

# The bare truth about how architects really live

EMMA CULLINAN

While some fondly believe that eminent architects live in pristine palaces, the truth is often a lot more raw

Architect Adam Caruso lives in a small converted warehouse with exposed brick walls, although it is cosier in the bedrooms, where there are gypsum boards, but these are left bare except for daubed white lines. His practice, Caruso St John, which hit fame with its New Art Gallery built in Walsall, England in 2000, is just one included in the book *100 Houses for 100 Architects* (Taschen).

Many of the homes featured here show that, despite the fact that many people think architects live in pristine palaces that are cleanly designed with the sharpest of edges and details, many architects actually reside in comfortable homes that express their interest in arts and craftsmanship, as well as raw materials the buildings are constructed from.

These architects are interested in how things are made, and making things themselves, and they aren't afraid to see that expressed in their homes.

Also, because architects are used to building sites, there is no fear of unfinished interiors, as the Caruso house starkly shows. It's back to that old adage about cobbler's children being the least

well shod: the professional is so busy dealing with clients that things at home hit the bottom of the to-do list.

The homes that architects design for themselves epitomise their true style: there is no client and no compromise (except in the budget). They can also experiment with new ideas knowing they will be the only ones who will have to live with quirks.

Alvar Aalto's house in Helsinki, built in 1936, marked the end of his functionalist (in the pared-back sense) period and the move towards a more human architecture which embraced people and nature. As with many of the other humanist architects in the book, the house joined with the architect's studio indicating a close link between design and life: and craftsmanship and living space. In Aalto's case a sliding wall conjoined the livingroom and workroom providing a link between where they were designed and where they ended up.

The house itself is a combination of timber slats and concrete on the outside and while there are plastered walls within, there are also areas of exposed brick on walls, stairs and fireplaces and, in the office, the timber stairs are simple and ladder-like.

Many of the architects in this book who designed in this way - with raw materials and expressions of how the homes were built - are Scandinavians who don't have the same fear of timber that people in other countries have.

Erik Gunnar Asplund designed himself a summer house in Lison, south of Stockholm, that was smoother on the outside than it was inside. As with Aalto, his own

home marked a new direction in his designs. "Asplund moved from Romanticism and Classicism to Modernism but without losing a pragmatic, humanistic and sensible way of working with a architecture," write Gunilla Svensson and Finn Werne, authors of this chapter. "Pervading all of his designs is a solid ground of personal values, continuously evolving."

The façade is made from smooth white boards, whose neatness contrasts with the timber tiled roof and, within, the bare bricks and unplanned, unmatched wooden wall and ceiling panels. "The exterior is far more elegant and in a sense more interior than the interior," write the authors who conclude that this may have been so that the "interior could be more generous and more flexible".

They cite a possible Arts and Crafts influence from William Morris (made popular in Sweden by Lars Israel Wahlman) which brings us back to the link between design and the expression of how things are made.

Asplund's interior also considered what made people happy, with views over the water from the drawing room, an outdoor kitchen and places in which to ponder and chill.

"It is not difficult to imagine the comfortable feeling of sitting in the staircase looking out onto the meadows and bay, with a lit fire," write the authors.

While Jean Badovici and Eileen Gray's house in Roquebrune-Cap Martin in France is of a more pared Modernist tradition, looking like a Le Corbusier building, Gray too designed with people in mind right down to her furniture which was created to work with the human body and its needs. The house was oriented to various views, with the living space enlightened by the sea and the bedrooms waking to the rising sun. "Gray sought to overcome the dehumanising qualities often associated with abstraction by engaging the subjective qualities



Above: Alavar Aalto's workroom in his 1933 Helsinki home; below, left to right: Erik Gunnar Asplun's living room in his 1937 house near Stockholm; Ralph Erskine's 1963 house on the outskirts of Stockholm; Adam Caruso's kitchen in his 1993 London home

of experience," writes Caroline Constant, author of this chapter, going on to quote the designer. "The poverty of modern architecture," said Gray, "stems from the atrophy of sensuality. Everything is dominated by reason in order to create amazement without proper

research."

The pared 1996 Notting Hill home of John Pawson has often been held up as the prime example of clean, minimalist perfection but here too there is austerity afoot; linking to a form of basic living practised in rougher interiors. Apparently

when he was at boarding school he preferred to sleep in a hammock made out of a white sheet, than slumber in conventional beds: well we all have our quirks.

Another newer house is that by Dutch architect Jan Benthem, with Mels Crowell, on a site in

the Netherlands for which a competition was held: the proviso being that the houses would be knocked down after five years and the land handed back. This probably led to the house's light, temporary look, it's simplicity perhaps a response to the fact that everything was to be

demolished. There are rubber floors, corrugated metal roofs and thin walls. The whole house sits on a steel tube framework – akin to scaffolding – which gives the impression that the house could be easily lifted and taken elsewhere. It was built in 1984 and is still here – the five-year cut-off having come and gone – and Benthem remains in residence.

Another architect who lived beneath a corrugated roof is Ralph Erskine, born in London and who practised in Sweden. Influenced by his parents' membership of the intellectual, socialist Fabian society and his own schooling with the Quakers, Erskine's passions for "freedom, social integration, an anti-authoritarian way of life, complexity and simplicity, combined with an interest in site and climate", were all expressed in his home on the outskirts of Stockholm. This house, too, incorporates a studio, has a central fireplace, exposed timber and curtains dividing rooms. "Erskine's interest in vernacular architecture, his reinterpretation of Modernism and above all his anti-authoritarian view of life lead in the house to an architectural form that relates more to usefulness and feeling than normal rules."

Norwegian Knut Knutsen also took up the cause against "the simplified and unemotional version of functionalism" as displayed in his summer house in Oslo, completed in 1949, which uses different types of timber and centres on a large stone fireplace. The house, like others featured here, managed, in the words of Knutsen, to "give expression to a human content".

While interiors magazines would run a kilometre from many of these simple spaces – with their

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piles of books, random objects placed on ledges that aren't necessarily proper shelves, stairs that lean towards ladders in their design, vast open fireplaces that would make an obsessive cleaner weep – they express a love of natural materials, an embrace of living at close quarters with others, and an ease about displaying how things are designed, whether through seeing elements half-built or expressing how they were built by not plastering over them.

The houses illustrate design based on humanity and, while we are impressed by pristine hotel-like homes and trendy, iconic buildings, there is an argument that lasting, pleasing design is that which can speak to people. As architectural theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz said: "Freed from architectonic styles, architecture could make the art of building a language of more lasting values... to ensure that the materials and the dimensions sing, live and convey universal values."

These eminent architects have built houses that they want to live in rather than show off with. They have confidence to design experimentally and don't worry about what conventional society thinks.

■ *100 Houses for 100 Architects*, new, cheaper edition, €19.99; edited by Gennaro Postiglione and others. Taschen



