

IN THE WILD

# WILD ABOUT DESIGN

Getting away from our visually saturated, screen-based lives has never been more vital. Luckily, the custodians of some of Europe's most spectacular scenery have seized this opportunity to commission leading architects and designers to make the prospects of going off-grid even more enticing

WORDS BY  
VERONICA SIMPSON



Previous spread and below  
Treetop Walk at the National  
Arboretum at Westonbirt,  
designed by Glen Howells  
Architects with Buro Happold

**WILD NATURE** has never been so fashionable – not, perhaps, for more than a century, since art critic and philanthropist John Ruskin exhorted his contemporaneous Victorian artists and art lovers to honour the power of rocks, plants, birds and wild landscapes, lest they forget the importance of ‘truth to nature’. When the head of the Guggenheim Foundation, Richard Armstrong, declared to me in a 2014 interview that he was tempted to prioritise building a cabin in the woods above Bilbao as the next global Guggenheim destination, rather than press on with plans for the Guggenheim Helsinki, it sent a very clear message about the growing need – even on the part of the privileged cultural cognoscenti

– to find respite from the pressures of city life in the quiet contemplation of Mother Earth and her riches. Armstrong was clearly struck by the idea of drawing people to a place of outstanding beauty, to live simply, connect with nature and enjoy a seasonally attuned, slow art, slow food immersion. Three years ago I was inspired to investigate an emerging lust for immersion in wild and heritage landscapes for FX (FX July 2013). But the feeling then was that this call of the wild was largely in response to the pressures of urbanisation – as more and more people crammed themselves into our cities, we were being drawn to reappraise and appreciate the spaces and places that lay

beyond them. At that point, the most interesting architectural schemes were dynamic spaces aimed at creating destinations within these landscapes through dramatic and tactile structures, such as the sleek wooden contours of Snøhetta’s Tverrfjelhytta Reindeer Pavilion in Norway, and the rough, sculptural stone edifice of Heneghan Peng’s Giant’s Causeway Visitor Centre, in Ireland. In the short intervening time that social and cultural shift has been intensified by the increasing penetration of digital information and interaction into every aspect of our lives. Barely a day goes by without another article cropping up in the media bemoaning the loss of peoples’ real-time, three-dimensional

An epidemic of articles has made us ever-more anxious about the impact of endless multi-tasking, multiscreen activities on our memories and attention spans

connection with friends, family and our physical localities caused by that fourth dimension, which links us with the endless possibilities of new virtual, social and cultural connections. As Will Self noted in a recent article in The Guardian: ‘Four-dimensionality seems to queer our flesh-and-blood existence...[so that]...the friend who continually updates their online profiles can seem oddly insubstantial in person’; [or] fleeting, real-life encounters can ‘turn into a persistent virtual presence, hovering around our twittering timelines.’ As Google, the White House, corporations and even a growing roster of UK schools sign employees and pupils up for courses in mindfulness (an abbreviated version of the >

CASE STUDY  
TREETOP WALKWAY

The UK’s longest treetop walkway opened to the public early this summer, offering visitors to the National Arboretum at Westonbirt a 300m route up in the tree canopies more typically inhabited by squirrels and birds. Glenn Howells Architects, working with Buro Happold, used advanced computational parametric principles to create a timber and steel structure, both strong and light, to blend into the trees while following the contours of both land and woodland. The Treetop Walkway starts and ends at the ground, rising 13m as it follows the valley floor. At four optimal points the walkway ‘bulges’ to form viewing platforms, where visitors can congregate and survey the landscape of the historic downs. The walkway’s legs are made of timber that will age beautifully over time, spaced at 10.5m intervals so that they don’t interrupt the natural rhythms or sightlines of the existing ancient tree population. Says Glenn Howells: ‘The walkway is designed to disappear as a sinuous silver ribbon that meanders between trees and canopies.’ The Friends of Westonbirt raised £1.9m so that the walkway could provide visitors with a better understanding of the Arboretum and its landscape. Glenn Howells also designed the Arboretum’s 2014 Welcome Building, a curved, timber-clad centre for visitors to this English Heritage Grade I registered landscape and garden, established by the Holford Family in the early 1800s, and now run by the Forestry Commission.

<b>Client</b>	Westonbirt Arboretum
<b>Architecture</b>	Glenn Howells Architects
<b>Engineering</b>	Buro Happold
<b>Cost</b>	£1.9m
<b>Completion</b>	April 2016



PAUL GROOM

CASE STUDY  
HASLE HARBOUR BATH,  
DENMARK

The Danish island of Bornholm in the Baltic Sea was an important historical port for industry, fishing and ferry services. Its recent reinvention as a summer tourist destination has been substantially enhanced by the arrival of a new ‘wild swimming’ pool, designed by White Arkitektur. The Hasle Harbour Bath comprises a 360 sq m floating timber platform and two towers, sited within a network of breakwaters. The platform encloses basins of different depths, and, through its design, clarifies the areas for play and for serious swimming – for example, with lanes provided in the deeper waters. Stepped towers constructed from FSC-certified azobe timber boards rise from the platform to create playful, sculptural landmarks for this area – contrasting it with the solid, granite walls of the manmade harbour breakwaters nearby. The towers are designed to offer natural seating as well as diving platforms, extending from the main stair tower, whose 6m-high top step offers spectacular views of the harbour and the sea beyond. A 25m-long ramp connects the Harbour Bath to a new landing point along the coastline, where a new building, also clad in FSC-certified azobe timber, houses a sauna, lavatory and outdoor changing area. Designed for all ages and swimming abilities, the Harbour Bath encourages users to respond to the structure intuitively, and will form the heart of a future development to add further wooden decks to the breakwaters, offering a multitude of leisure and recreational opportunities for the new, residential community planned to populate this end of the harbour.

<b>Client</b>	Bornholm district council
<b>Architecture</b>	White Arkitektur
<b>Completion</b>	July 2014



SIGNE FIND LARSEN



Buddhist meditation practices, designed to encourage living in the present), an epidemic of articles has made us ever-more anxious about the impact of endless multi-tasking, multiscreen activities on our memories and attention spans. Children’s health specialists agonise over the six or seven hours a day that youngsters aged between five and 16 now spend on screens (often in school time). There’s also a growing body of research that links our teens’ virtual socialising and its inevitable accessory – constant self-evaluation – with the rise of youthful anxiety and depression. Mindfulness books and courses are one of the hottest trends in publishing and the ‘self-improvement’ industry; digital detox

‘We think there’s a real appetite for buildings that have a provenance and are more materially engaging and more tactile...that will change through time and seasons

– Fergus Feilden

holidays are the biggest new luxury-break niche; and allotment-grown vegetables and home-fermented or foraged foods have become the discerning foodies’ favourites. But all of this is – probably – too little, too late: in a recent MIT publication The Rediscovery of the Wild, psychiatrist Ian McCallum says: ‘The human psyche is alive with tokens of the wild. And yes, I think we have been negligent. We dropped these tokens. We have gradually but progressively lost track of our animal nature and what wildness really means.’

So congratulations to all those custodians of the still wild and spectacular parts of our planet for seizing this moment and commissioning impressive new buildings

to draw us frazzled city-folk away from the temptations of smartphones and binge-watching boxsets on iPlayer and Netflix.

Stylistically the design aesthetic has shifted: the latest wilderness structures seem to have moved away from being overtly iconic. If they are statement buildings, they whisper, rather than scream.

The most inspirational of these borrow heavily from the landscape – literally – such as Feilden Fowles’ forthcoming structure for the Yorkshire Sculpture Park that greets the visitor with a large, rammed-earth edifice whose raw materials have been taken from the surrounding site. Feilden Fowles’ design approach was ‘more inspired by land art’, says

Edmund Fowles – especially by Robert Morris, Michael Heizer and Andy Goldsworthy, the latter with several pieces in the YSP. ‘The site is a former quarry, now a faint depression in the land. This led us to develop a building very much as landscape, working with topography, boundaries and thresholds, rather than as an object or figure set within the landscape. It serves as a gateway building.’

The rammed earth elevation has a functional as well as aesthetic purpose, says Fowles. ‘We are tying it back into the landscape, and...creating a wall that protects from the motorway and the prevailing conditions. Then, facing towards the sculpture park, a subtly curving elevation wraps into the

existing quarry face, a continuation of the land contour and further embedding the building in its landscape,’ he says.

The practice, set up in 2009, was named Young Architect of the Year 2016 by Building Design magazine, and has specialised in subtle buildings whose form and materials complement and embrace their environment. Says Fergus Feilden: ‘We think there’s a real appetite for buildings that have a provenance and that are more materially engaging and more tactile – buildings that change through time and seasons. Certainly we find that people are being drawn to our work because of that.’ Feilden senses a growing desire for buildings that will have some longevity >

CASE STUDY  
PYRAMID VIEWPOINT,  
INVERUGLAS, SCOTLAND

The Pyramid Viewpoint is part of a wider Scottish Scenic Routes initiative by the Scottish government to showcase the country’s natural assets and give interesting commissions to young Scottish design practices. Glasgow’s BTE Architecture won the competition for one of Scotland’s premier wild destinations – Loch Lomond and its National Park – with the Pyramid Viewpoint drawing visitors to the most dramatic stretch of the UK’s largest inland lake. An existing cafe marks the entrance for visitors, and from the car park, the tall stack of the pyramid is visible above the trees, drawing them to it via a long, curved pathway leading towards the highest point of the Loch Lomond peninsula.

As visitors near the structure a single-storey tunnel frames the landscape, only as wide as the path itself, to lure them in and deliver them to a triangular platform. This is accessed via steps interspersed with benches that become more exposed as the structure rises, mimicking arena-style seating – with the breathtaking scenery as the headline act. The geometry of the pyramid forms an angular timber counterpart to the rocks at the loch edge, while the exclusive use of Douglas fir integrates and unifies the whole site as one large, sculptural intervention.

<b>Client</b> Scottish Government (Loch Lomond and National Park)
<b>Architect</b> BTE Architecture
<b>Structural Engineer</b> David Narro Associates
<b>Contractor</b> Land Engineering
<b>Treated floor area</b> 60 sq m
<b>Cost</b> £193,000
<b>Completion</b> May 2015



ROSS CAMPBELL

CASE STUDY  
YORKSHIRE SCULPTURE PARK

This February YSP was granted permission and £1.7m in Arts Council funding for a £3.8m visitor centre within the 500-acre Bretton Hall Estate, the showcase for work from some of the leading sculptors and artists of the 20th and 21st century. Feilden Fowles has designed the new centre for minimal impact on the site while intensifying visitor response to the landscape.

The building nestles into an impression left by a former quarry, and opens up a new focus and entrance to the park in an area that tends to be overlooked by the YSP’s 500,000 annual visitors in favour of the main entrance’s extensive facilities, galleries and cafe, or the cluster of iconic sculptures by Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth in the garden and lakeside, or the regularly changing exhibitions in the simple, industrial, shed-like Longside gallery.

The new building is announced by a large, rammed-earth elevation, richly striated and using earth from the site itself. Passing through the entrance visitors will find the landscape opening up in front of them, thanks to a visually porous, curving structure of a Douglas fir timber frame and extensive glazing.

The building will comprise a restaurant, ‘white cube’ gallery space, public foyer and a shop. Its structure and materials optimise both insulation and ventilation, with an air-source heat pump and a dense green roof, to be planted with moorland grasses to tumble over the edge of the building. A pioneering, low-energy environmental control system will maintain optimal conditions in the gallery.

**Client** Yorkshire Sculpture Park

**Architecture** Feilden Fowles

**Area** 395 sq m

**Cost** £3.8m

**Completion** Late 2017





in heritage settings – no matter how eye-catching, structures that lean on the industrial aesthetic can end up looking sterile when the fickle wheel of fashion shifts.

A renewed appreciation of craftsmanship is also creeping up. And the practice embraces the idea of working in dialogue with the craftspeople who help to construct their spaces. This may even, with the YSP building, become educational. ‘When the rammed earth is being constructed, there might be workshops, such as an open day giving people the opportunity to take part in the process,’ says Fowles.

There’s certainly room for innovation – and engineering technology has made possible one of the most spectacular and ‘light’ structures

Stylistically the design aesthetic has shifted: the latest wilderness structures seem to have moved away from being overly iconic. If they are statement buildings, they whisper...

for the appreciation of nature: Glenn Howells’ Walkway in Westonbirt Arboretum (see case study). But here too technology has been deployed in the interests of making sure the structure rests lightly on the land.

Ever on trend, Living Architecture – an organisation established by philosopher Alain de Botton to promote modern architecture, through offering up a series of architecturally cutting-edge holiday homes – is delivering a double whammy of wild living with its current and next launch. The Life House (see case study) is John Pawson’s take on a super-stylish retreat. Black Danish handmade bricks on the outside, white on the inside, and not a flash of colour to detract from the stunning Welsh ›

## CASE STUDY

### AVON WILDLIFE TRUST CABIN

Avon Wildlife Trust was looking to create a modest, low-impact shelter and teaching space for its educational programme in a new nature reserve within the Avon Gorge, near Bristol. HAB Housing commissioned Hugh Strange Architects to provide a semi-seasonal shelter that maximised enjoyment of the surroundings but avoided the use of glass, as vandalism has previously been a problem. Its response is a simple structure that mimics the typical off-the-shelf, agricultural shed, but adapts it to create something warmer and more welcoming. The timber-frame building is clad in timber panels, with galvanised-steel barn doors that take up the entire front elevation. These can be opened up to allow full enjoyment of the vistas and fresh air. A purpose-made Douglas fir roof canopy frames the dramatic views and offers shelter from inclement weather.

Simple plywood shelving and storage inside keeps the building workshop-ready. For flooring, Hugh Strange Architects took advantage of existing concrete slab in order to minimise disruption to the site and keep costs low; the concrete slab was a leftover from the 12-acre site’s previous incarnation as a rubble dump and then as a sports ground. The Trust has spent two years transforming the site into a wildlife haven, with ponds, footpaths, wildflower meadows and more than 4,000 new trees. In the surrounding concrete, the team has planted native flowers in the cracks and trenches so that the manmade will slowly be reclaimed by nature.

**Client** Avon Wildlife Trust and HAB Housing

**Architect** Hugh Strange Architects

**Floor area** 72 sq m

**Cost** £30,000

**Completion** April 2015





landscape around you, this dwelling is all about peace and tranquility. Next up, in 2017, will be a monumental but monastic structure, the Secular Retreat, from Swiss architect Peter Zumthor, set within the rolling hills of the high-end, second-home haven of Devon's South Hams.

Allegedly, it will be 'a work of art to touch the soul'. But only the souls of the well-heeled will be saved – Pawson's The Life House, for example, starts at £3,200 for a week (and sleeps six). Thank heavens nearly every other project on these pages is well within the reach of even the humblest civilian pocket. Wildness is something we can – and should – all benefit from. **FX**



**Left** Model of Peter Zumthor's proposed secular retreat, the next Living Architecture commission, and to be built in the rolling hills of Devon's South Hams

## CASE STUDY

### TY BYWYD, THE LIFE HOUSE, WALES

It's been five years in the making, but finally John Pawson's response to a Living Architecture commission – to create a cutting-edge, modern day secular retreat in the Welsh valleys – is due to launch this summer. Living Architecture's first property in Wales, Ty Bwyd (which translates as Life House) puts serenity and contemplation to the fore. The simple but luxurious building has been deeply influenced by Japanese design and the architecture of the Benedictine monks (Pawson has previously designed a modern-day Cistercian monastery, so he knows what he's doing). The house has been constructed from some 80,000 handmade Danish bricks – black on the outside, white on the inside. These are combined with pale polished-concrete floors, Douglas fir timber ceilings, doors and furniture. It features a spacious living area, large bathrooms and bedrooms, and good storage to maintain the minimalist lines of furniture and fittings. There are areas that cater for both communion and solitude – for the latter, there is a contemplation chamber, buried deep in the hillside, devoid of views and light, as well as an exterior one, where the meditative can calm the mind with views of the Welsh mountains. A sequence of walks have been curated by the artist Hamish Fulton, leading directly from the house. John Pawson's verdict? 'I wanted to create a sanctuary where people feel at home, but never insulated from the elemental character of the surrounding landscape,' he says.

**Client** Living Architecture

**Architect** John Pawson

**Area** 260 sq m

**Completion** Summer 2016

