

For ANTTI LOVAG
ARCHITECTURE is
a form OF PLAY
– spontaneous,
JOYFUL, FULL
OF SURPRISE

This page, Antti Lovag in the garden of the case study house he has occupied since the late 1960s. The house, along with numerous experimental structures, opposite page, top right, was built on the grounds of Lovag's first major habitology commission, centre, a private home that is nearing completion only today. Nature penetrates the interior of the home, top left, it is a recurring theme in Lovag's work





Antti Lovag is not an architect. Depending on his mood, which may be influenced by a *désinfectant* of whisky and Perrier, he is a *bricoleur* (French for “handyman”), a *con* (“asshole”, more or less) or, if you really press him, an *habitologue*: Lovag studies the nature of – and constructs habitats for – Man. *L’Homme*. By his own reckoning, that makes him the opposite of an architect. He is, if you will, an anti-architect.

This is no mere pose. Even by the standards of architecture, which as a profession tends to tolerate if not embrace a certain degree of radicalism, Lovag, creatively active at 87 and engaged in the project of a lifetime, is radical. So thoroughly radical in fact – so unrelentingly rational on the one hand, so utterly quixotic on the other – that after five years of acquaintance, and more than 30 hours of interviews, I still don’t know if he’s serious. I tend to think he is, but were I to ask him, he would probably deny it.

Antti Lovag’s best known work is his most visible one, the Pierre Cardin house near Cannes. You might have seen it in magazines or even in person. Cardin takes great pride in the place and doesn’t mind showing it off. Many a fashion editorial has been shot there, and Cardin occasionally rents it out for film festival parties and other grand events. Capable of hosting hundreds of guests, the Cardin house is sprawling. Or rather, it’s bubbling. Like soapsuds under a microscope, the complex of spherical and spheroidal rooms seems almost to foam down the hill above the sea.

It’s in keeping with the extended paradox of Antti Lovag that this, his most famous building, is frequently misattributed (to Cardin himself) and generally misunderstood. The almost universal response to the home is a visual one – usually along the lines of, “Wow, it looks like something out of a Bond movie” – whereas, for Lovag, its appearance is

beside the point, and to love (or hate) it for its style is to miss that point altogether. The Cardin house, like Lovag’s two other major commissions, was conceived from the inside out, made as it were to the measure of Man. Its appearance is a mere by-product of the praxis of habitology.

Now, it’s hard to say exactly what habitology is, and that’s because Lovag – who coined the phrase, developed the techniques and more or less embodies the spirit of habitology – never quite says what it is. He offers hints and glimpses and vague definitions. But it’s pretty clear to me that the prankster bricoleur in him, which delights in breaking rules and scorns all grand formulations, has made a pact with the utopian rationalist in him, which can’t resist a systematic re-envisioning of the world: each will keep the other in check; together, they will sustain the paradox of Antti Lovag.

That said, a basic idea of habitology can be gleaned from Lovag’s occasional remarks, and another round of *désinfectant* usually helps.

“Whether for economic reasons or lack of technical solutions,” Lovag maintains, “human beings have confined themselves to cubes full of dead ends and angles that impede our movement and break our harmony.” The straight line, in Lovag’s view, is “an aggression against nature” – not just Mother Nature, in which straight lines practically never occur, but against our own nature, Human Nature. So when Lovag claims, “I build shelters that bring us closer to nature,” what he means, in part, is shelters that bring us back to ourselves.

“The motion of human arms and legs,” as Lovag likes to point out, “traces circles in the air.” And here, in this simple fact of the human body, can be found habitology’s point of departure, the circle. “We have a circular field of vision,” says Lovag. “Conviviality is a circular phenomenon. The circle structures the way human life is carried out.”



This page, bottom, one of many experimental structures dotting the property of Antti's first major commission. Above, a panoramic view of the home, revealing spheres still under construction and, in the foreground, preparations for a man-made lake. Opposite page, abandoned spheres offer a glimpse of the structure of Lovag's habitats before the concrete is poured





This page, a view of the spheres and spheroids that are the building blocks of Antti Lovag's habitats; the intersection of these forms creates sensuous interior spaces, bottom left. Opposite page, Lovag's own residence, the case study house in which he explored some of habitology's main themes, is less spherical and more organic in its form than are his major works. The placement of windows in Lovag's habitats is decided by the clients, directly on site; there are no plans





What's more, the circle "is the simplest construction. It has just one dimension: the radius."

It should come as little surprise, then, that the fundamental structure of Lovag's habitats is the circle in three dimensions – the sphere – the lightest, strongest, most material-efficient form of them all. Think of the sphere as the anti building block, a radical foil to the rules, conventions and most basic assumptions of what Lovag calls "the orthogonal system". To work in spheres, one must rethink everything – materials, machinery, methods, mindset. It is here, in his tireless on-site experimentation with spheres – their construction, arrangement and interactions – that Antti Lovag, empiricist to the core, conducts the ongoing, quasi-scientific investigation that is habitology.

"I have three conditions I'm obliged to respect," Lovag says of taking on a project. "I don't know what it's going to be like, I don't know when it's going to be finished, and I don't know how much it's going to cost."

As you might imagine, he doesn't get lots of clients. But that's okay, because Lovag doesn't want clients. He wants *complices*. Accomplices. Partners in crime against architecture, for the greater liberation of Man. And somehow, he always manages to find them. Or they find him. For there's clearly some sort of mutual attraction. These are men whose vast fortunes are but a function of their approach to life. They are *joueurs* ("players") and *aventuriers* ("adventurers"), to use Lovag's words. Men who take risks for the fun of it. In this, they're just like him.

One might liken Lovag on site to a movie director on set without a script. The workers are there, the materials and machinery at the ready. But there is no plan, only a process, a methodology of improvisation. Lovag calls it *conception par simulation*, and it may well be his most radical idea of all. As spheres of various sizes are constructed of

lightweight mesh and rods, Lovag and his accomplices literally roll them around the site, like giant marbles, searching for the appropriate placement, arrangement and function of each. For Lovag, it's a form of play – spontaneous, joyful, full of surprise.

When I first met Antti Lovag, the days of joyful creation seemed behind him, habitology but a relic of the 60s and 70s, when Lovag was something of a cultural star in France, and young architecture students from around the country migrated to the south to share in the excitement and unlearn everything taught at school.

Penniless – money holds no interest for him – but supported by a vast community of loyal friends and disciples, Lovag was living – squatting, to be precise – in a case study he had built on the grounds of the massive, still-unfinished home that was his first major commission. Built, in typical Lovag style, without a permit on land where building was prohibited, the home had to be declared a French cultural landmark in the 90s to avoid its being torn down by the local government. Work on the home, which had been expanding and evolving since the late 60s, had ground to a halt with the passing of its original owner.

It's a fitting next chapter in the story of what must be, if half of the tales he tells are true, one of the most colourful lives of the 20th century, that this landmark home has been purchased, and not just by anyone. Miraculously – or perhaps predictably – the new owner, who wishes to remain anonymous, is a *joueur*, an *aventurier*, a *complice*. Realists, pragmatists, pessimists and architectural naysayers, beware: Antti Lovag is at it again.

For more on the life and work of Antti Lovag, please visit *The Antti Lovag Project* at www.anttilovag.org