

ALL EYES ON THE GRAND PRIZE



The best in house design is about to be revealed.

Kevin McCloud weighs up the competition

Le Corbusier, the Swiss-born pioneer of modernist architecture, was in no doubt about what made for a successful building: "Space and light and order.

Those are the things that men need just as much as they need bread or a place to sleep." Things have moved on a little since then, of course: the essentials these days are space, light and an Italian sofa.

All of which are about to be judged. This year sees the second Grand Designs magazine awards for domestic architecture and product. The event has attracted entries from some of the best practices in Britain, for an extraordinarily wide range of projects, across categories that include ecological products and houses, restoration projects and larger housing schemes. Oh, yes, and sofas. What surprises me, given that we're only seven years into a new century, which is normally a time for taking stock of the previous 100 years and general navel-fluff-gazing, is that so many of the buildings this year have evolved Le Corbusier's three essentials into something more confident and outgoing.

Admittedly, we seem obsessed with one thing at the moment: light. Our homes must be flooded with the stuff. But this year's contenders are far from a bunch of crude white boxes with big windows: at their best, they are cleverly orchestrated volumes that have been punctured with openings and artfully interconnected. Where there might have been a concrete wall, there is now a translucent panel or a timber screen of slats. Or just a hole. And everywhere, of course, there is glass: oddly shaped and placed windows, clerestory panels and roof lights connecting you to the great infinity of the sky.

That is not to suggest that all this year's entries are invisible. Many, such as the Blacksheep House and the Tree House (both shown here), reach out into the landscape and embrace it solidly. All demonstrate a commitment to sustainability.

Where all these buildings surprise is in the delicacy, poetry and glamour with which they express themselves. It is as though Le Corbusier's ideals had come of age. And, what's more, none of this year's entries can be thought of as a self-contained object in a landscape. The hermetically sealed modernist box, it seems, is no more. Our architecture is the better for it.

■ *The winners will be announced at a ceremony, hosted by Kevin McCloud, at the ExCeL London exhibition centre on Friday. For tickets, call 01992 570030, or visit www.granddesignsmagazine.com/awards.*

GRAND DESIGNS TICKETS

For half-price tickets for the Grand Designs exhibition at ExCeL, June 8-10, go to timesonline.co.uk/property



Long View, Henley-on-Thames

Long View, Susie and Ulrich Gerhartz's property in Henley-on-Thames, is a finalist in the best new-build category. A modern home for the couple and their daughter, Lucy, 5, it was begun by Patrick Gwynne, the celebrated architect; after his death in 2003, the project was taken over by Avanti Architects, based in London. The building is adjacent to Past Field House, a Grade II-listed home designed by Gwynne in 1960 for Susie's parents. "It's

sympathetic, but not a copy of it," says John Allen, a director of Avanti.

The couple were given the 24,000 sq ft plot by Susie's parents; the house cost £700,000, including fees arising from a protracted tussle with the planners, who initially refused permission. The 2,475 sq ft home has a steel frame, clad in brick and timber, a zinc roof and metal trim. Although occupying only a single storey, it is on three levels that follow the plot's contours, with five roofs pitched at

different angles. Full-length windows maximise the southerly views towards the Hartsden Valley.

The plan is a modified pinwheel, with open-plan living space in one wing, a master-bedroom suite in a second, and three more bedrooms and a piano studio in another. The living area is separated from the kitchen and dining areas by retractable timber screens, which also open onto the terrace.

■ *Avanti Architects: 020 7278 3060, www.avantiarchitects.co.uk*

Holland Park mews

This transformation of a cramped, dark mews house in Holland Park, west London, into a bright, open, one-bed home has been so successful, it is a finalist in the best remodelled category.

The highly contemporary result is all the more remarkable as it was achieved under permitted-development rights in a tightly controlled conservation area.

Jonathan Tuckey's London-based architectural practice in effect cut a wide vertical slot into the centre of the 1,300 sq ft property, creating a 23ft-high internal space, topped by a retractable roof light, which, when open, creates the effect of an internal courtyard. Its steel frame is deliberately oversized, running on tracks attached to the roof, and cannot be seen from below. When it is in place, light floods the remodelled entrance, the living area and the new central staircase.

On the ground floor are two reception rooms, one of which is really a glassed-in public space next to the now-recessed front door. It houses a table-football game; passers-by are encouraged to challenge the home's owner to a match.

On the first floor is a small study, the bedroom, a dressing room and a bathroom, with a window of opaque glass giving onto the street. This allows light to stream in, but ensures complete privacy. On the same floor are the dining and kitchen areas, which look down on the living space below.

Oak has been used for external cladding and internal timberwork. Plaster finishes and terrazzo flooring contribute to the minimalist feel. The wooden shutters on the frameless windows are a nod to the original stable doors of the mews.

■ *Jonathan Tuckey Design: 020 8960 1909, www.jonathantuckey.com*



Blacksheep House, Harris

It is hard to believe that Christine and Peter Hope's striking home, on an inlet on the Sound of Harris, in the Western Isles of Scotland, was once a ruined thatched house with just three standing stone walls, and one side completely open. Its revamp, by Stuart Bagshaw & Associates, has won it a place on the shortlist for the best restoration award.

Christine, 52, a social worker turned weaver, and Peter, 41, a dry-stone waller, wanted to create a sympathetic yet modern interior, which is just what they and their architect have achieved. The derelict structure has been turned into an environmentally friendly, single-storey, split-level home built by Peter and a joiner friend.

The sole bedroom is embedded in the ruin and incorporates the original stone walls. Leading off it

is a modern stone section — supported by an internal timber frame — which contains the bathroom, a workspace, a kitchen and a living area. A sleeping platform provides room for guests. There are sweeping views of the sound from the 30ft-wide windows, and the curved building sits snugly in the exposed landscape. The roofline is inspired by a whale's back, and the biodiverse turf roof is made of materials lifted from the croft, to preserve existing flora and fauna. The stone was recycled from the original dwelling. All this kept the bills down: build and land costs were just £135,000. An air-exchange pump supplies underfloor heating, saving the couple about 75% a year on their energy bill.

■ *Stuart Bagshaw & Associates: 01851 704889, www.blacksheephouse.co.uk*

Tree House, Clapham

According to its owners and the architects who built it, the Tree House, in Clapham, south London, has been inspired by the huge sycamore tree that dominates the site and carries a preservation order, as well as by how the tree functions. So, the home, a finalist in the best eco category, is designed to adapt to local climatic conditions; it is built from sustainable materials and is 100% powered by alternative energy.

Owned by Will Anderson, 40, a writer, and Ford Hickson, 41, a social researcher, and designed by Constructive Individuals, a London practice, the Tree House makes heavy use of recycled material and is at least carbon-neutral, if not carbon-negative. It is super-insulated and airtight, with recovery ventilation, photovoltaic panelling and highly energy-efficient appliances, lights and electronic kit. It is already feeding power back into the National Grid. "The idea is to generate as much as we consume," Anderson says.

None of this has been cheap: he says the overall build and land costs came to about £500,000. The open-plan ground floor has a kitchen, living and dining area, and a laundry. The bedroom and bathroom are on the next floor. The third floor, again open plan, is designed to double as extra living space and guest sleeping area.

■ *www.treehouseclapham.org.uk; www.constructiveindividuals.com*



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