

THREE-FIFTY NOVEMBER 1992

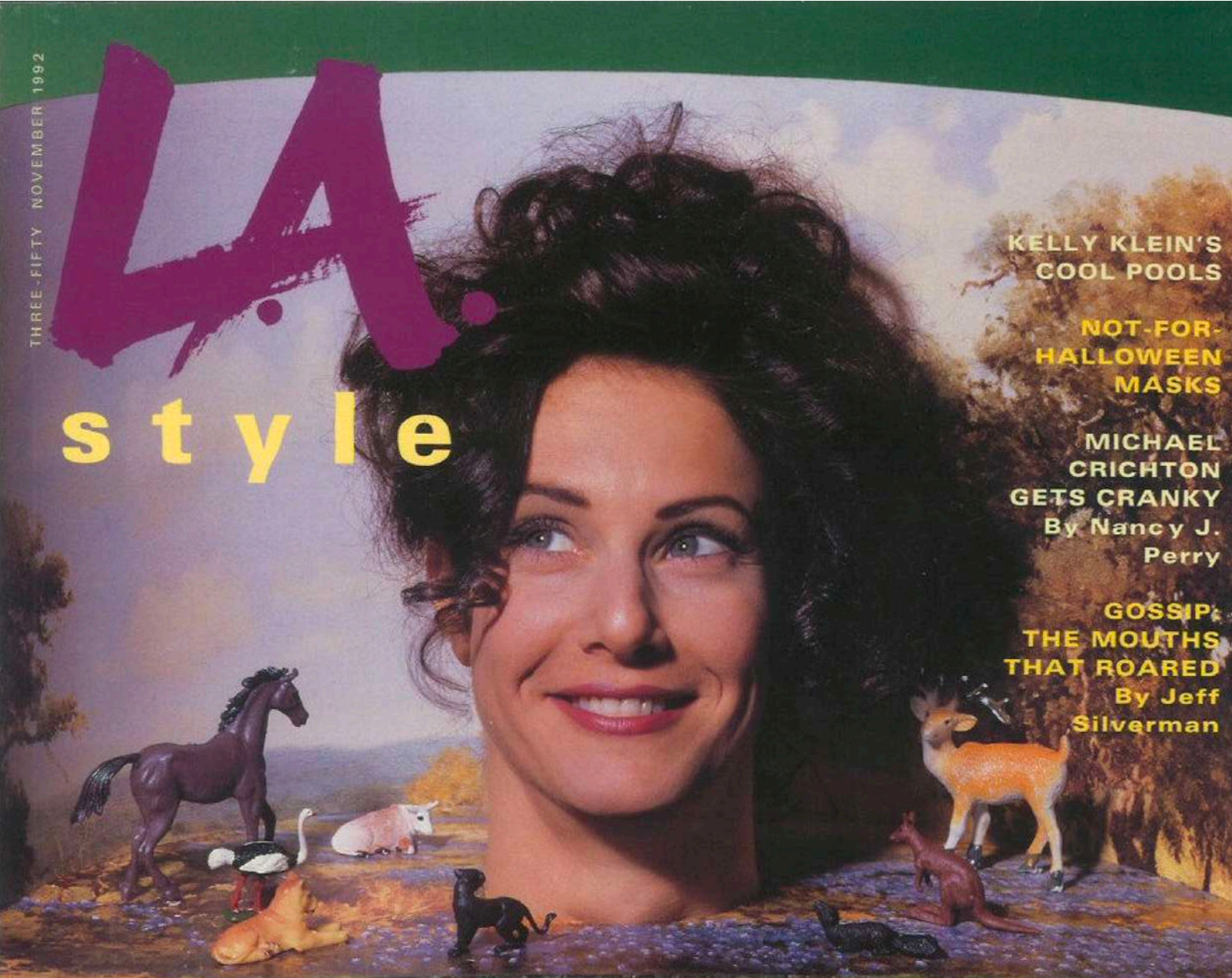
# LA. style

**KELLY KLEIN'S  
COOL POOLS**

**NOT-FOR-  
HALLOWEEN  
MASKS**

**MICHAEL  
CRICHTON  
GETS CRANKY**  
By Nancy J.  
Perry

**GOSSIP:  
THE MOUTHS  
THAT ROARED**  
By Jeff  
Silverman



**WINGER COUNTRY**  
**DEBRA DOES DALLAS. . . AND HOLLYWOOD**  
By KRISTINE McKENNA

S  
T  
A  
R  
C  
K



B  
E  
A  
U  
T  
Y

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

PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL HANAUER

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 lofilike 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.**

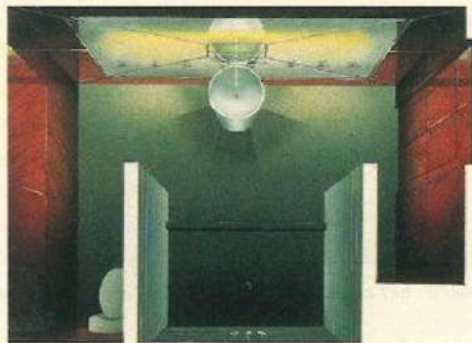
**...and Venice will never look the same again. BY MICHAEL WEBB**

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

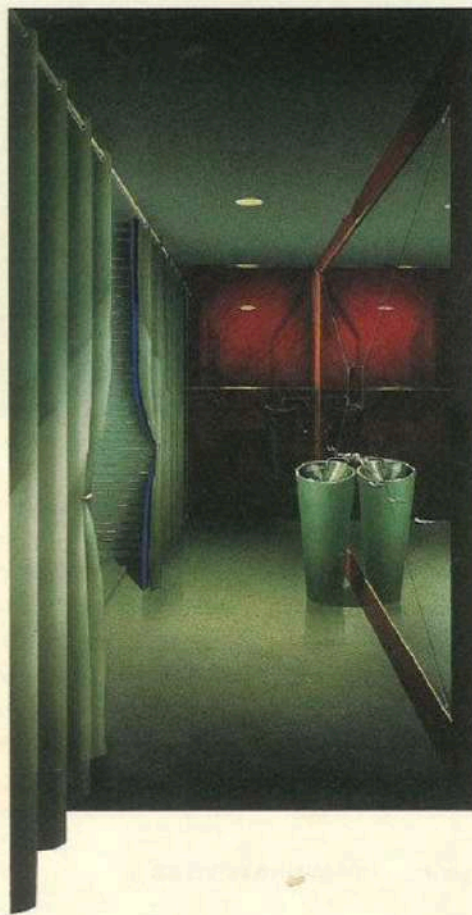


ed his way unscathed through the minefield of building regulations, only to be blocked when he sought a loan. "It's incredible how banks can practically dictate style by refusing finance for anything they can't understand," complains Shimogori. Starck went back to his sketch pad, replacing a glass curtain wall with horizontal strip windows, and substituting steel-troweled stucco for the copper cladding, but retaining the bowed end wall and roof. These changes reduced the cost to a level the loan officer would find acceptable, without diminishing the visual impact. If anything, it is more arresting: The sensuously curved block seems to have been cut out and dipped, with its side yard, into a vat of paint.

How well will it work? Starck says it's easy to build a functional shell that will keep out the rain, but many modern architects, from Frank Lloyd Wright on, have failed this basic test. Stucco cracks as it settles and is permeable. Project architect Ken Tanaka, who is turning Starck's sketches into working drawings, praises his directness and flexibility. "My task was to preserve the unique flavor of his concepts," Tanaka says, "but he was involved at every stage and the changes made the buildings more secure and energy-efficient." The integrally colored stucco will be given a flexible, waterproof seal that will also conceal the inevitable hairline cracks. Tanaka is still wrestling with the problem of how to surface the roof and inte-



**Minimalist: Custom-designed fittings for the bathroom are furnished and finished by the architect.**



grate the gutters and downpipes while preserving the illusion of a seamless, monochromatic block.

The Venice townhouses will incorporate Starck's graceful metal door handles, and may (if purchasers choose) be furnished and finished by him. Already, he has sketched a minimalist bathroom and syberitic bedroom. But, for Starck, every new building is a pretext to design new furniture. The three-legged, wood-backed chair he created for Cafe Costes in Paris has become a classic. Since then, he has developed more than a dozen sleek or spidery examples, with legs that evoke a silvery unicorn's horn, the curvilinear grace of the rococo era, or the cool rationality of the Bauhaus. Many are named for characters in Starck's favorite reading—the science-fiction novels of Philip K. Dick. The city of *Blade Runner* seems certain to excite his creativity.

For Shimogori, this is just the first of what could become a unique concentration of Starck inventions. He has already acquired the site for a third cluster of condos, as well as a disused church he plans to move to the median strip. Starck hopes to work with Frank Gehry and a leading Asian architect to turn the church into a multicultural community center. If West Washington Boulevard could be renamed for Abbot Kinney, it is possible to imagine a future Rue Philippe Starck. Best of all, these buildings may serve as a catalyst for originality in other L.A. neighborhoods. ●



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.