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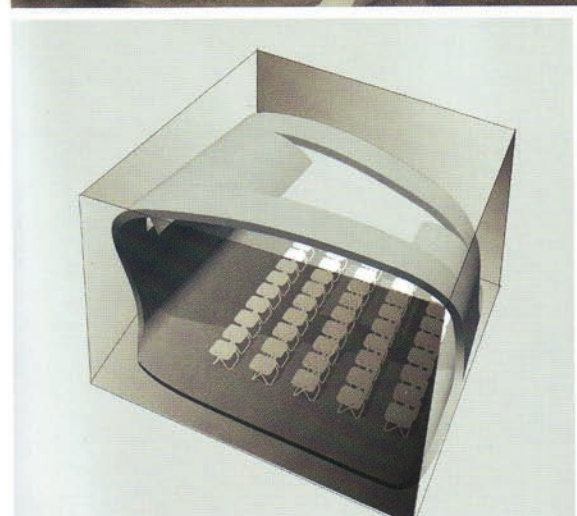
LAB RESULTS

TWO RABID MULTITASKERS JOIN FORCES TO CREATE EVERYTHING FROM PROVOCATIVE SHOWROOMS TO AWARD-WINNING FURNITURE **WRITER: JEN RENZI**

Antonio Pio Saracino and Steve Blatz launched ArchLAB in 2004 to plumb the fuzzy boundary between product design, branding and architecture. "In Italy, architects design everything, from silverware to furniture to spaces," notes Saracino, a 31-year-old native of Rome. "There are no dividing lines. We wanted to embrace that European sensibility." The duo has quickly amassed a diverse and, indeed, interdisciplinary portfolio of experimental projects, many with elements that perform multiple roles: building facades that become projection screens, ceilings that morph into dividing walls and merchandise displays that double as sculptures.

And the multitasking doesn't end there; ArchLAB is actually a sideline venture for the two partners, who also maintain sepa-





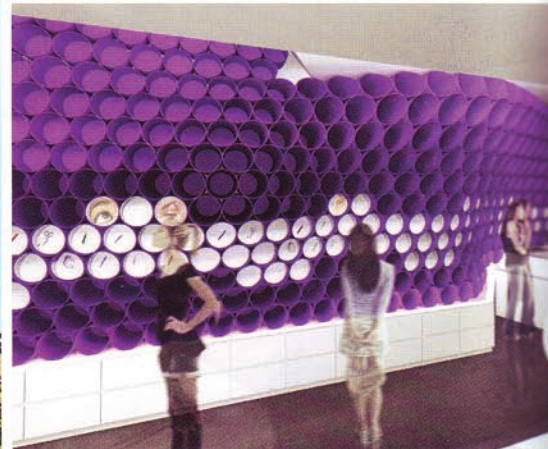
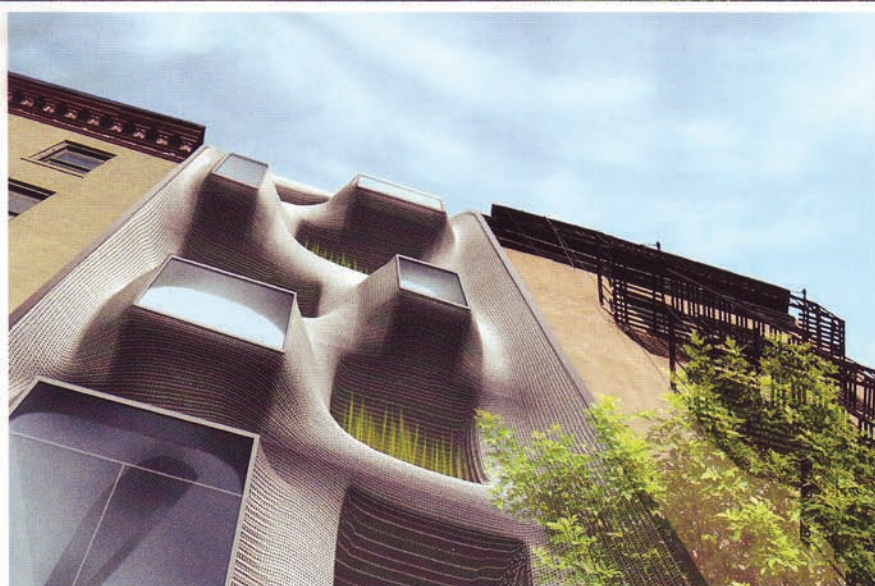
TIBI GREAT: (Previous) The Tibi boutique on Wooster Street in New York City; (clockwise from top) renderings of the first freestanding Tibi showroom; two folding canopies create intimacy in Tibi's Greenwich Village boutique; renderings of the Italian Cultural Institute on Park Avenue, slated to be completed later this year

rate practices. Steve E. Blatz Architect's roster of high-end residential and fashion clients includes Oscar de la Renta, Michael Kors Fragrances and Calvin Klein Jeans, while Saracino – who worked for Massimiliano Fuksas and Winka Dubbeldam – has a thriving art career, too. The two met through mutual acquaintances and first collaborated on design competitions, prototyping provocative furnishings like a teak-veneered carbon-fiber table and an expandable LED light fixture baffled with fiberglass panels. After winning almost every contest – including the Future Furniture and ICFF's Next Generation awards – they formalized their partnership to tackle even more ambitious projects.

Although Blatz, 48, jokes that he's the voice of reason while his partner is more adventurous – "I'm the practical one, always concerned with how to actually build things" – in reality, their dynamic

is much more fluid, rooted in lengthy discussions, R & D of new materials and prolific 3D model-making that results in arresting, spatial volumes. One of their biggest clients is the playful, '70s-inflected fashion line Tibi, for whom ArchLAB completed a loft-like Soho boutique last year. To simultaneously celebrate and suppress the storefront's boxy proportions, the architects conceived a sort of magic carpet that hovers just below the ceiling, a hand-painted canopy that folds origami-like to carve out spatial zones from above. "The device creates a forced perspective, lending scale to the big white box," explains Blatz. "Many of our designs are structured according to a single bold move like this."

A similar gesture unifies the duo's scheme for the Tibi showroom a few blocks north, where a ribbon-like band of polymer-coated sheetrock loops through the 6,600-square-foot



RAISED ARCHES: (Clockwise from top) The Seed House, located in Marbletown, NY, imitates a seed, giving life to the environment around it; the German company Tweezerman's first freestanding boutique in São Paulo; the NYC Cocoon House facade is rendered in elastic metal mesh

floorplan. Like a bolt of cloth, it's strategically puckered and snipped, peeling off at angles to admit light and views, billowing to form a reception desk, bending to enfold a conference room and otherwise separating public spaces from the more private (but still open-plan) work areas. The element is an obvious formal nod to Tibi's stock in trade, which is fabric. But it also exemplifies an ArchLAB trope: manipulating continuous, elastic surfaces to create a visual continuity while dividing the space programmatically.

Saracino and Blatz have deployed this strategy in other projects, as well. An undulating, wavelike display wall of acrylic tubes will

animate the Tweezerman boutique in São Paulo, Brazil, opening this summer. The architects' imminent restyling of the Italian Cultural Institute's Park Avenue townhouse will juxtapose an avant-garde timber-framed membrane against the faded elegance of the building's Federal-revival envelope. For Cocoon House, a conceptual residential building, they envisioned a woven, metal-mesh facade that conceals the interior during the day, but reveals it at night. "The Modernist glass curtain wall has no more aesthetic value today, when boundaries between private and public space has been made more complex by technology," says Saracino. "We're in need of a more interactive model." In other words, who needs boundaries at all? ▀