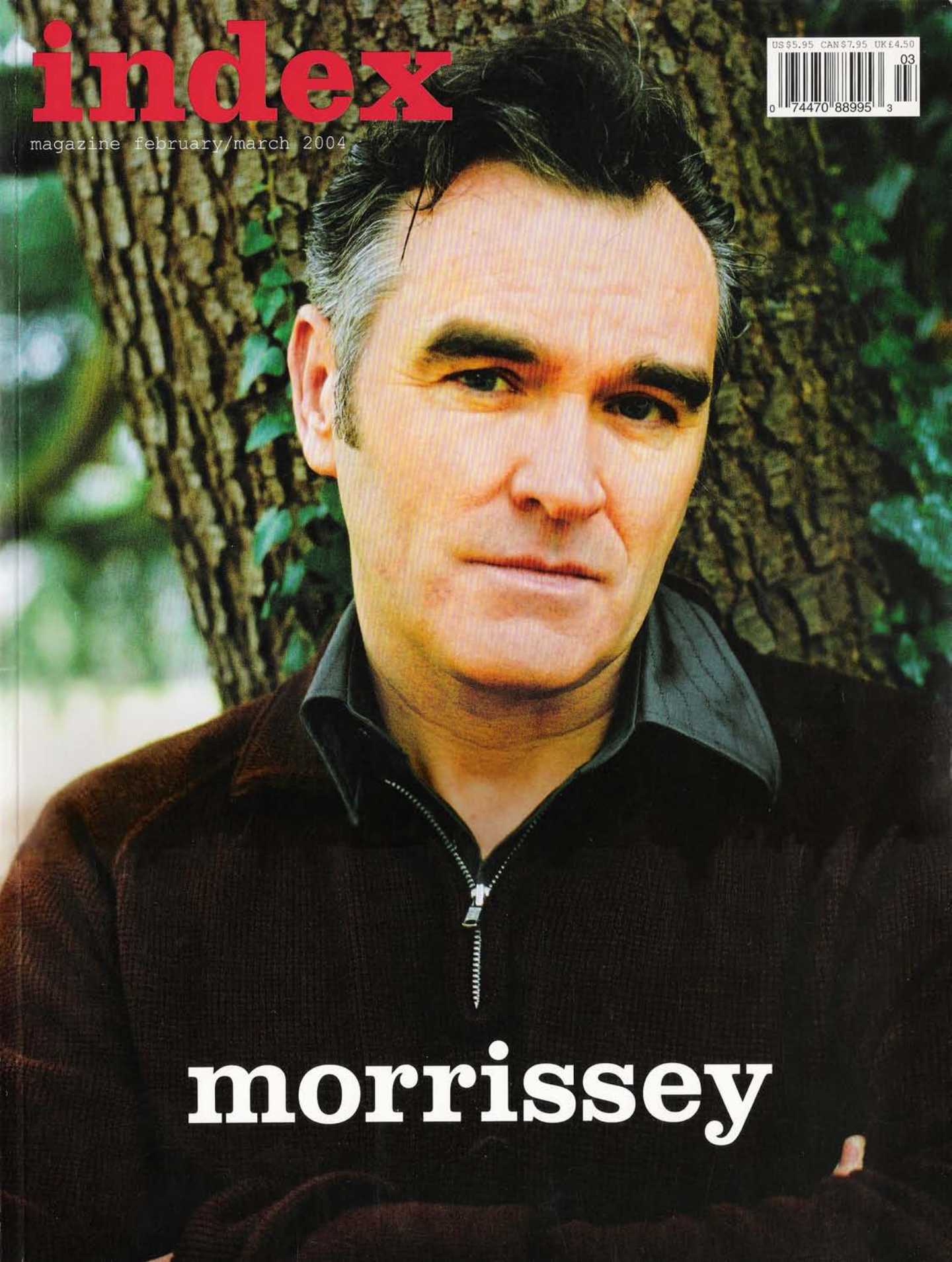


index

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morrissey

PHOTOGRAPHED BY JEFF BURTON

**CAN A YOUNG
LA ARCHITECT
CHANGE THE
WORLD?**

FRITZ

**IS MAKING HIS GEODESIC DOME
WITH ARIANA SPEYER**



HAEG

THE CENTER OF THE UNIVERSE

[After he bought an eccentric geodesic dome in LA's up-and-coming Mt. Washington neighborhood, Fritz decided to put the space to work by starting a series of salons. The Sundown Salons, named after Fritz's street, have since become a hub for emerging artists, musicians, and performers. Besides acting as a curator/social catalyst and running his architecture practice, Fritz teaches at Art Center College of Design. When *index's* Ariana Speyer came to visit, he extended cheery hospitality despite hobbling on a recently broken leg.]

ARIANA: How did you find a geodesic dome to live in right in the middle of LA?

FRITZ: I went looking for a junky, old house on which I could impose my vision. I finally found this place on a realty website in 2001. It's outsider architecture – half subterranean cave, half geodesic dome. It was built in 1985. It's really sad because the woman who built it died just a few months after it was finished.

ARIANA: Is your domestic routine different in this house?

FRITZ: Nothing about the house says what happens where, and I love that. It's not "sleep here," "work there," "eat over there." It has developed that upstairs in the dome is the daytime workspace, and downstairs is the nighttime recreation area.

ARIANA: After moving here, you started hosting the Sundown Salons.

FRITZ: Yes. It seemed like a waste for me to just live in these absurd spaces. The Salons were completely casual at first. It was like, "You guys should come over and play – it'll be fun." Then they developed into regular events with all sorts of work being presented.

ARIANA: Los Angeles must foster a less orthodox way of making and presenting art.

FRITZ: It's interesting to see what happens when you take music out of clubs, art out of galleries, readings out of bookstores, and combine them all in one space. People here aren't as preoccupied with how their work might pay off later.

ARIANA: Historically, a salon was a place to which people were invited to share ideas and conversation.

FRITZ: With Sundown, the work that's being presented forms the conversation. When the Swiss video artist Pipilotti Rist curated a show here, she called it *Instant Installations*. She asked her students from UCLA to participate. They all came with works to install, but they couldn't just deposit them and leave. They had to somehow respond to what was happening in the space. One artist, Krysten Cunningham, tethered a couple of copulating Styrofoam figures, held up by helium balloons, in the garden. During the event one escaped and got caught in a neighbor's tree. I think it's still there.

ARIANA: What did your neighbors think?

FRITZ: I usually lead a pretty quiet life but

my neighbors have come to understand that sometimes it gets a little bit insane. During the rehearsals for the Nightmarathon Hextravaganza Salon, every now and then there were these bloodcurdling screams.

ARIANA: That Salon was organized last Halloween by the LA band My Barbarian.

FRITZ: Yeah, they're friends of friends. They play a kind of music they call "showcore" – a mix of show tunes and hard-core punk.

For the Nightmarathon, they wrote an epic play that they performed in the garden from early afternoon until after sunset. It was all about classic horror stories, gothic literature, and parables.

ARIANA: We usually think of art and performances taking place in generic spaces. Galleries and museums go to great lengths to create supposedly neutral settings so that the art can speak.

FRITZ: That is the assumption today, but there is nothing in our history that compels us to do things that way. I'm always fascinated by photos of group shows from the '60s. There'll be a Warhol painting, a Lichtenstein, and then a marble fireplace and messed-up wood floors. To me, a space like Sundown offers the potential to mix things up in a way that museums can't.

ARIANA: Your last Salon was a departure, because it wasn't held at your house.

FRITZ: Yeah. Kimberly Meyer of the MAK Center invited me to do a Salon at the Schindler House, which MAK uses as an exhibition space. The house is an absolute celebration of Los Angeles. R.M. Schindler came to LA from Vienna in the '20s. It was a transformative experience for him. He was so excited that it was warm enough to sleep outside that he designed sleeping baskets for the roof.

ARIANA: Schindler brought a modernist outlook with him from Europe.

FRITZ: Yes. The Schindler House is almost the cultural soul of Los Angeles. In the '20s and '30s, Schindler and his wife Pauline would invite musicians and dancers to come to perform. The Schindlers also had very serious social ideas. They were interested in cooperative living and psychoanalysis. The house was a place where all of these concepts were debated and discussed.

ARIANA: So the Schindler House is a model for what you're doing today.

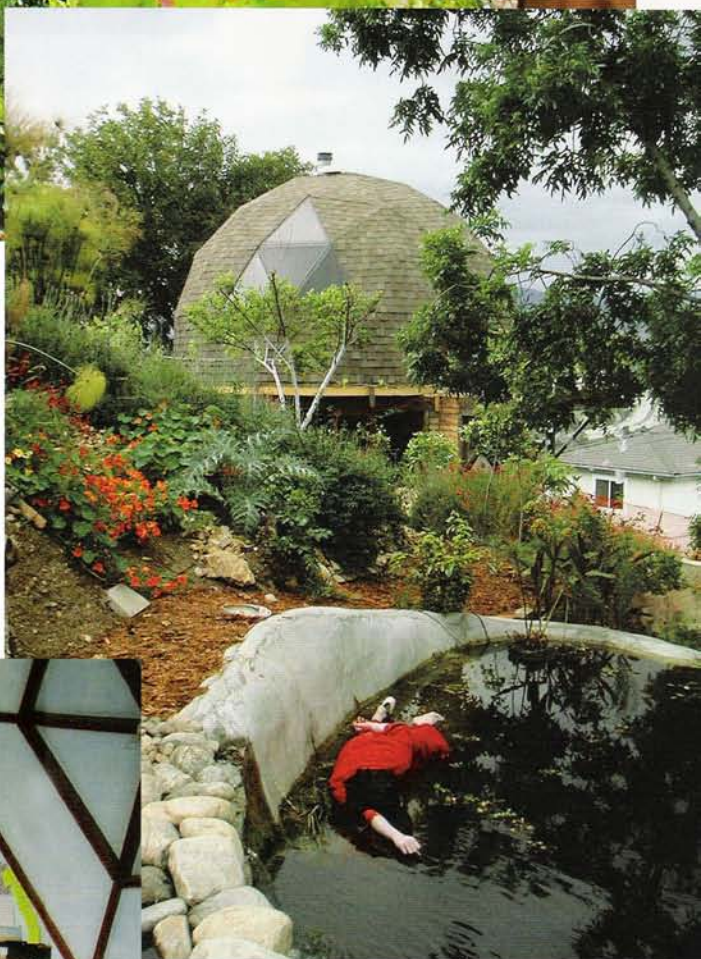
FRITZ: Politically, socially, architecturally, the house represented a challenge to prevailing beliefs. You get the sense that those people came together because they believed they could





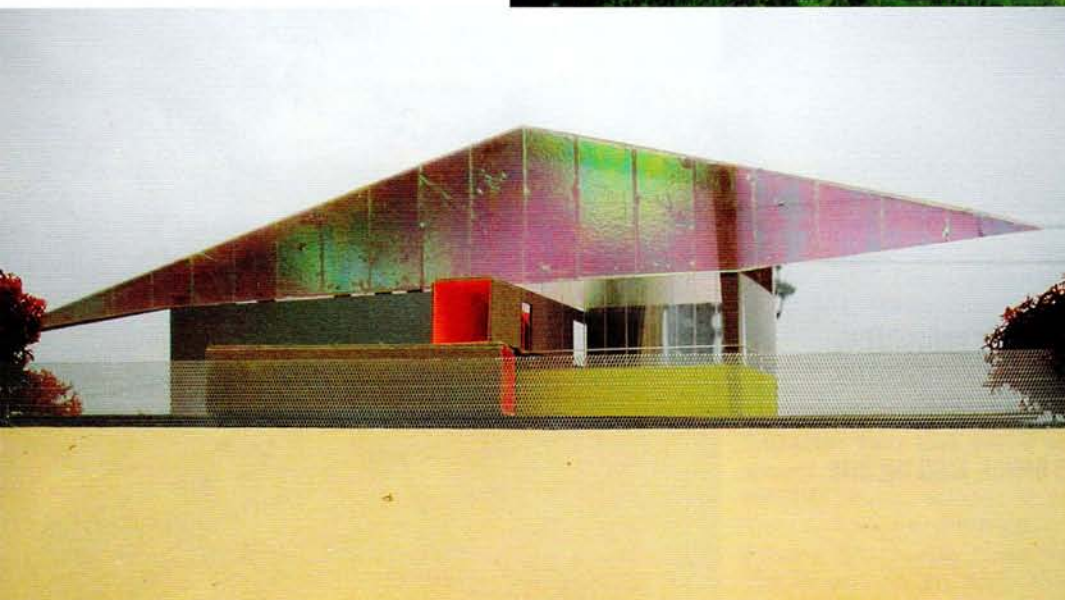
**SUNDOWN SALON HAPPENINGS CAN BE PROVOCATIVE:
TOP, A PERFORMANCE BY ASDIS SIF GUNNARSDOTTIR.
RIGHT, "POND ACCIDENT" BY DAWN KASPER.**

**BELOW: FRITZ'S DOME-SHAPED OFFICE, ALSO THE SITE
OF SALON FILM SCREENINGS.**





**BACK TO NATURE:
THE COMMUNITY GARDEN AT
ART CENTER IN PASADENA.**



**A CONCEPT DRAWING OF THE
LA RIVER HOUSE. THE SITE
WILL ALSO HOST CULTURAL
EVENTS.**

change their world for the better. I don't know if artists and designers have that same sense of possibility now. I'm not sure they feel as if they can change things. I detect this quiet acceptance of the status quo, even in the most supposedly avant-garde circles. We're stuck in this horrible period where shapes and colors and forms are created without much thought about whether or not people's lives will be affected by any of it.

ARIANA: Who participated in the Schindler House Salon?

FRITZ: I invited Anna Sew Hoy, an up-and-coming artist who just moved here from New York, and Giles Miller, a jazz-influenced musician, along with Amy Yao, who just started a fashion line, and Jason Taylor, a hip-hop musician. They are two couples that are friends with each other. They came up with the idea for a band, D'Argento, named after the Italian director

Dario Argento.

ARIANA: What was their music like?

FRITZ: It was a fusion of Goblin, the group that scored most of Argento's movies, and hip-hop. We decided to put them in the very back of the garden, in the bamboo grove. They performed in black light, and they were dressed in white jumpsuits. So as you walked through the garden, you saw these glowing figures playing this gorgeous, haunting music.

ARIANA: Sounds beautiful.

FRITZ: It was supposed to be a one-time thing, but now they're becoming a real band. They'll be performing this week.

ARIANA: When did you first start thinking about architecture?

FRITZ: I knew I wanted to be an architect when I was in second grade. [laughs] On family road trips, I'd bring a huge stack of *Architectural Record* magazines and read them in the backseat.



Photos Fritz Heeg

But since then, my interests have expanded way beyond architecture.

ARIANA: You also teach in the environmental design department at Art Center in Pasadena. Is that where you combine your interests?

FRITZ: In order to fix the inhuman urban disaster areas that we live in, we have to start designing with a broader mindset. Unfortunately, right now you have car designers designing cars, urban designers designing streets and public areas, and architects designing discrete shells of buildings. None of these people talk to each other, and you end up with a mess. In our program at Art Center, we are trying to teach designers to think about the implications of their work from urban scale down to micro scale.

ARIANA: You can't just ignore the rest of the puzzle.

FRITZ: When I studied at the Architecture Institute in Venice, we were trained to design a skyscraper or an airplane or a dress or a pen. Unfortunately, American architectural training is very narrow. We should be thinking, "What does it mean for me to sit here at this moment, in this place, in this environment, in relationship to the immediate community, in relationship to the city, in relationship to transportation?"

ARIANA: You want to encompass the entire built environment.

FRITZ: A smart brain has more connectors. A dumb brain has fewer connectors. We are operating with very dumb brains in our society today. Part of it has to do with the capitalist system, in which the only function of an architect is to design buildings.

ARIANA: But isn't that kind of specialization natural in a modern economy?

FRITZ: Not if you look at the most brilliant moments in history. The Renaissance was so spectacular because there were people who were creating sculpture, paintings, buildings, and science simultaneously. Every discipline was feeding and absorbing other disciplines. Hopefully our graduates are thinking about issues beyond just getting a job and making money, like what are the real by-products of the work that they're doing?

ARIANA: Is it also about the impact on the environment?

FRITZ: The Gardenlab program that I started at Art Center supports ecology-based initiatives. I got a small grant two years ago to make what I thought would be just a little garden. For the first project, the students designed a community garden on campus, with thirty plots. Students, faculty, and staff can take plots and do whatever they want, just experiment.

My current students have selected an area on campus where they would like to have outdoor student activities like band performances and film screenings and also integrate some memorial trees for faculty, students, or staff who have died. It will be a place for lively activity juxtaposed with our own personal history.

ARIANA: You're also working on a project called LA River House. It's another public-private space that will ripen over time.

FRITZ: Yeah. I'm doing that with Steve Appleton, an artist who does large-scale, site-specific urban projects. He has this piece of land directly on the Los Angeles River north of downtown, in this desolate industrial zone.

ARIANA: It sounds like a movie setting.

FRITZ: The river runs through the entire city, so a lot of people are thinking about how to reclaim it as an urban amenity, as opposed to what it's become during this century, which is a massive storm drain. The house will sit right across from what's going to be a state park. Appleton plans to open the house for art events.

ARIANA: What will the house be like?

FRITZ: It's going to be a prefab steel structure, with a massive sculpture studio on one side and a residence on the other. We're designing the house to be responsive to the river environment, taking advantage of the way the air moves, catching the rainwater and using it to irrigate the gardens, and employing solar power.

ARIANA: How will you use the air movement?

FRITZ: The house is situated on a part of the river called the Glendale Narrows. The wind currents come down from the mountains and through the LA basin or vice versa. The roof will be able to catch the air to ventilate the sculpture studio.

ARIANA: In many ways this project explores the same ideas that you're talking about at Art Center and at the Sundown Salons.

FRITZ: Yeah. I like to think that every project I do is a manifesto. If we do a good job on this house, it should be a model for how people could reclaim areas of Los Angeles that have degenerated and turn them into humane, civilized spaces — spaces that connect you not just to other people but also to the natural environment. That's what people came to LA for in the first place.

ARIANA: I feel like artists have done that all around the world, reclaiming abandoned industrial neighborhoods and adapting them.

FRITZ: But this goes beyond finding the cheapest, most comfortable space in the city and turning it into an artists' community. The rehabilitation of the river is an opportunity to look at public space in Los Angeles — and to think about the experience of all the people in the city. Already, there are people taking walks and bike riding along the river.