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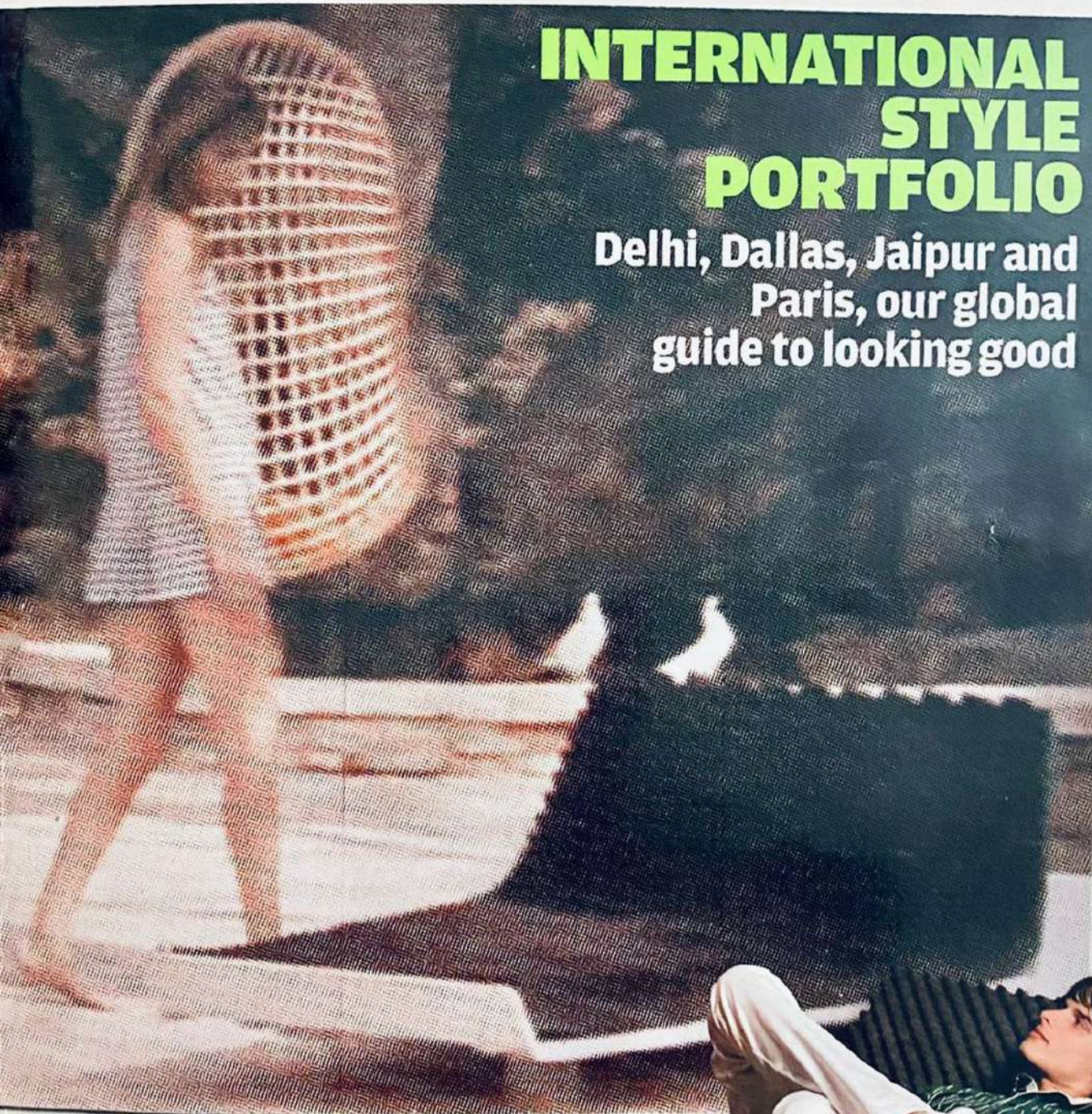
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NEWSPAPER



IN RESIDENCE

Stairway to heaven

A north Portugal site seemed an impossible place to build a house, until architect Álvaro Leite Siza Vieira stepped up with his vertically challenging Casa Tólo



Clinging to a ridiculously steep hillside in north Portugal, Casa Tólo's story started back in 1999 when the 825 sq m strip of land the house now occupies was bought by Luis Marinho for €2,500, a derisory figure even for this isolated area 100km north-east of Porto. The reason for the low sum was the precipitous 35-degree slope that facilitated the plot's impressive views. Having originally intended to build a low-cost prefab log-hut to use as a weekend retreat, Marinho then had a change of heart and decided he wanted a more elaborate holiday home. That's when he thought of Álvaro Leite Siza Vieira, the architect son of Portugal's Pritzker Prize winner, Álvaro Siza Vieira. Leite Siza says he chose to keep Casa Tólo's interior simple because it is a holiday home. "It's true minimalism in the sense of reducing everything to the real essentials," says Leite Siza. The three bedrooms and living space are accessed through glass doors with lacquered metal frames, and walls and ceilings are painted white and contrasted with pine-wood floors.

The most striking aspect of Casa Tólo is on the outside: the concrete steps that cascade down the hillside. There are 164 of them in all (with a further 86 inside), and Leite Siza says they remind him of the stairs in MC Escher's famous lithographs. It's a feature that's partly responsible for Leite Siza's unapologetic claim that "no other house is like this one", but this uniqueness was only achieved after six painful years of construction work, which defied the relatively modest €125,000 budget. The project was incomprehensible to the builders, who cheated on materials and even added unplanned details that subsequently had to be removed. Now, at last finalised according to the first drawings, Casa Tólo was submitted as part of the Portuguese presence in São Paulo's 2005 Architecture Biennale. Yet, if a commission's success is measured by client satisfaction, Casa Tólo doesn't have to travel anywhere. "At the beginning of the process I was expectant," says Marinho. "Now I like it a lot. I take great pleasure in it being out of the ordinary." ★

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VIEW TO A HILL
Due to the plot's steep topography, it was necessary to build the house as a series of levels and rooms linked by exterior steps, right, and interior staircases, far right

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