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LIVE WITH IT



NEW HOUSE ARCHITECTURE

In an era of exaggeration contrasted with existential fear, architecture's original type (beginning with our Primitive Huts) keeps calm and carries on. The house, arguably the art's simplest and most ubiquitous building programme, continues to represent the large-scale aspirations of many individuals on the planet, in terms of actually physically realising something. There is usually nothing a person or family can attempt to create that outsizes a single-family house; it is an endeavour which absorbs very large amounts of money, patience, capacity for stress... and of course, offers exceptional joy. Many times it involves no professional architect – it is conceivable, if rarely advisable, to design one as a layman – yet it is very often the first type of professional commission novice practitioners receive. And purely in terms of a formal exercise, the standalone house remains arguably the most potent, design-dense typology in architecture. In relatively small packages, houses pack in a lavish bounty of ideas and details. In part, that aspect is the logical outcome of the involvement of the client, which is of necessity highly personalised and unique. Residential architects know this well: designing private homes involves an intimate, lengthy, patient relationship with the client. There is no way around this fact – it is probably what inspires much of the effort to create originality in what really ought to be an exhausted genre.

That continued originality is what provides interest – and awe – in aficionados of house architecture. And as remarkable as many larger buildings have always been, no less than with the recent years' exploration of expressive form, it is the house which captures the rapt attention of most laypeople, obviously in part because it is an aspirational building category. Even people with little hope of being able to finance the design and construction of their own new house fantasise about doing so, and watch the plethora of television programmes devoted to the subject. Once we win that lottery, we'll buy a piece of land and build our dream house...

In fact, fantasy plays a significant part in the genesis of many house projects. That is because the house is the most accessible programme to the average person; it manifests their 'everyday' experience. Sleeping, eating, reposing, gathering, sheltering... these are the functions of the family home, and nearly every human being deals with them every day. So envisaging a physical enclosure to accommodate those needs is possible within everyone's imagination. Also, even though the vast majority of the world's population will never actually commission their own, houses don't actually need to cost exorbitant amounts of money. Yes, they are more expensive than an automobile (the next highest cost most people spend on a single object), but not necessarily much more, and unlike cars they tend to rise in value over the long term. So a house, or a cottage, or at least an addition to a house, or a garden pavilion... are near enough to the possible for many people to entertain the idea of building one someday. And for those who actually do, an adventure ensues unlike any other.

So what does this year's *hinge* collection unveil? Once again, a rejection of commonalities, first and foremost. Obviously, we might set out to choose candidates within trends, or identify temporal directions within the field of house designs. But that would be as dull as it would be disingenuous, and that's because when it comes to the architecture of houses, there really aren't ideas that qualify as genuine trends, at least internationally. For one thing, there are simply too many of the things built each year to possibly conquer with a singular design direction or manner. More relevantly, architects of houses employ too much talented imagination to be corralled into momentary aesthetic groupings. Quality demands more than following the crowds. And even houses that follow influences tend to find originality in details at a level of subtlety that reveals itself through domestic use. Perhaps, as is often noted, everything in architecture has been done before. But the houses that follow 'do it again' in ways that make them fresh and worthy of study. Students of function and beauty, plunge in.

SHANGWEI VILLAGE PLUGIN HOUSE

Shenzhen, China
People's Architecture Office

Photography by People's Architecture Office, Zhan Changheng

A once-forgotten village in the shadow of giant metropolis Shenzhen, Shangwei held a crumbling fabric of tiny houses and buildings neglected or abandoned by a shrinking population. The local government, however, became interested in creative approaches to saving, replacing or reusing some of the village material. The Shangwei Village Cooperative decided to support artists and craftsmen who had started to come to live and work here, and initiated a partnership with the architecture firm to help in its mission to rehabilitate the decaying urban condition. Because many of the buildings were essentially beyond repair, or impossible to renovate because they shared structural members with adjacent buildings, the architects established a strategy of building within the property confines without impacting the original structure.

The Plugin House system uses prefabricated panels that can be configured into different site situations. Each panel holds integrated structural connections allowing unskilled labour to assemble them onsite in very little time, and using minimal tools. It really is a kit of parts, not unlike a flatpack IKEA furniture item. Thus economy and energy efficiency is achieved in the factory. These two minuscule residences are examples of how the system can be adapted to very specific conditions. Huang Family House sits on a mere 15 sqm of space, squeezing into and around a decrepit existing structure, and then poking out where it could, such as in a first-floor bay window that juts out at one corner over a collapsed wall to offer views across the village. Where one portion of the old roof had collapsed, the new house features a skylight that brings light through the tiny interior. Gaps in the site between old and new become reduced garden spaces. The second house, for the Fang family, is a whole 5 sqm larger, and opts for a clerestory window near its rear bedroom area. Both buildings stand out in their white newness, amid the crumbling jumble of village detritus and charm. They pop up suddenly like little sparkling boxes, and the juxtaposition is persuasive, even if the spatial amenities are less so. The rooms are dollhouse-sized, though that is a result not of the plugin construction system but of the available sites. In fact, the strategy suggests possible answers for other cities or towns, and the cottage-like houses that result in Shangwei are ideal for young people or occasional use. Small can be imaginative.



