wresting pine cones from the trees. "What had you been doing before that? How did you end up in France?" we ask.

As an architect, Lovag was a superb inventor, but he could be just as creatively inventive with the truth. No one will ever be able to reconstruct what actually happened during his life between 1920 and 1948, a time when he still went by the name of Antal Koski. Anyone you talk to about Lovag has a radically different story to tell.

On our first visit, Lovag told us that his mother had died in unexplained circumstances shortly after his birth, when he was around seven months old. Lovag said it was an assassination: he believed she had been killed by her anti-Semitic family, who could not bear the thought of an illegitimate child born to a Jewish engineer. He and his father then fled to Turkey, where he began building Izmir's first cinema theatres. In 1924 he went to Finland, again to build cinemas. When Finland entered the war in 1939 to fight against Russia, he joined the Finnish armed forces as a pilot. In the middle of the war, he absconded to Lithuania to look for his father, who had fled there from the Germans. Antti was arrested



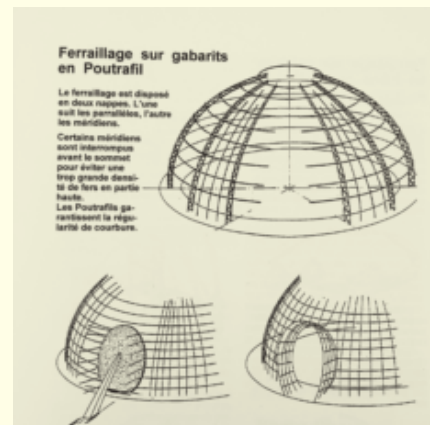
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by the Russians, but posed as a Finnish Jew forced to flee the Germans, a story they believed. In 1945 he entered Berlin alongside the Red Army and made his way back to Scandinavia (an alternative version he told us on our second meeting was that, when the Russians marched into Berlin, he met the Swedish ambassador's daughter and travelled with her to Stockholm; the next account, on our third meeting, was that he met the Swedish ambassador in Berlin and went back to Stockholm with him, where he then met the latter's daughter). In any case, it was in 1946 – according to Lovag – that he inherited his father's estate after the latter's death. He bought a yacht and was planning to spend his 26th birthday circumnavigating the world.

By December 1946 he had reached the Seine estuary – and he remained in Paris. He spent his time at the École des Beaux-Arts and made the acquaintance of the designer Jean Prouvé and worked for him from time to time. Together with the experimental architects Pascal Häusermann and Jean-Louis Chanéac he founded the group *Habitat évolutif*. Their concept of architecture was shaped by Frederick Kiesler's theory of correalism and his organic *Endless House*, a model of which went on display at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1960. The building's organic shape was to be created by covering a free-formed steel mesh in concrete, thus providing the transition from simple Euclidian geometry to a more complex spatial design that looked more like a second skin or an extension of the human body; its occupants would then be able to pass through it like blood cells flowing through a vein. Like Kiesler, Lovag dreamed of spaces that were like body imprints, of the identity between building structure and physical anatomy.

Lovag built the first such structure in Théoule-sur-Mer in the south of France, next to the Port-la-Galère residential complex designed by his friend Jacques Couëlle, where he built 26 residential bubbles for the industrialist Pierre Bernard. Soon after, again for Bernard, he designed the Maison Bulle, a mix of residential dwelling and communication centre that was later bought by Pierre Cardin. This particular structure already reflects Lovag's great inspiration, namely Charles Fourier's *phalanstère*, or phalanstery, a large-scale self-sufficient 19th-century utopian community, a residential complex for 1,600 people based on the floor plan

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of the Palace of Versailles. The main wing would accommodate the collective dining room and the library, as well as a conservatory. Fourier was obsessed with the idea of cancelling out the seasons, with being able to be outdoors at any time, even when you were indoors, an aspect also to be found in Lovag's work.

With Fourier, the architecture designed for the collective community was not restricted to formal measures; in Fourier's architectural dream, the human body, too, would be beyond the reach of privatisation. Free love was a key component of his theory, as he posited in his essay *Le nouveau monde amoureux*. Fourier was infuriated by everything the emergent bourgeoisie was bringing forth in terms of form, ownership structures, and values: private ownership, the repression of sexual impulses, the "accumulation of hideous huts" – and the ways of life that were being played out inside them. Fourier wanted Versailles, a culture of generosity and ecstasy – but for everyone, without exploitation of a paying class. As a habitation temple for life as a collective, with collective festivities, Lovag's *Maison Gaudet* is a revisiting of this idea, a palace for everyone in a future where people live off an unconditional basic income (another of Fourier's ideas), where they no longer have to work and can spend their time between the swimming pool, the palm trees, and the love caves.

The way this bubble world is today, it looks like a folly, a facility for the infamous "one per cent" to disport itself, and yet that's precisely what it shouldn't be. It ought to be a post-capitalist building that melds both nature and architecture organically, but also one that dissolves the systems, the hierarchies and the categories which, until now, have organised and structured our lives together in our late bourgeois society.

It is one of the greater ironies of this particular building that, as a hippie utopia, as an anti-bourgeois fantasy, it was sustained by the funds of an entirely bourgeois financial speculator. Unlike many experimental communes of its day, this alternative bubble world was not the brainchild of critics of society; rather, it was commissioned by a capitalist who had fallen in love with an art student. Here capitalism financed the utopia of the society that was expected to emerge after the former's downfall. Along the way, both regimes converged around the idea of festive celebrations,

4 Antti Lovag, floor plan, undated

5 Antti Lovag, *Maison Bulle*, c. 1979

6 Antti Lovag, *Habitologie*, detail of the reinforcements, undated

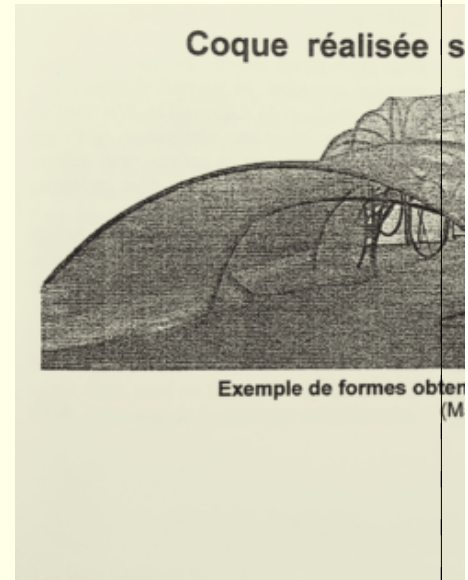
of unfettered excess. And, evidently, that's what Gaudet found appealing about Lovag: "orgyitecture" rather than architecture.

When Lovag accepted the commission for the bubble house, he had just come up with a disarmingly simple technology for building round houses. It involved injecting concrete and polyurethane foam into a spherical corset comprised of iron bars and wire mesh; the surfaces were then cured with a polyester coating so the rainwater would simply pearl away. In Lovag's utopia, everyone would be able to build their own concrete cocoon around their ideal living environment, without the assistance of an architect.

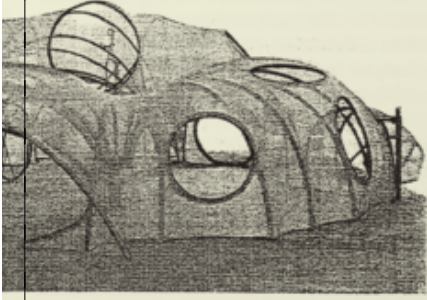
Lovag turned down virtually all his other commission for Gaudet's sake. He built without plans. They would experiment by docking bubbles together only to pull them apart again if they were not satisfied with the result. They channelled the natural course of the stream down marble steps and through a hall where palm trees grew above huge boulders. From there, pathways led to the cave-like bedroom grottos. Animal furs were laid out beneath the Perspex domes. The bubbles looked like foam turned to concrete, like molecular models. Construction work came to a standstill on numerous occasions; winters came, then made way for scorching hot summers. Lovag met a number of women and had children with them, but that was something he did not want to talk about, a private affair, literally. And still the mistral swept across the hillside, and the cranes began to rust. Lovag did not build another house from the 1980s onwards.

In spite of it all and at the initiative of a village mayor, himself an architecture enthusiast, the building site was declared part of France's national cultural heritage. And then Gaudet died; his house was still a building site and it became dilapidated. Later on, a UK real estate company bought the hillside along with the house and had the construction work completed. Lovag remained on site, Gaudet having granted him the life-long right of residence in his small model of a bubble house.

Antti Lovag was not very well the last time we saw him. He sat motionless beneath the Perspex dome of his bubble house. He had had it painted bright green. His bubble was now his prison, a snail shell with which he was now inseparably fused. His dog had died; only the cats



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(Maquette d'Antti Lovag pour une exposition)

carried on breeding, scampering about the bubble house or dozing beneath the blind plastic windows. For a while it looked as if Lovag had nodded off. But then, as we were about to leave, he opened his eyes and said: "Look around. Everything about my architecture is so simple. Did I ever tell you what my dog's called? He's called 'Dog.'"

Lovag died on 27 September 2014 at the age of 94. He was still living inside his bubble, to the very end.



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- 7 Antti Lovag, model with upholstery, undated
 - 8 Antti Lovag, prototype, dwelling, Lovag's dog, Tourrettes-Sur-Loup, 2008

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