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Sail Away

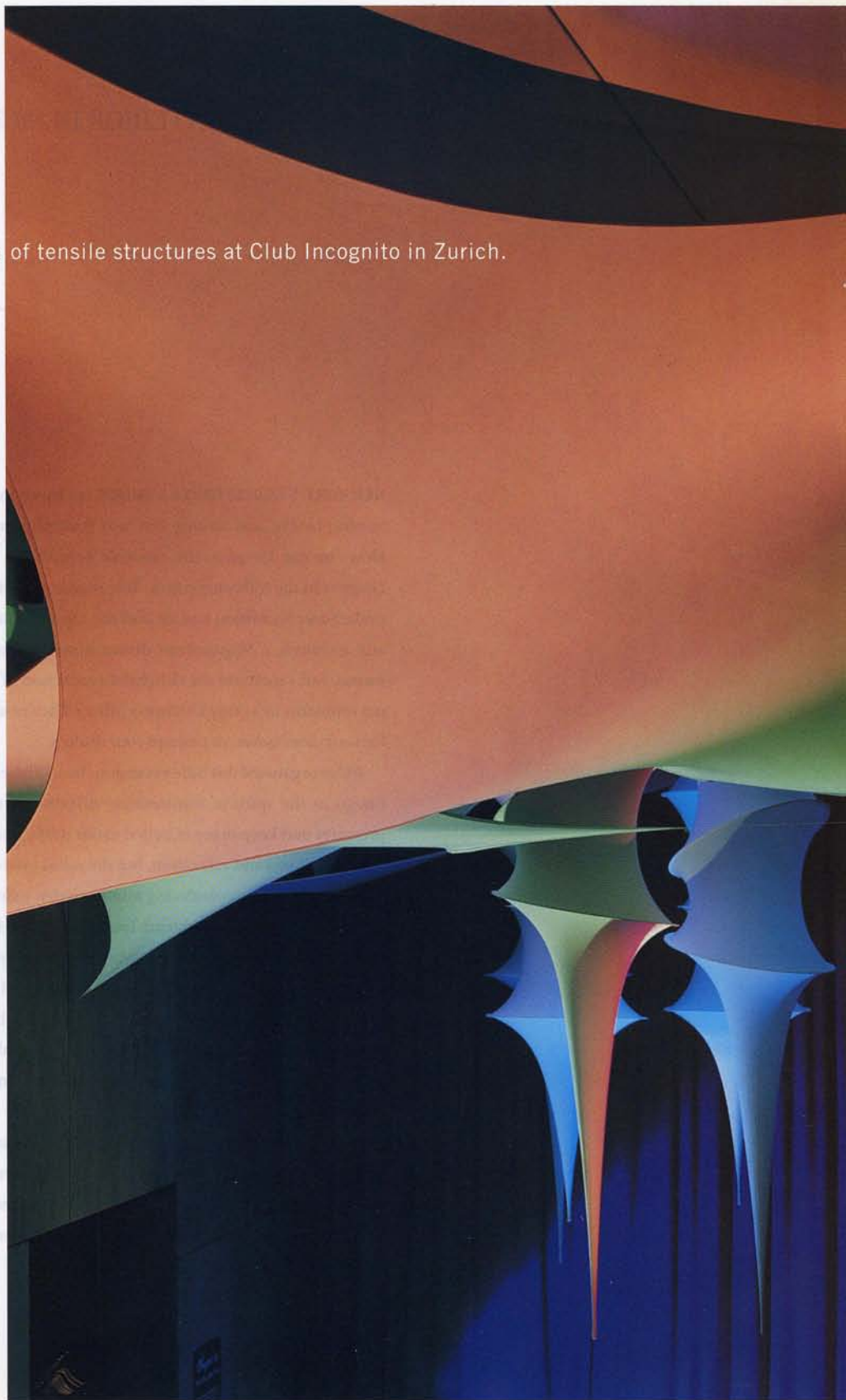
Gisela Stromeier conjures a fantasia of tensile structures at Club Incognito in Zurich.

CONVENTIONAL BUILDING MATERIALS—metal, glass, plaster, stone, and concrete—are not for Gisela Stromeier. She relies instead on stretched fabric to create her otherworldly interiors. “I never thought I’d end up doing this,” says the Konstanz-born architect, who trained in dance before studying architecture in Germany and, eventually, at Pratt Institute in New York. Genetics may be responsible for Stromeier’s career path: Born to a family of tentmakers, she is now following proudly in her father’s footsteps. Peter Stromeier and his partner Frei Otto pioneered the use of tensile structures, counting the German Pavilion at Montreal’s 1967 World’s Fair and the 1971 Olympic Stadium in Munich among memorable installations. Gisela Stromeier’s legacy is clearly apparent in the myriad projects she has completed since moving to New York in 1986. The Incognito Club in Zurich is one of her most dramatic creations to date. →

Right: Horizontal forms are anchored by wall-fixed hooks, while vertical versions, shaped through internal hoops, are suspended by wire.

Far right: Lit from within by colored lamps, suspended fixtures provide the vehicle for an ever-changing light show.

PHOTOGRAPHY: PAUL WARCHOL







Zurich is not necessarily synonymous with cutting-edge interiors. Nonetheless, Stromeier's client was determined to create something extraordinary, travelling to New York to scope out new ideas and furnishings. Intrigued by lighting fixtures discovered at a retail store, he tracked down Stromeier and asked her to design his nightclub. The rest, as they say, is history.

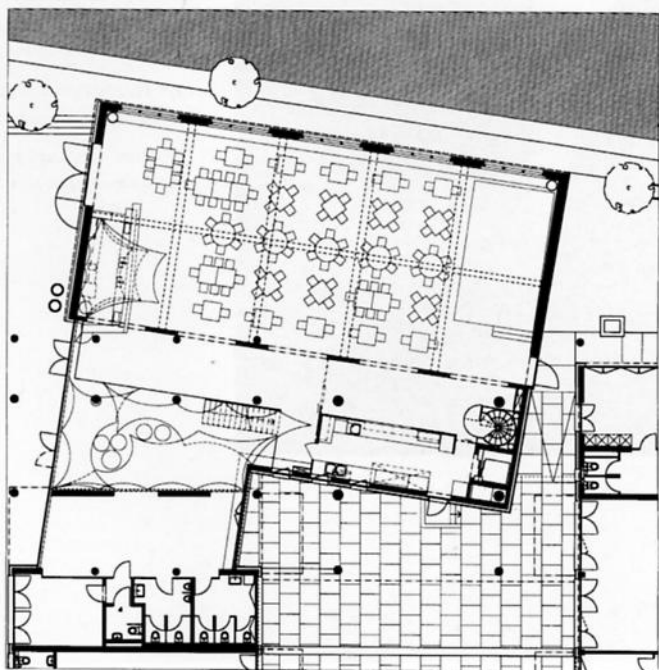
Stromeier traveled to Switzerland only twice—once at the project's inception and again for the final installation. During the first trip she explored the nightclub's hybrid new/old site located in a formerly industrial river-front area currently in the throes of gentrification. The structure's older component, dating to the 19th century, was built as a warehouse. A double-height, skylit entry hall links the existing building to a recent addition built of concrete and glass.

The nightclub's organization, as determined by the client, is straightforward. The ground floor is essentially an open space with

almost half of its square footage dedicated to table seating and the bar. There is also a stage at the far end for presentations and fashion events. Upstairs, a glass-fronted lounge overlooks the main area.

Within the rectilinear concrete envelope, Stromeier worked her signature magic. Her ethereal, white Spandex forms counterbalance the structure's inherent toughness and organize the space. For the foyer, with its 20-ft-high ceiling, she created three horizontal, sail-like constructions that wrap around five suspended columnar forms that are lit internally. Over the bar Stromeier installed a canopy of layered fabric panels. The simple material and complex sculptural forms, Stromeier explains, also provide a vehicle to inject color into the neutral space. Colored lamps can be fitted inside the tensile structures so that they glow from within. The →

Opposite: View of Stromeier's tensile structures as seen from the second-floor, glass-fronted lounge.





fabric forms also work as blank canvases for colored light projections, which emanate from theatrical light fixtures installed on beams. It's all very flexible.

Stromeyer's approach is strictly hands-on. Based on a project's existing volumes and geometries, she and her staff shape, cut, and sew the fabric themselves. Often, the fabrics she uses are custom made. Stromeyer installs the fabric too, using only lengths of wire to shape the material and anchor it to hooks in the walls, ground, and ceiling. Occasionally she utilizes metal armatures such as the internal hoops in the suspended pieces at Incognito. "I'm really very self-sufficient," Stromeyer says. "I try to create a balance between the existing structure and my way of building."

The tensile structures at Incognito cost \$21,000. Thomas Lack was the project architect; lighting design was by the Zurich-based firm Sound & Lights Image AG. —*Edie Cohen*

Left: Five fixtures are suspended from the ceiling in the double-height entry zone.

Opposite: Overlapping Spandex sheets create a cloud-like composition above the bar.