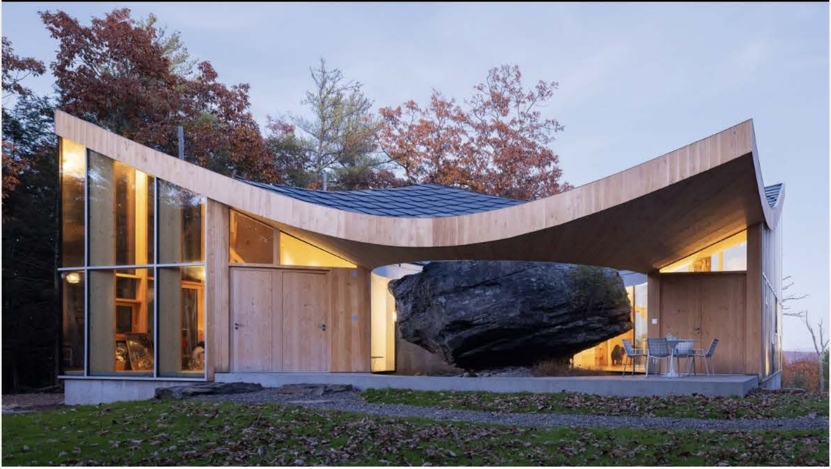
The real grand designs: the 13 best modern homes in the world

Triangular cabin in the rainforest and an all-white 'spaceship' — a new design bible reveals the next generation of new-builds. House envy? Us?



Rock'n'House, Woodstock-Saugerties, New York, USA

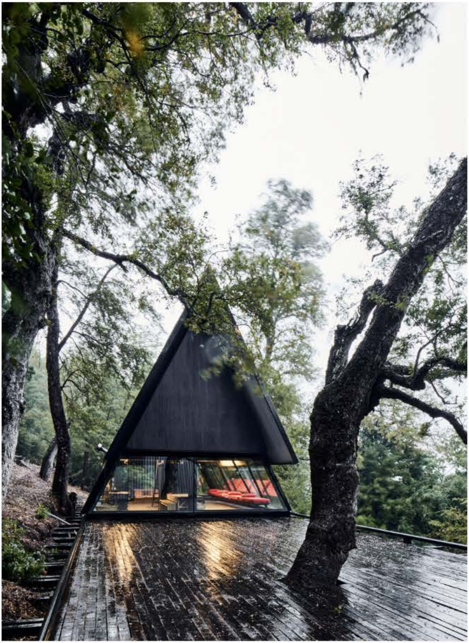
RHYS HOLLAND

Philip Jodidio | Friday October 25 2024, 12.01am BST, The Times

Share Save

Houses have been the field of experiment of talented architects for more than a century because they require fewer means than larger buildings, and because they rely on single clients as opposed to government bodies or corporate boards. Often objects of privilege, even if now coloured with the green spirit of environmental concern, the houses here are not anecdotal spin-offs of the "real" work of modern architecture; they are the starting point, the source of inspiration. These forward-thinking buildings were designed by capitalising on technological advances such as video conferencing and 3D printing, fostering inventiveness and imagination, and yielding sustainable, site-specific homes.

1. Prism House + Terrace Room, Conguillio, Chile



CRISTOBAL PALMA

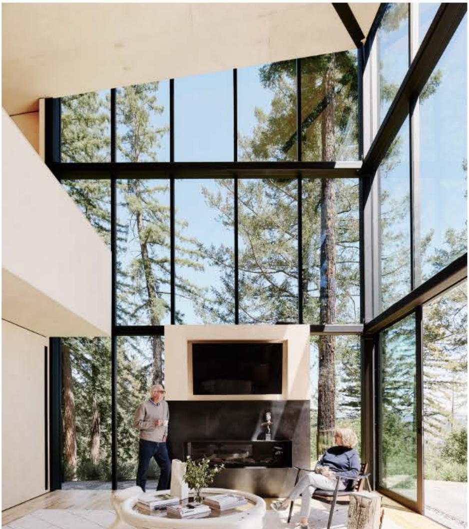
This pointy cabin in the Chilean rainforest was inspired by a 20th-century design icon: Kazuo Shinohara's 1974 Prism House, a triangular mountain hut in Japan. The Croatian-Chilean architect Smiljan Radic Clarke wanted to replicate its "geometrical structure and famous lateral façade, a right-angled isosceles triangle laid on the floor". It consists of two elements on an elevated wooden deck that has been built around a single tree, with views of the forest, Conguillio National Park and its river of solidified lava.

2. Hart House, Great Mackerel Beach, near Sydney, Australia

RHYS HOLLAND

Hart House is on a magnificent stretch of white sand north of Sydney on the western shores of Pittwater. Robert Brown and Caroline Casey of Casey Brown Architecture wanted to create a modern version of “the quintessential one-room Australian beach shack”. A corrugated aluminium shell protects the home from salt erosion, cold winds and potential bushfires, and is open on one side, offering panoramic views of the bay. Also accessible by water, the house has a living space with a dining and kitchen area, and a master bedroom with its own sandstone terrace. It is largely self-sufficient, with solar panels, rainwater harvesting and on-site waste processing.

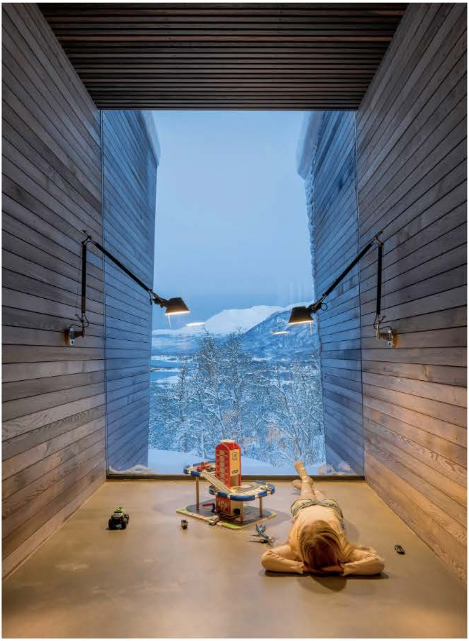
3. Mount Veeder Outpost, Napa Valley, California, USA



JOE FLETCHER

The living area of this home has a wall of glass with views of the nearby redwoods. Its Danish-American architect, Brandon Jorgensen, describes it as a two-storey cube with an entrance courtyard and a V-shaped awning. There are three bedrooms with full-length windows - the main bedroom's are 9 metres high - and the living room has been designed so that the ceiling is barely visible, accentuating the sense of living in a forest. Corrugated steel cladding in a deep umber colour was used for the exterior and nautical-grade Russian birch plywood inside. It is entirely self-sustaining and weatherproof.

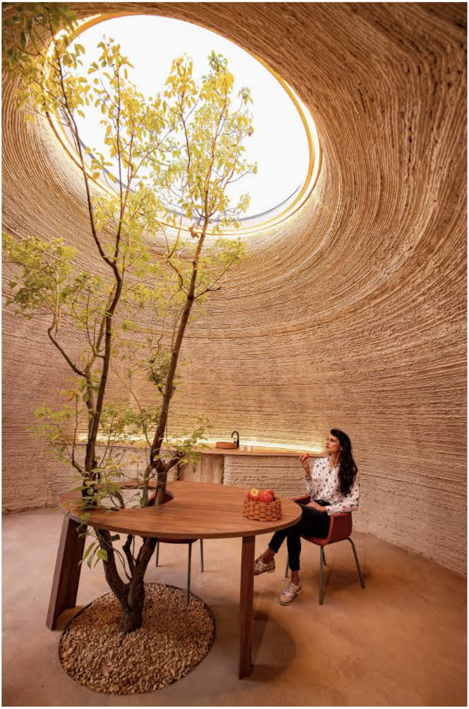
4. Malangen Retreat, Sand, Norway



STEVE KING

The architect Snorre Stinessen created this family retreat on a ledge above a fjord overlooking a forest on the Malangen Peninsula, an hour's drive south of Tromso in Norway's Arctic Circle. The location of the plot meant it had to be built quickly during a brief period of warmer weather. The home consists of several rectangular pods with large windows, as well as a central winter garden, which has a fireplace, an outdoor kitchen and a sauna with views of the wintry landscape.

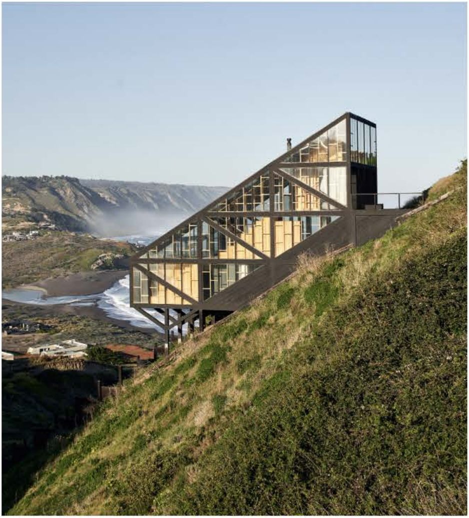
5. Tecla, Ravenna, Italy



IAGO CORAZZA

Made from soil, water and rice husk fibres – and built around a tree – Tecla is the “first eco-sustainable house 3D printed from raw earth”. Designed by the Italian architect Mario Cucinella in conjunction with Wasp, a 3D printing company, it took about 200 hours to construct, using 60 cubic metres of natural materials, and was a “nearly zero-emission” project. There are two continuous, nest-like structures with natural circular skylights, which are at the cutting edge of design yet evoke much older cave-like dwellings.

6. Casa Ladera, La Vega de Pupuya, O’Higgins Region, Chile



CRISTOBAL PALMA

La Vega de Pupuya is an area on the western coast of Chile known for its windy climate and dramatic cliffs. The site of this house is a south-facing slope that is completely exposed to the wind, but the clever design by WMR Architects ensures it is fully protected while providing spectacular views of the coastline. The slope is incorporated into the structure via a system of terraces, with four bedrooms spread across four floors and the entrance on the third. Wood, both natural in colour and blackened, dominates the interiors.

7. Ashraya, near Aldbury, Hertfordshire, UK

EDMUND SUMNER

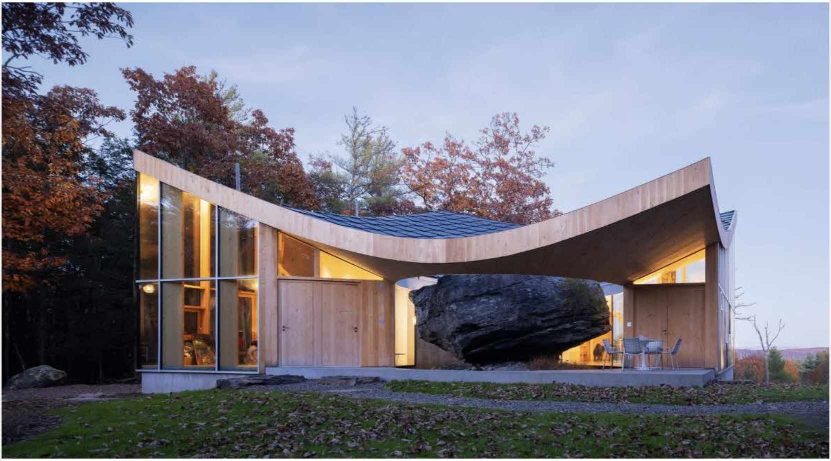
This modern, cave-like house is on the Stocks estate close to the 13th-century village of Aldbury, with a Georgian mansion and walled gardens next door. Designed by David Kirkland of Kirkland Fraser Moore, it is ultra-low emission with insulated concrete panels and an arched green roof planted with wildflower meadow species. It has three floors, with the bedrooms on top and a basement with a games room that you can reach via stairs or a slide. The double-height, triple-glazed windows reveal expansive views across the Chilterns.

8. Yuputira, Miyako Island, Okinawa, Japan

YOSHIHIRO MAKINO

The Japanese artist Mariko Mori's home and studio on Miyako Island, which is 190 miles southwest of Okinawa and subject to frequent typhoons, was "inspired by the organic form of coral on the seashore and a cave". After designing numerous 3D models, she created the final curvilinear form, which is reminiscent of a spaceship and contains a master bedroom, two guest rooms and a space for tea ceremonies. The house and all the furnishings are white, like Mori's clothes.

9. Rock'n'House, Woodstock-Saugerties, New York, USA



IWAN BAAN

This home was built around a boulder apparently deposited on the southern slopes of the Catskill Mountains during the last Ice Age. The base of the structure is a concrete platform made with bluestone gravel from the site and it incorporates photovoltaic shingles - solar panels designed to look like roofing - as well as recycled newspaper insulation and natural clay plaster. "The house collects energy from the rays of the sun, water for a swimming pond from the rain, and geothermal heat and drinking water from the earth below," says its Swiss-American architect, Christian Wassmann. "Our goal is for the building to generate more energy than it uses."

10. Acucena House, Nova Lima, Brazil

JOMAR BRAGANÇA

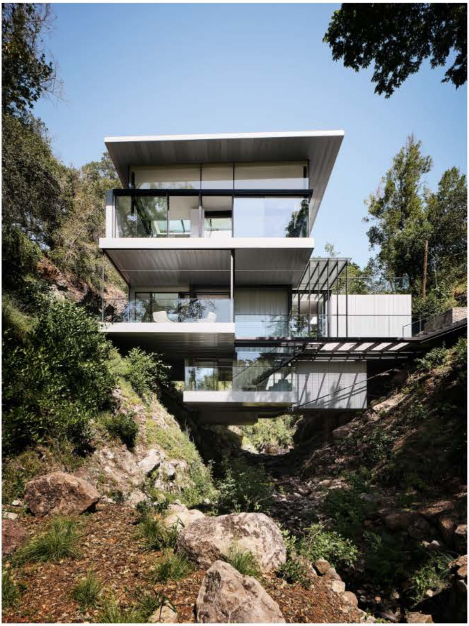
Tetro Arquitetura built this house in the Atlantic rainforest of Brazil "with the understanding that architecture should mould to the terrain, and not the other way round". It is elevated high above the ground, protecting the ecosystem and allowing the animal and plant life to develop underneath, with no trees culled in its construction. The home, the design of which is based on triangles and rectangles, is all white with black pillars, creating the illusion that it is floating in the forest.

11. MJA House, Muda, Portugal

FERNANDO GUERRA

MJA House sits within the Muda Reserve, a stylish residential development near Comporta, south of Lisbon, and consists of four buildings connected by a set of wooden paths and a pool. Pereira Miguel Arquitectos set each of the elements on concrete platforms, with the largest containing a dining and semi-subterranean living space, while the rest are individual bedrooms with patios canopied by the overhanging eaves.

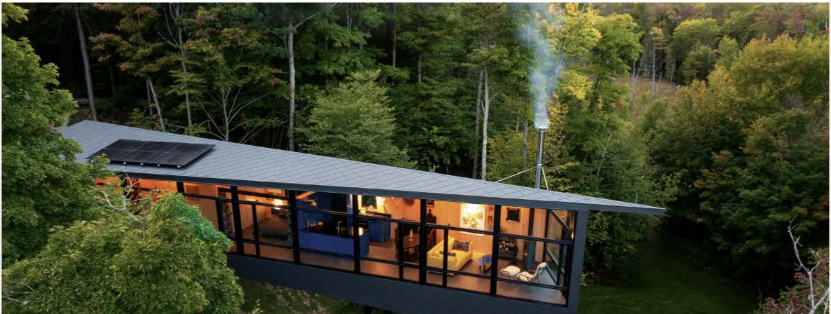
12. Suspension House, Napa Valley, California, USA



JOE FLETCHER

California laws do not allow for new homes to be suspended over creeks, so the French-American architect Anne Fougeron had to follow the exact outline of an existing two-storey Seventies house and deck already straddling a valley in Napa. Fougeron installed a new steel structural system anchored in the hillside, with floor-to-ceiling windows and a floating staircase to show off the water from as many angles as possible. The living space looks out over the steep ravine, while the bedroom on the third floor opens onto a deck with a view of the canyon.

13. m.o.r.e CLT Cabin, Wakefield, Quebec, Canada



SCOTT NORSWORTHY

Critical of wilderness cottages that are “woodsy versions of suburban homes with every modern convenience”, the architect Paul Kariouk chose not to concentrate on a connection to the natural setting but to make a bold contemporary statement that was also sustainable. This house in the countryside just outside Wakefield has a steel roof and wall shingles, and a low-waste cross-laminated timber structure supported by a steel mast. Local regulations stated that it had to be set back 30 metres from the nearby lake, so it is dramatically cantilevered over its forest site. The kitchen, dining and living areas are concentrated in the spaces closest to the outer point of the building, which has sweeping views of the lake.