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A golden rendition of a black hole, Maximilian's Schell is an apartment-sized vortex that doubles as a sculpture and shade canopy. Installed in the courtyard of an L.A. gallery, the structure is made from sheets of reinforced Mylar. Creators Benjamin Ball and Gaston Nogues describe it as a "warp in the face of the street."



GRAVITATIONAL PULL

Los Angeles architects Benjamin Ball and Gaston Nogues joke that they lifted the design for their recent installation directly from the opening credits of the B movie *The Black Hole*. In fact, the project takes its name, Maximilian's Schell, from the lead actor of Disney's 1979 cosmic clunker. Part shade canopy, part sculpture, the golden vortex is both witty and technically precise.

Installed in the courtyard of Materials & Applications (M&A), a hip architecture gallery in L.A.'s Silver Lake residential neighbourhood, it creates a sci-fi spectacle in contrast to the small-scaled shops and homes along the street. "The outside is a very bold urban statement – a warp in the face of the street. But on the inside, it's like the underside of a flower," says Nogues.

Inspired by the bubble studies of German architect Frei Otto, Ball and Nogues modelled the effects of gravity on form. They derived the initial parameters for Maximilian's Schell using the software Top Solid, then started searching for materials. That done, they returned to Top Solid to mock up the project. For the final structure, they used a CNC machine to cut panels out of transparent, amber-coloured Mylar reinforced with nylon and Kevlar fibres. "The architecture happened when gravity was applied," says Nogues of the funnel shape. Ball, meanwhile, adds that using computers to explore new forms is exciting. "But for us it's not enough to produce an image in the computer," he says.

If the idea of a black hole evokes a sense of absence or a void, experiencing Ball and Nogues's work dispels that notion. Jenna Didier, M&A's founder and director, is pleased with the positive public response to the experiment. "Part of our mission is to pull in as many people as possible from the community and to inspire interest in the built world," she says. "Socially, the installation has really transformed the courtyard into a meeting space. It's a great way of gathering the minds of the community."