STAYING HOME...

New House Architecture

What is it about single-house architecture that so excites designers and magazine editors the world over? Like many publications on architecture and design, *hinge* annually devotes an issue to the subject, and looks forward to putting it together. There's just something about this building type that seems elemental to the field of architecture, and almost fundamental to the human psyche – as if all the complexity, meanings, references, complications, problems and solutions bound up in the building arts could be filtered down to a single, modestly scaled volume. The process of simplification implicit in house design is appealing in the same way most minimising, editorialising acts are; it suggests reducing things to their core, as if we could get closer to the 'soul' of a thing. We like it in art, in music, in literature, in clothing, so why not buildings? It implies a journey toward purity, no matter how problematic that concept is. (We also happen to like excess at times, but that's a different story.) Unlike museums, airports, parliaments, office towers, shopping malls and luxury hotels, houses are generally easy to understand, to take in, to absorb in single appreciations. They are also, importantly, the first buildings… the first type humans built, and the first humans owned. They are what we live in, what we trust to let us sleep peacefully and raise our young, prepare our food and let down our guards. Perhaps most of all, they are the buildings we can be most private in – read: most honestly ourselves. It is no accident that the word 'home' in the English language has such loaded and multiple meanings, quickly signifying all sorts of things to every human being, even – or perhaps especially – children.

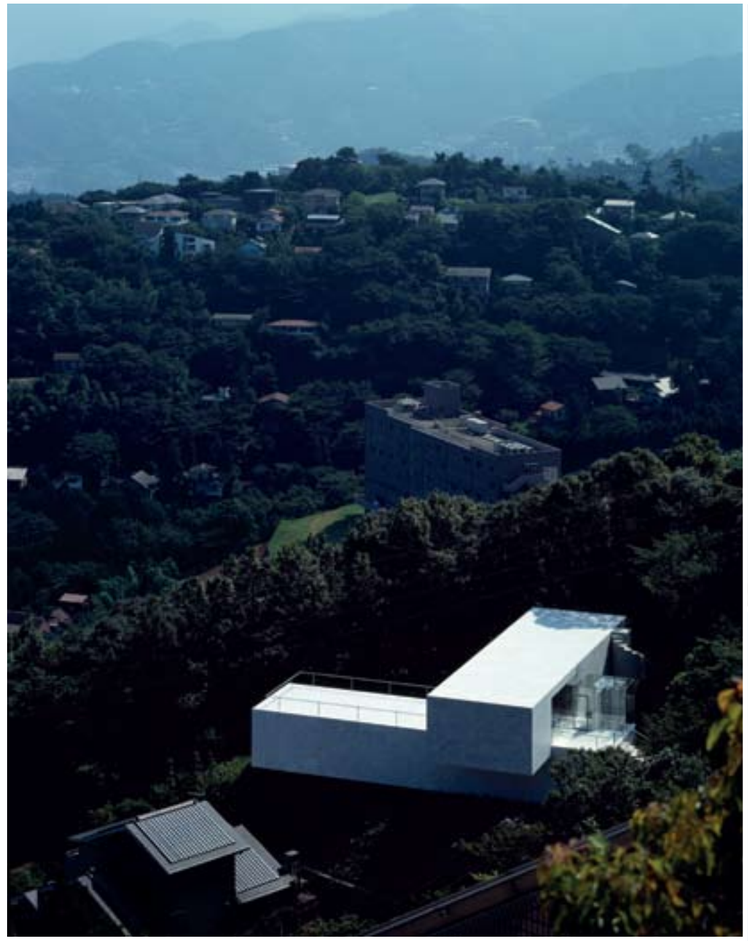
Every year architects stumble over themselves to produce new house designs, to make the definition of the type ever wider, to bring to these small buildings the very best thinking power they can muster. Does anyone know how many private houses have been built in the history of the world? Nope. Millions, we'd guess. Still, ingenuity and originality appear, time and again. That is simply confirmation of the infinite potential of the art of building; nonetheless, it is rather astonishing. Observers often spot trends and tendencies in these private commissions that portend larger directions among societies. This year it's modesty and reduction and a desire to live more accurately within our means, or at least, to refrain from building what we don't need. Yet houses, by their nature, are often built by the wealthy (few others can afford to undertake the enormous challenge) and rarely are the houses that make news actually cheap. Site and land has a lot to do with it. Of course there are some brilliant economical houses built regularly, too. But in general, building yourself a house isn't exactly a small endeavour. It requires not only money but an attitude of adventurousness, the willingness to start something you know will take a long time and be stressful and contain hiccups. Not for everybody, to be sure.

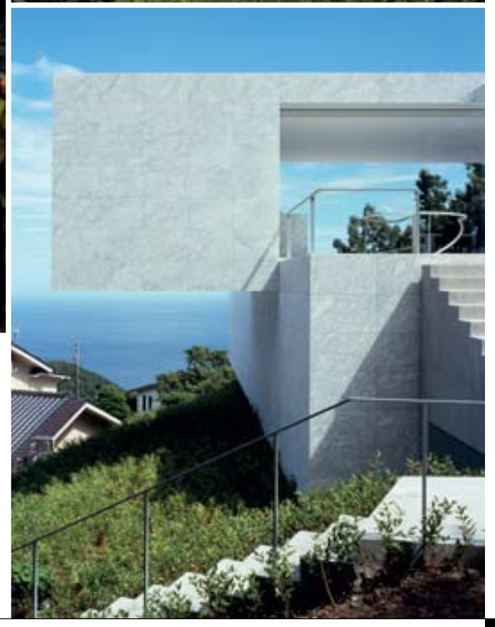
The reward, of course, is unsurpassed. Realising your own, personally designed abode, on land you own, in a manner and style you've chosen, and then living in it, is a special experience, not to be missed if one can manage it… because most people, most of the time, live their lives within buildings that they haven't had a hand in designing, tolerating the compromise because they have no choice. But what a luxury to make all the decisions regarding the building closest to you, to take responsibility for its successes and failures, to have a stake in its very character. The house is the closest thing to letting the masses take part in the adventure of architecture.

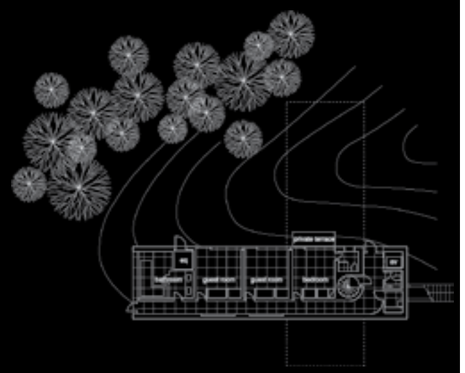
Plus House – Japan
Mount Fuji Studio

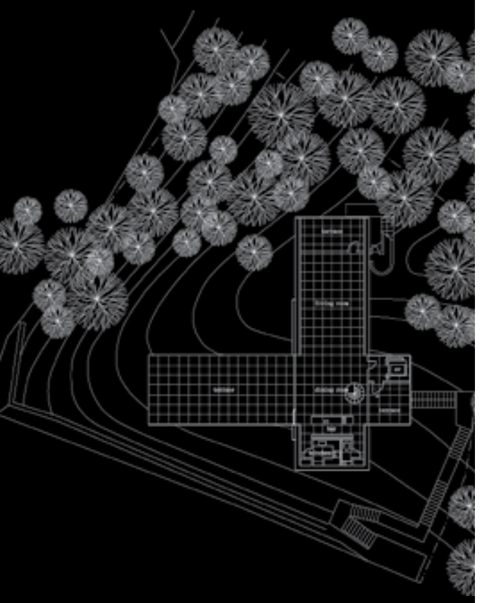
Photography by Ken'ichi Suzuki

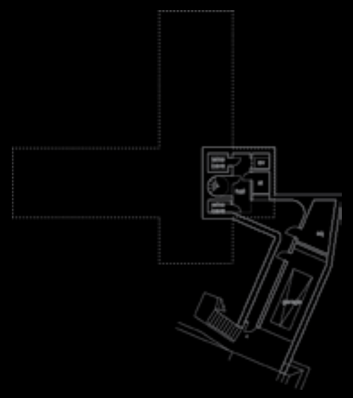
This widely admired entry by Mount Fuji Studio is made for the lenses; a sharp, clear parti composed of two perpendicularly positioned boxes set upon a green hillside overlooking the Pacific Ocean in Shizuoka, Japan, clad in delicious white Carrara marble from top to toe. Its architects have a natural feel for dramatic formal siting and a command of minimalist detailing (they keep all the messy bits safely out of view). Reinforced concrete is the structural material of the two-storey (plus basement) building, which is used as a weekend house by its owners. Architect Harada Masahiro speaks of wanting a "blueprint for autonomous architecture"… an "abstraction of nature". The two rectangles of the house separate private and public functions into lower and upper segments where the roof of the bedroom wing provides an astonishing terrace for the upper space, thrusting out toward the sea. The transverse axis seems to embed into the forest adjacent, making the house a kind of bridge between green and blue. Cloaking it entirely in polished white marble emphasises the natural tones thrown off by the context (water and vegetation), even as it shimmers against it like some classical statue. The marble nearer the south and west ends of the building was incrementally polished to approach reflectivity, bouncing the sky and sea blues and the forest greens off its almost mirrored surfaces; architecture lovingly abstracting nature. Luckily, Masahiro is fully capable of playing such a highly charged game here… Plus House is a triumph.

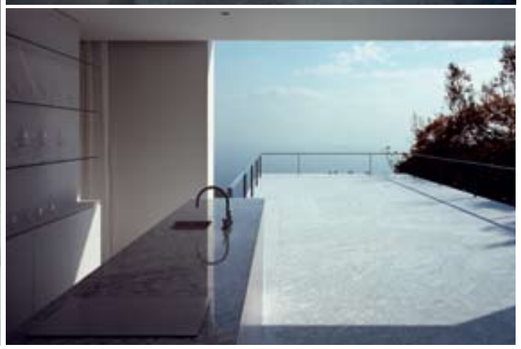












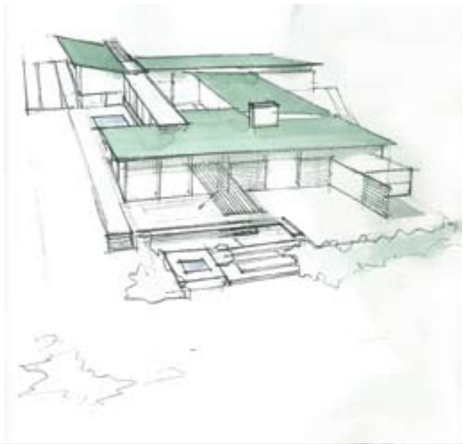
Tiburon House – USA
Andrea Ponsi Architetto

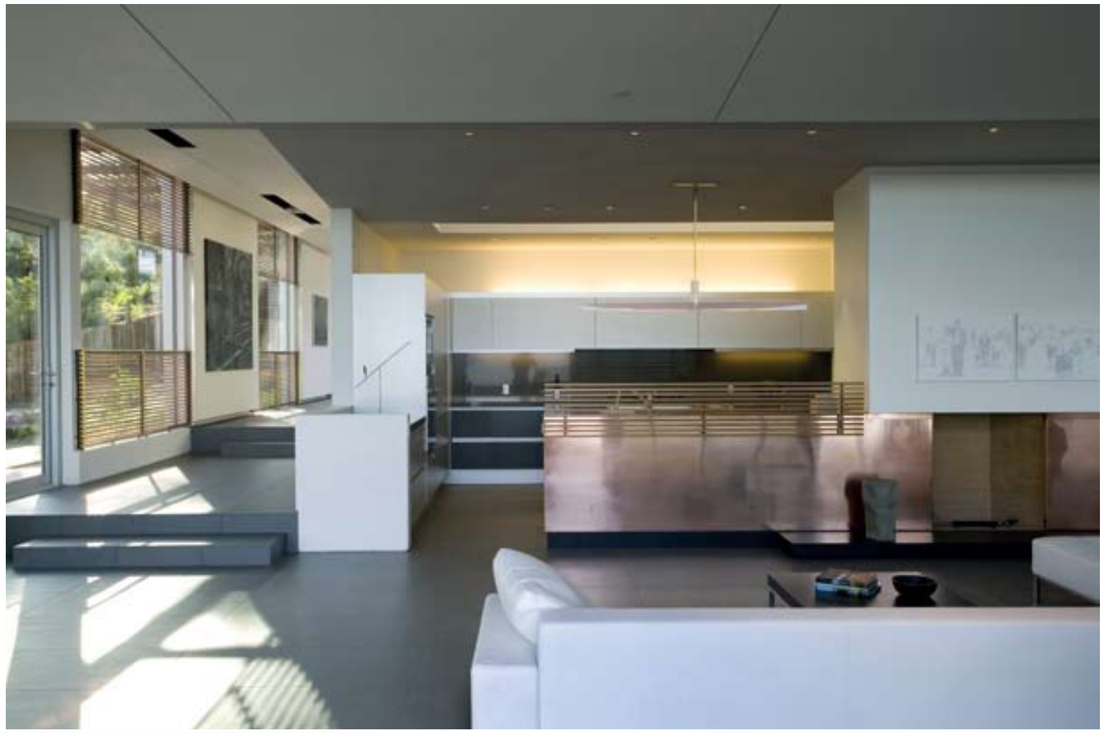
Images courtesy of the architect

Situated on the waterfront near San Francisco, this house occupies a narrow site leading to a small beach. Oriented to the four compass points, the structure explores the relationship between interior and exterior space. At its heart lies a void: the courtyard garden, which is enclosed by a glazed gallery that connects to the four wings radiating outward, forming four pavilions expressed by individual copper roofs. Programmatically these organise into guest wing, service and garage, master suite and living area, the latter opening toward the sea. The whole building nestles down low to the ground, intentionally stepping down with the site topography itself and keeping its environmental footprint as light as feasible. From the principal entrance along the main gallery toward the sea, a central axis prevails, animated by overlooking the south garden space below it. The naturally lit gallery surrounding the internal courtyard provides space for the client's considerable art collection.

The materials Ponsi selected reflect the site and character of the house. Exterior walls of slatted ipe wood create a ventilated wall that helps passively cool the building. Copper was used extensively and for different purposes, in everything from intricate custom details enlivening specific spots in the house, to more practical matters such as tubing sun blinds in the gallery space. The architect, a master craftsman with the material, also designed custom furniture and fittings using it; among these: light fixtures, hardware and doors and even an outdoor shower. The glow of the copper, along with its evolving patina, seems particularly sympathetic to the California climate – simultaneously soft and edgy.

Somewhat in keeping with its location also, is the building's attitude toward sustainability. Extensive solar panels (100sq m worth) power the building, helped by solar glass sandwich panels, passive cooling and shading devices. The northern California climate is not the most difficult to deal with, but neither client nor architect took the easy way out. Impressively, the tech components don't negatively impact the aesthetics, nor overtake them; they are fully integrated and largely disappear. Tiburon House is an exceedingly comfortable domestic building with a filigree of delicious details that whisper rather than cry out for attention. Its rewards play out over a broad and subtle canvas.

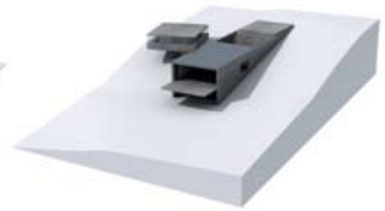


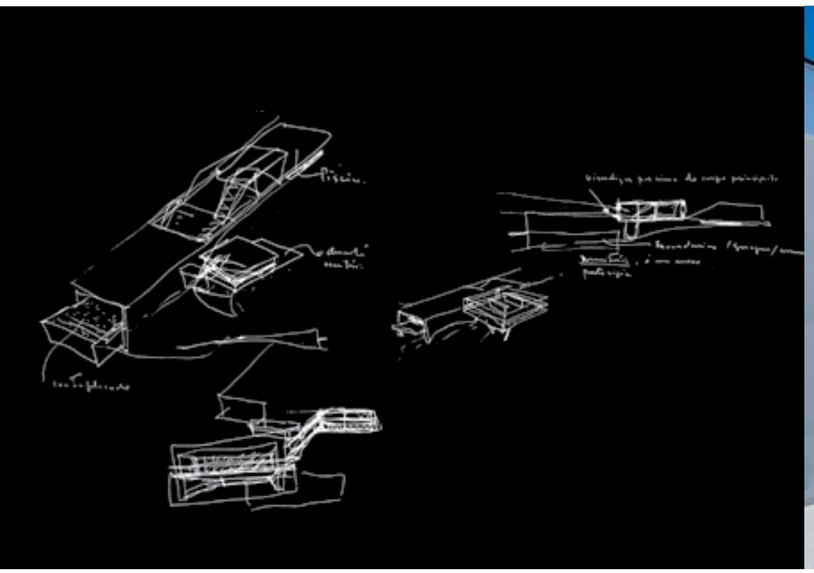


JC House – Portugal
Carvalho Araujo

Images courtesy of the architect

This home, also designed for occasional use, is set on the highest point of its rural site in the Minho region of northern Portugal, enjoying good views over the green environs. The building is divided into two principal blocks set askew (of each other), one square, the other a rectangle embedded into the sloping site and containing a stepped courtyard space feeding onto the public rooms. This space is intended for social gathering related to the kitchen, beyond which lie the dining and living areas, opening onto a large cantilevered terrace overlooking the view. The smaller block sits atop and offers 360-degree views, not unlike a watchtower. In this section are bedroom, bathroom, library and office, organised around a central stair. Perimeter walls are glazed with a mirror finish, throwing reflections of the landscape back to it. The longer, low block is clad in concrete and zinc. Carvalho Araujo set up an apparent contradiction in 'opening up' the more private wing of the building (and situating it most visibly), while making the public section more opaque. Yet the massing of the long wing allows for the dramatic counterpoint of what apertures there are, and one suspects the stepped courtyard, really a private amphitheatre, and the terrace shelf were the motivation. To gain the spatial impact of the courtyard, he had to first invent the enclosure for it. Given the pleasant site and its views, taking the unconventional decision to make an introverted courtyard was inspired, as it sets up a potent dialectic with the extroverted terrace. It also enlivens the interior space between both 'outsides', lending the living room and kitchen added spatial interest. While it is not entirely evident how much actual use the courtyard will enjoy, it nevertheless performs a strong visual role in the house. The glossy-versus-matte theme of the exterior facade materials drives home the intriguing relationship of the two blocks. One can imagine a more seductive result if both had been identically clad, say, in glass [a la Plus House], but this architect was more fascinated with the conversation between opposites: inward/outward, shiny/dull, up/down, public/private. JC House encapsulates many of the fundamental aspects of domestic life, defining them as complementary dissimilarities.

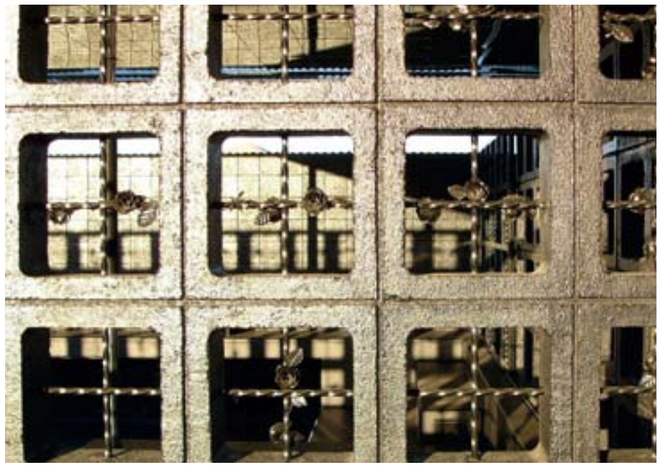


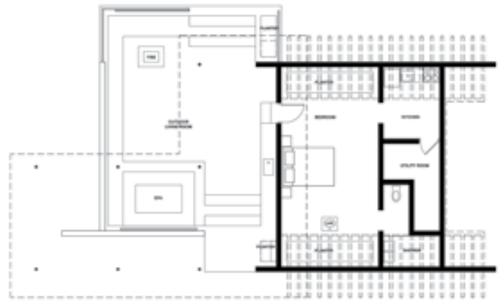


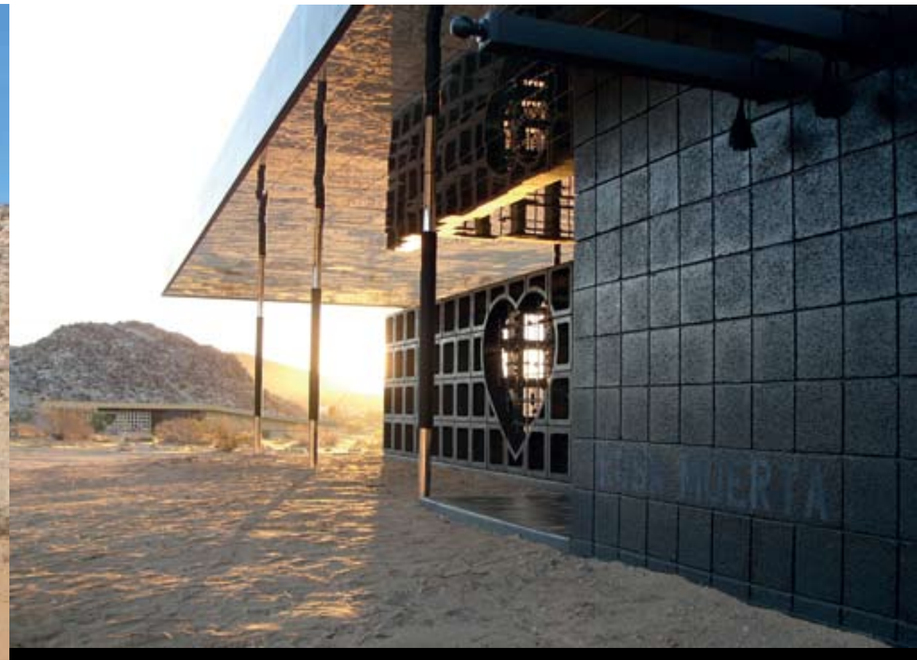
Rosa Muerta House – USA
Robert Stone Design

This little house, in the desert somewhere outside Los Angeles, was designed and built by the iconoclastic architect-designer, Robert Stone. He set out to explore what he terms “new architectural aesthetics intentionally developed out of personal, sub-cultural and local poetics rather than the more universal and abstract approaches that preoccupy contemporary architectural practice”. The house, which is at once reduced and knowing, culturally aware and autonomous, referential and tongue-in-cheek, sits on a dusty site with few immediate contextual influences. This helps underscore its abstract quality, even though it is also a house driven by hyper-practical incentives. Stone built it entirely himself, without assistance, and declares that modern art, more than current architecture, was his inspirational fuel. And fashion. And what he calls “democratic aesthetics”, such as street trends, cheap manufactured goods and “tacky” materials. And “theatricality”, as explicated by minimalist art. The narrative here is more elaborate than the product.

What we get from all this is a deceptively seductive little building, half enclosed in block walls (the kitchen, bedroom and bathroom), half defined by screen walls (the living room) open to winds, all protected by flat roofs. Tipping its hat, consciously or otherwise, to Mies van der Rohe, the building is yet new and original and seems entirely fitting to its site. One can readily imagine settling in for a few days to commune with the weather, with light, with breezes and smells and whatever grows around it. It is an ideal place to experience the desert in – and to escape from society, like a retreat with almost nothing to it. The sense of monastic reduction is knowing and of course intentional and sexy, and Stone makes sure we are aware of this, through small signatures on the building, such as a heart-shaped aperture, mirror-finished ceilings and the charcoal-and-black palette. This is a building hovering between basic shelter and high-society cultural relic, with the rhetorical liner notes to go with it. If it didn’t convince as corporeal architecture, it would be annoying. But it does, so it isn’t.







Ljubno ob Savinji House - Slovenia
Superform

Photography by Miran Kambic

This 420sq m, two-part residence, sited on a plateau near a brook in Ljubno ob Savinji, was inspired by the concept of recreating the character of a boat on water. Divided into two unlike halves, organised along progamme lines, a 'traditional' wing holds bedrooms and is clad in timber. Beside this is the living and dining room structure, built of steel, glass, wood and stone, with a large sloped roof and aggressively cantilevered terrace leaning toward the swimming pool. The distinction on the exterior between the two parts is stark and, were it not for the timber occurring in both, would suggest different construction eras. What it does prompt is the question: why? Although realised with skill, the 'trad' half of the building hardly seems necessary to emphasise the modernity of its sibling, and it is not immediately evident what each brings to the other, besides the obviousness of the difference in massing. The 'modern' half suggests a reinterpretation of classical building forms in the area - its living space features a tall peaked ceiling readable on the exterior facade, for instance - and as such, makes the point.

The materials are important, and how the timber is generously used goes a long way toward softening the building forms. The public great room, with soaring ceilings, ample skylighting, and angular, sixties-era spatial shapes, is one part 007, two parts Austin Powers, while the private wing is pure Sound of Music. Visiting for the weekend, you'd have to pack a tuxedo, silk pajamas and lederhosen. Meanwhile, the large pool and timber decks adjacent to the house are updated zoomy a la Hadid. Does it all add up to schizophrenia? Surprisingly, not really. In some odd way the clash of styles sort of works, perhaps by suggesting ever so subtly a tongue-in-cheek character to the whole thing. We're not sure if the quotations and contradictions were intentional, but this eastern collage certainly is loads of fun.

Letter Box House – Blairgowrie, Australia
McBride Charles Ryan

Photography by John Gollings

This 290sq m holiday house near the beach on an Australian peninsula is a celebration of a particular vibe – vacation, liberation, awareness of nature – in the eyes of its designers, Rob McBride and Debbie-Lyn Ryan. It's called Letter Box House because conceptually and volumetrically it 'begins' with the streetside letterbox and grows outward from that, 'opening up' as it does. Facetted, dented, folded and of low profile (deliberately, to respect its neighbourhood), the timber-clad building at moments seems two-dimensional… in a not-necessarily-bad way. The temptation to describe it with words such as 'organic' is difficult to resist, but it's really no more organic than an automobile design. Indeed, its angularity and occasional sharp points and turns make it quite unlike a natural form. Instead it is more an illuminating essay on architectural volumes we might recognise elsewhere and which have been consciously distorted and collaged into something new and unfamiliar. Ironically, given that it is a declaratively natural material, the timber uniformly cladding the exterior facades helps boost the abstract quality of the house. Inside, matters get less clear; mostly white spaces veer close to conventionality, leaving room for a couple of markers: a pink storage wall and an enclosed terrace.

The house is so extremely object-like it is difficult to see it as gently inviting inside/outside flow or harbouring the kinds of activities traditional spaces such as verandas, porches, loggias and terraces do; negative spaces that we normally look for to lounge in, when we are in a place to lounge. Then you find its implicit veranda, under leaning roofs, and make the effort to settle in. The surprising scale of the building – small – seems to invite proximity, the way a cuddly pet does. You want to approach Letter Box, be near it, linger and ponder. Despite its angles and edges, it seems 'friendly'. This is not what most people have in mind when they think 'vacation cottage'. But then if they did, these would be common, and that wouldn't be good.

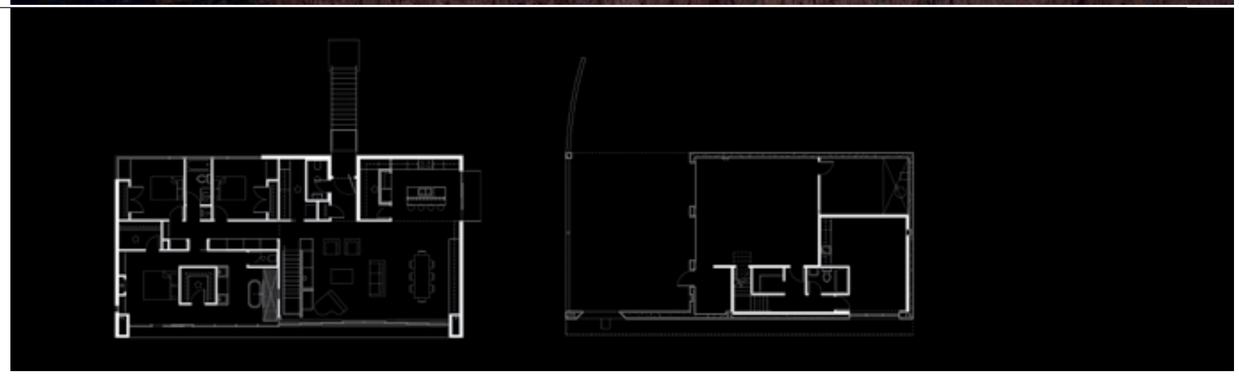
Canyon Residence – Salt Lake City, USA
Sarano + Mooney Architecture

Images courtesy of the architects

Bordering a 200-acre campsite, this single family home of 2500sq ft sits among wooded slopes in a mountainous environ of Salt Lake City, capturing canyon views and offering plenty of access to the wide outdoors. Given its site, exploiting views was a priority; the great room features an operable 30-foot wall opening directly to nature. Materials were inspired by the rugged traditions of the American West, although with a decidedly contemporary bent. Corten steel panels in a harlequin pattern clad the exterior, lending it a textured surface that softens its boxy massing. The pattern casts subtle designs upon the walls, particularly in oblique light. The gradual evolution of the material's palette, as it rusts with time, represents, according to the architects, "the non-static quality of domestic life". Furthermore, it is magnetised, allowing for the personalisation of attachments, including the surface panel of the front door, which can be removed and replaced at whim.

To reduce its impact on the site from an environmental point of view, the house sits on legs, which gives a treehouse atmosphere to some of the spaces. A rainwater collection system helps irrigation, the steel is recycled, and all spaces enjoy natural light sources. It is the first residence in the state to receive a LEED Silver certification – no insignificant feat.

On first impression, the house seems anything but 'environmental', in the sense of an aesthetic image of organic or 'natural' construction. This is thanks to the use of metal and the shoebox form of the building, as well as to its dropped-from-the-sky site use. It is therefore ironic that precisely those aspects are what burnish its sustainability credentials. Rather than attempt the conventional 'make it look soft and cuddly' version of environmental building, the architects here argue that a steel box set abstractly upon the land is a 'softer' answer. And it is refreshing to learn that architecture which is environmentally respectful can assume tough, some would say 'aggressive', formal personality.



Geometry in Black - Quebec
yh2 Architecture

The house is divided into three blocks, one for a family room and teenagers, the next with a central 'daytime' space opening onto a terrace, and the third for the owner's suite, the most private. These are connected by a section clad in bent Corten steel, which also defines a number of outdoor settings. A relationship between light and shadow, different colour tones (rust, black, white, etc), transparency and opacity, and so on, is explored through the building.

The architects are playing with the idea of fragmentation and reunion, on the canvas of the dramatic, forested site. The metaphor of a natural rock outcrop emerging from the ground is implicit in the elevations and massing. The angularity of the building, which at first seems to contrast with the natural forms surrounding it, does lend an element of surprise to the project, set as it is amidst the lush tranquillity of the forest. Referring to rock formations in rusted steel might be dubious, yet the rough power of this small structure seems oddly at home in the softness of its context; a relic of some other action or event perhaps. Maybe it takes unedited nature to humble even the most geometric architecture.

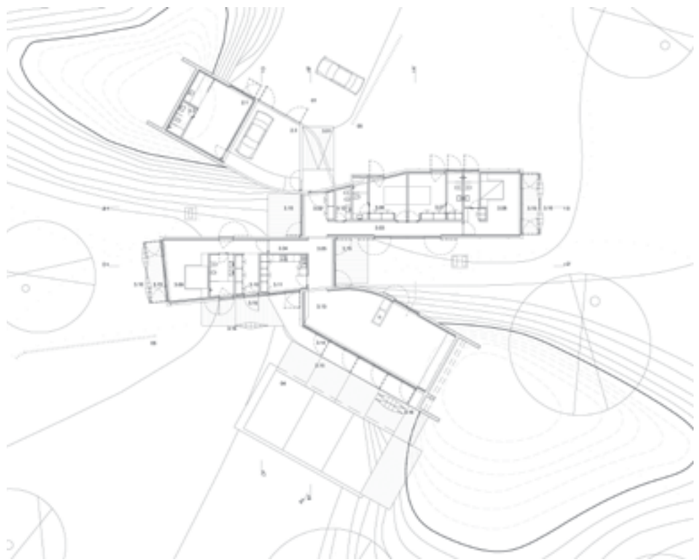
Casa Monte na Comporta - Grandola, Portugal
Pereira Miguel Arquitectos

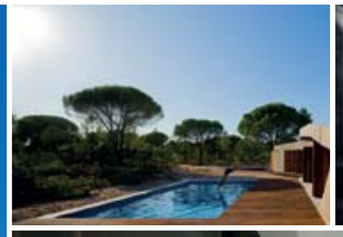
Photography by Fernando Guerra

Set down upon a large site covered largely in sand dunes, is this dramatic, free-form residence. Initially building up two new sand dunes at either end of the plan, the house is formed by four concrete arms that shelter its living functions in a basic cross formation. An undulating roof produces varying internal spatial experiences and creates a dramatic external profile, particularly given its setting. One can even access the roof to gain superior views of the landscape.

Most glazing faces south, to capture solar warmth in winter. In summer, concrete overhangs shade the largest expanses of glass. The swimming pool, set to the south, helps cool the air during summer. The thick walls themselves assist with insulation, helping moderate winter cold and summer heat in a time-honoured way. These are formed of a 20cm concrete layer, a 2cm ventilation gap, 3cm of insulated panels, then an 11cm brick layer. Burrowing down into the dunes already provides major insulation against temperature extremes.

Large timber panels shutter the glazed openings when not in use, exaggerating the abstract quality of the building, and softening the grey concrete surfaces. It is the abstraction that makes the house work, reliant on the sand dunes and abundant trees for effect. The extreme minimalism of materials and details helps give the building an unexpected sensuality, as if concrete, timber, sand and trees were in a four-person dramatic performance, with all of them equal in billing. In a more urban situation, near other buildings, the evidently random bends and curves of the house would seem gratuitous. Here on its almost lunar backdrop, beautiful but empty, they seem inevitable, and just what is wanted to bring forth the poetic element.





Paraty House - Brazil
Studio mk27

Photography by Nelson Kon

Every year or two, a house is designed somewhere that captures the imagination of people everywhere, including other architects. This normally occurs either because it does something no one has thought of before, or because it does something many have thought of, only better. This 1050sq m beachside residence in Paraty, Brazil, is such a building. Its precedents are numerous, yet it revisits its themes with audacious freshness and savoir faire. Those themes include minimalist volumes (in this case, two horizontal boxes set one-upon-the-other in interesting juxtaposition), daring cantilevers, the expert use of raw concrete as a primary finish material, exaggerated proportions and others. Paraty is a house to catch the breath and elevate the pulse of everyone; if this building doesn't grab your visual attention, you're probably dead.

What is probably most impressive with it is how little there actually is. Spaces are defined by the least means possible; perhaps only the square outlines of the concrete frames that make roof, walls, floor. Vast, linear openings are unencumbered by annoying window or door frames (walls disappear as huge sliding panels). A deliciously abstract lap pool nestles into the beach side to define sundeck on one side, sand on the other. And there is a wonderful interplay of dark, introverted spaces and bright, extroverted ones; some of the house's most fascinating nooks and corners burrow into its bowels, as if seeking shade and the cool of the concrete. Considering this is a beach house in a hot climate, these dark areas are strongly alluring. The concrete is 'decorated' with a pattern of narrow unequal strips recording the formwork, used deliberately to roughen the edges of all the exposed surfaces. This gives the building a quiet layer of texture, a hint of connection to the natural world, which happens to grow lushly all around it. The architects wisely canted the outer metre or so of all the concrete planes to achieve a narrower profile, lightening up the building and underscoring the sense of frame, whether looking inward or outward.

Paraty House is a particular achievement. It includes a precise calibration of materials, proportion, shape and site placement that is more often seen in Japan, yet it oozes sensuality and is 'warm' even in its coolest moments, making it undeniably Brazilian. If this building doesn't summarise the potential for architecture to formalise a celebration of living, then what does? It's enough to make clients elsewhere issue a single order to their designers: I'll have what they're having.