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LARCH ASCENDING

Hiding high in the Swiss Alps, this luxury lodge contrasts starkly with the surrounding icy landscape, its exterior wood elevated into a brooding inky black by a Japanese fire-and-oil weathering technique. Architect Arnd Küchel's dark materials don't stop there – the 2,500sq m interior boasts granite-lined bathrooms and a fireplace carved from a 30-tonne rock. A chilled Caroline Roux takes shelter in the shade. Photography: Oberto Gili



For many in search of a property in Switzerland's St Moritz – a ski resort high in the Engadin Alps and famed for its sheer fabulousness – the prize spots are all within throwing distance of its glittering frozen lake. It's far from the region's biggest stretch of water, but, ringed by mountains, it's perfectly formed. This icy arena is also the seat of the annual Snow Polo World Cup, which takes place in January or February: yet another fancy feather in the town's already chic cap.

One family, from the Italian lakes, had a different setting in mind. After years spent hunting for the perfect place to create their mountain home, they found it seven years ago: an exceptionally secluded 6,000sq m site, some feat in an area where, thanks to its desirability, houses are often squeezed in rather close together. 'We wanted trees and animals around us: to be in the forest,'

says the owner, who also spends time in Milan, where her husband's luxury fashion label is based. 'In our home away from the city, we live right on the water, we open the windows and there it is. I have an incredible view of the mountains from my pilates reformer. I feel embedded in nature.'

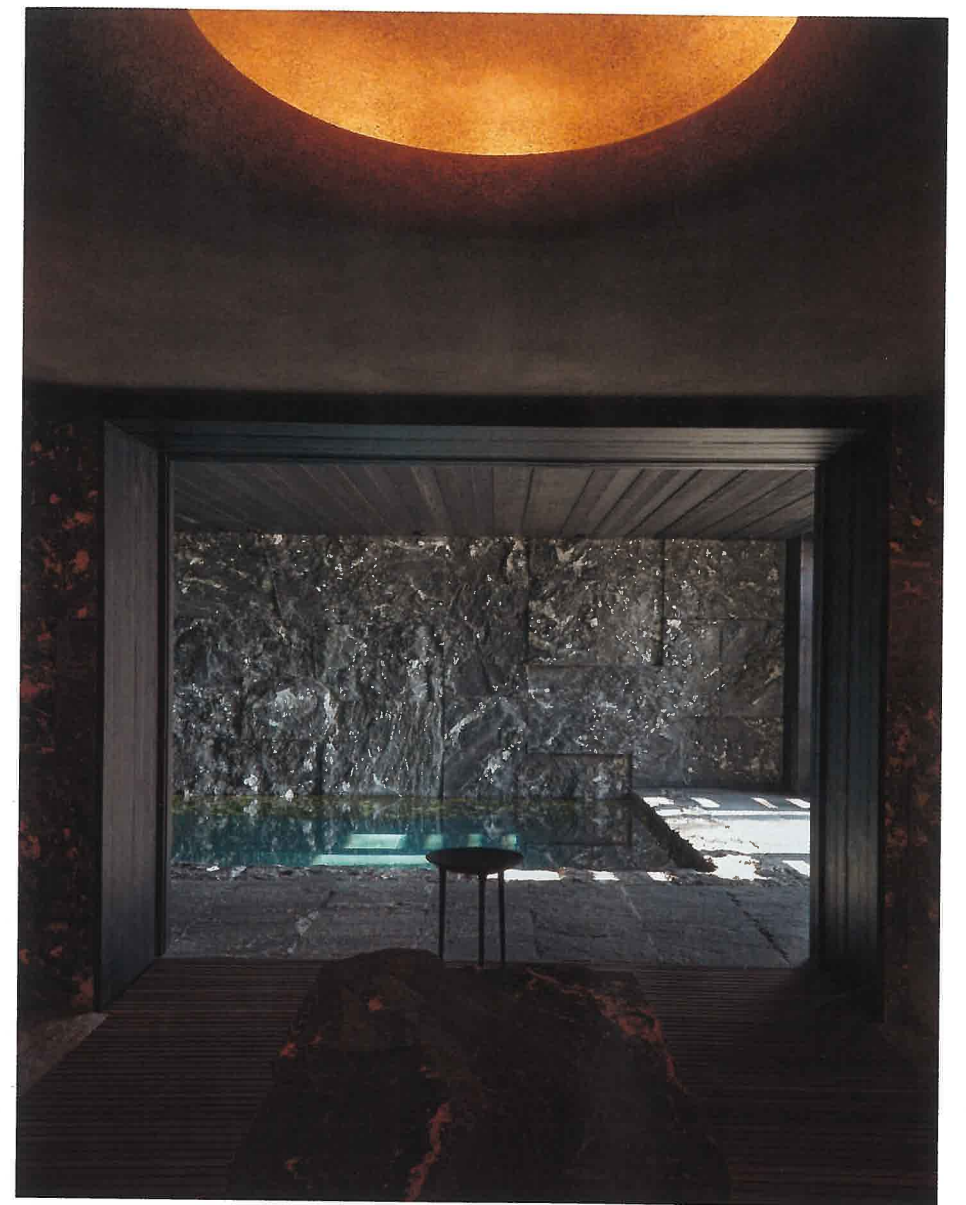
The family moved into the St Moritz house three years ago, but it wasn't their first home in the region. Their previous place, in nearby Champfèr, was like 'a big chicken coop', says the owner. If that sounds hard to imagine, their new creation is more extraordinary still: a 2,500sq m interior concealed under five small-scale roofs covered in wood shingle. 'It was the best way I could find to break up the scale,' says architect Arnd Küchel, who hails from the nearby Zuoz. 'Although we wanted to keep to the local rules of construction, we didn't want to do a normal chalet.'

Normal it is not. While the house is constructed from larch, which is traditionally used in the Engadin both for its load-bearing qualities and natural resistance to the extremes of mountain weather, its exterior has been torched to an inky black – the signature of a Japanese wood-burning method. 'You burn it, and oil it, and burn, and oil it,' explains Küchel, who researched the technique thoroughly before teaching it to local workmen. And so the chalet sits, dark and brooding, among the pines.

The owners had encountered these charred exteriors on their many visits to Japan. Known as *shou sugi ban*, or *yakisugi*, the system was developed in the 18th century as a way to weather-proof Japanese cedar. Despite its historic roots, with its characteristic soft dark finish the effect could hardly appear more contemporary. 'We showed Arnd some pictures,' recalls

Previous pages: in the salon, the burnt-wood surfaces achieve a shock of chiaroscuro. Beside wall pieces by Theaster Gates, left, and Lucio Fontana, right, twin woodburners frame Rick Owens stools and a bust of Kuntermann, a forest guardian, by Christophe Charbonnel. Opposite: 'Hoho', a savage oil painting by Kazuo Shiraga, flanks a steel staircase. Top: helpfully fitted with display niches by architect Arnd Küchel, the salon teems with abstract works by the likes of Tony Marsh and Sonja Ferlov Mancoba. Sitings editor: Gianluca Longo

Opposite: the chalet's entrance hall is hung with textural pieces, drawing to the fore Küchel's innovative use of wooden shingles – typically affixed to outside walls – across much of the house's interior cladding. To the left, two nail-on-board works by Günther Uecker add further striking relief, while one of Alberto Burri's singed plastic paintings rhymes with its flame-treated surroundings. Beneath it, a chair by Rick Owens boasts a carved antler. Right: the spa's monumental far wall, richly bespeckled with white quartz inclusions, was built from granite quarried in a nearby valley. The architect was pleased to discover that, 'when polished, it looks like mountains in the snow'. Bottom: the show kitchen is a forest of trimmed pine and rustic wrought chestnut chairs by Christian Astuguevieille. The black central stool is by Max Lamb





the owner. 'He's quite a low-key person as a rule, but he became very excited. I think the result is really unexpected and beautiful. The first time I saw it, I was just amazed. The classic chalet is quite boring, and we wanted a bit of Brutalism.'

For all that he is local, Arnd Küchel has embraced the cosmopolitan climate that now defines St Moritz. He has taken up commissions in the area for a number of glamorous clients, all the while supporting projects for international names, including Norman Foster. 'Growing up in

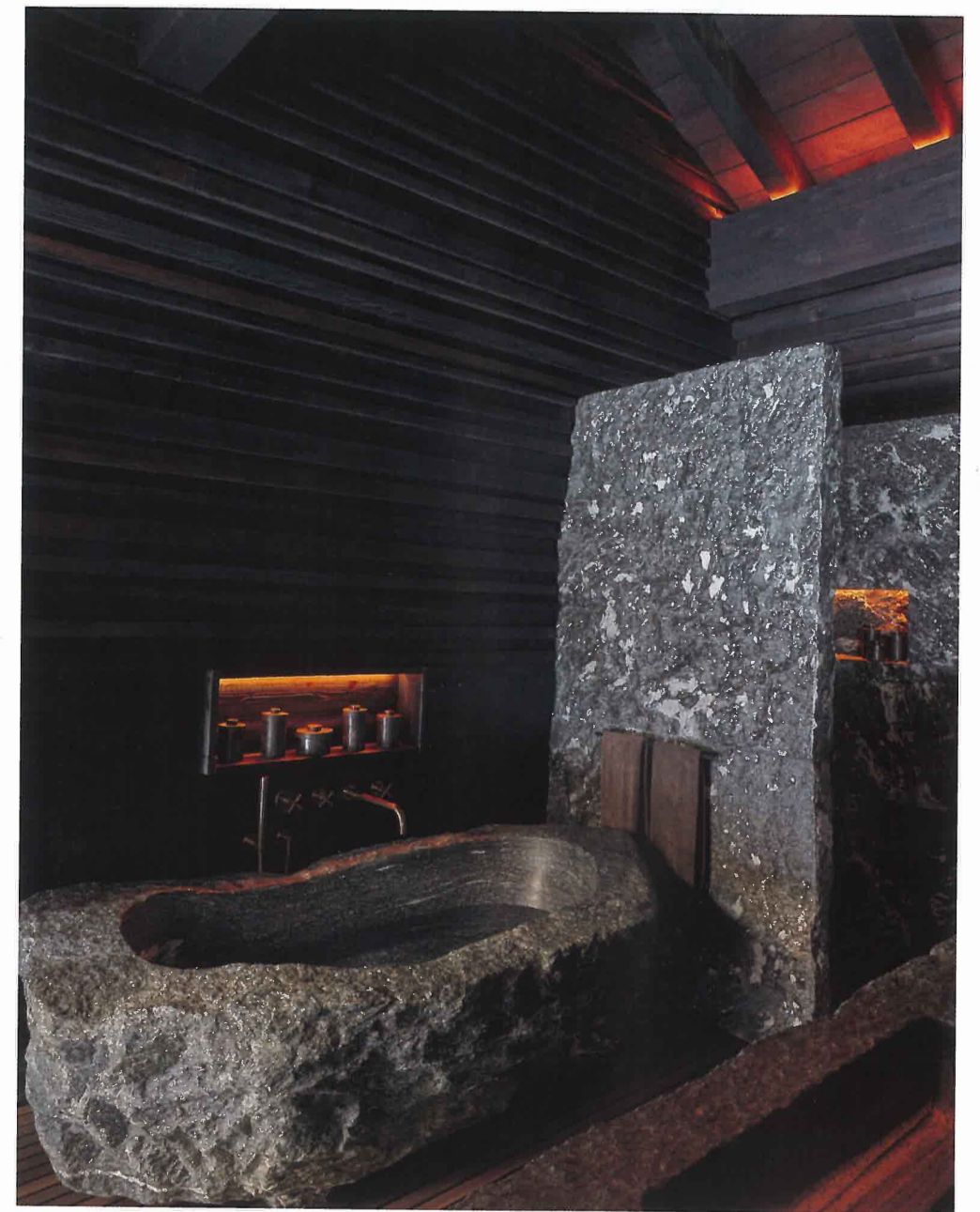
the Engadin, you have a great respect for nature, and what it can offer, and for tradition,' he says. 'But you adapt that to new ways of thinking and designing. In every project, I create at least one new idea.'

Among his big ideas is the vast living area: according to his clients' wishes, he's brought the torched exterior right inside. 'In the 50s and 60s, a lot of houses here had dark-painted interiors,' he says. 'It was only in the 90s we started taking those colours away.' Entering through the front door and down a steel staircase, visitors find

themselves in a cavernous ten-metre-high space, which leads, in one direction, to a terrace and a spectacular mountain view, and to an expansive kitchen in another. The ceiling, equally, is finished in a render normally used for outside walls, made from sand and stones taken from the local river. 'It's not luxurious, but it is difficult to make,' explains Küchel. 'This is the first time I've brought it inside.' The walls of the reception area are finished in fine wooden shingles: another testament to the architect's love of 'using materials in

unexpected ways'. The fireplace is carved from one 30-tonne piece of stone; the outdoor jacuzzi from a single rock. 'They are from the local valleys, carefully sourced.'

Though the salon is full of furnishings crafted by the architect, the owners' tastes are fully on display. Shelves are lined with exquisite Japanese ceramics. There are five bronze occasional tables commissioned from their friend, Massimiliano Locatelli. 'They are in the shape of Engadin lakes,' explains the owner. 'The project took a year: they are completely unique.' Each



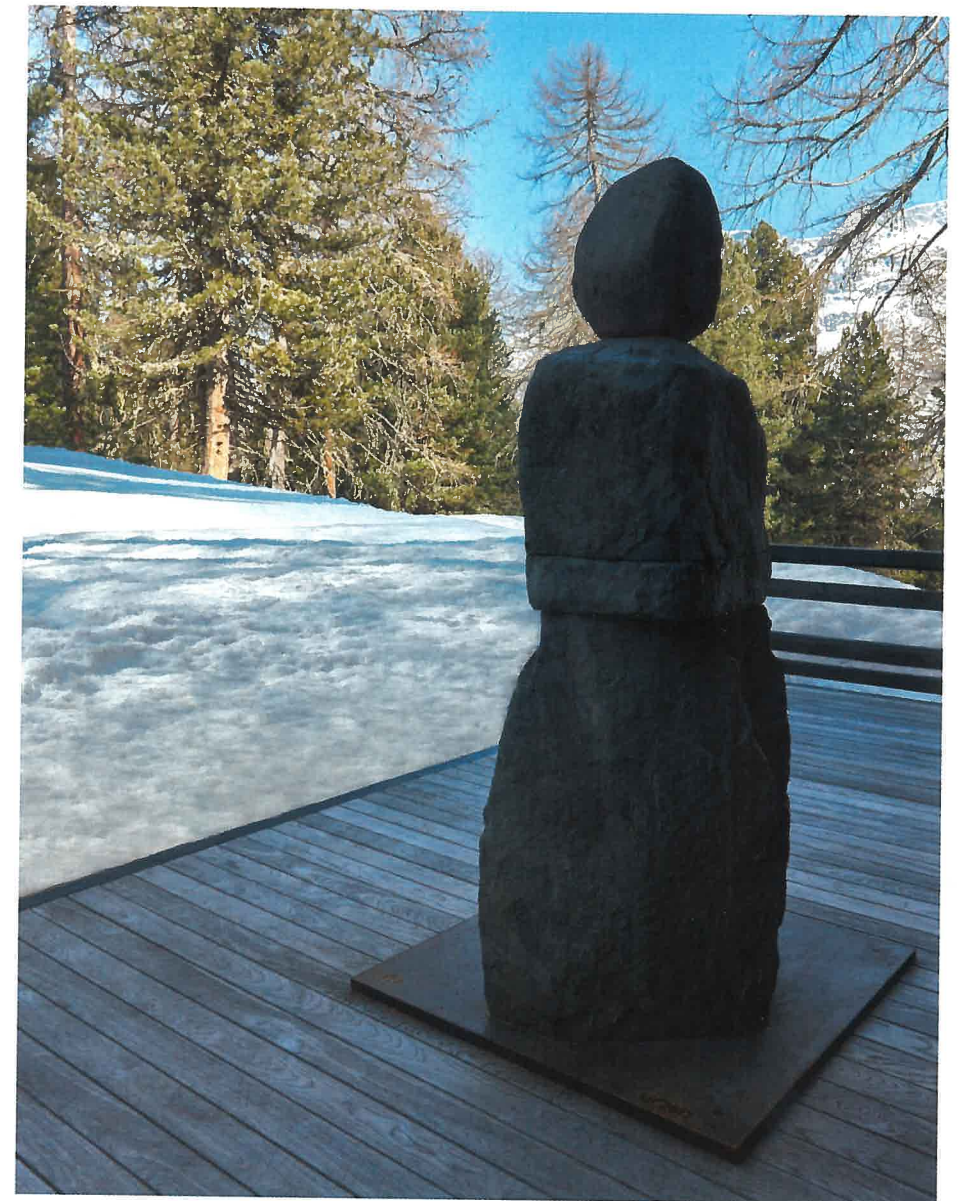
rests on an undercarriage of wooden branches. The walls are lined with dazzling paintings by Kazuo Shiraga, and the Austrian fashion designer-turned-artist Helmut Lang; chairs by Rick Owens sprout antlers. 'Michèle Lamy – Rick's wife – is a very dear friend,' the owner says. (Such a good friend that they threw a party for her here with 300 people.) A coal-and-stainless-steel sculpture of a mountain comes from another friend, the aristocratic Swiss artist Not Vital. It's displayed with Arte Povera works from Jannis Kounellis and

Alberto Burri, and a set of *urushi* lacquer furniture by Max Lamb.

What visitors won't see are the seven bedrooms and their bathrooms, lined in dark granite with white quartz inclusion. Nor will they witness the heavy curtains in every bedroom, made from the bouclé wool you might more expect to see in a Chanel coat. 'I love bouclé,' says the owner. 'When you use it like this, it's fantastic. It has so much weight, it becomes quite brutal.' Another perfectly arresting element in a mind-bending mountain home ☺

Top: in the chalet's intimate principal bedroom, two more works by experimental painter Alberto Burri take centre stage. The piece nearest the room's bouclé curtains hangs above another of Christian Astuguevieille's chestnut chairs, this time a fauteuil

Top right: the bedroom's adjoining bathroom is another love letter to local granite, all sourced, as in the spa, from the same nearby Alpine quarry. The bath was made out of a single huge piece of the veined rock, hollowed out and polished at its centre



Opposite: 'Tongue' by Not Vital points defiantly skyward in an alcove beside a stairwell. This page, top: the sparse ski room plays host to two encircling wooden animal sculptures, both by Cyrille André. Right: 'The Sensible', an abstract bluestone and stainless-steel sculpture by Ugo Rondinone, feels perfectly of a piece with the landscape, marking the threshold between the mountains and the chalet's dining-room terrace