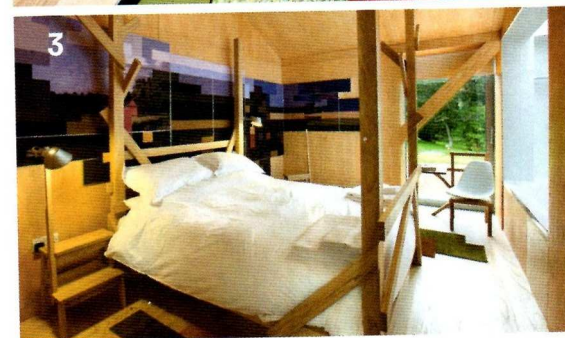
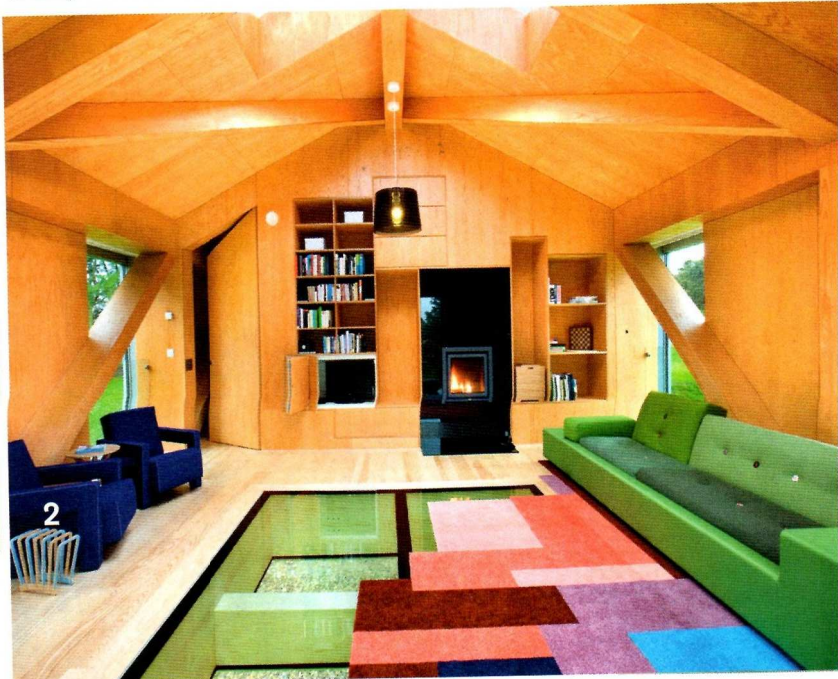


# alain de botton

Photography courtesy of Living Architecture and by Charles Hosea and Vincent Starr



## DESIGN FOR LIVING

The works of Switzerland-born, London-based writer and philosopher Alain de Botton span novels, literary criticism, and meditations on religion, travel, and work. It was Clodagh's particular admiration for his 2006 book *The Architecture of Happiness* that prompted her to contact him for this interview.



### Tell us about your newest venture, Living Architecture.

Judging from the success of interior design magazines, you might think the UK is now as comfortable with good contemporary architecture as it is with food or music. But scratch beneath the metropolitan, London-centric focus, and you quickly discover that Britain remains a country deeply in love with the old and terrified of the new.

A few years ago, I wrote a book about architecture critical of British nostalgia. It received a healthy amount of attention, on the back of which I was invited to a stream of conferences about the future of architecture.

But one night, returning from a conference in Bristol, I had a dark moment. I realized that however pleasing it is to write a book one feels passionately about, the truth is—few exceptions

aside—books don't change anything. If I cared so much about architecture, writing was just a coward's way out; the real challenge was to build.

On the back of a notepad was born a project which officially launched two years ago: Living Architecture, a not-for-profit organization that puts up houses around the UK designed by some of the world's top architects, available to the public to rent.

Our dream was to allow people to experience what it is like to live and sleep in a space designed by an outstanding architectural practice. While there are examples of great modern buildings in Britain, they tend to be in places that one passes through (airports, museums, offices), and the few houses that exist are almost all in private hands.

When people declare that they hate modern buildings they are on the whole speaking not from experience of homes, but from a distaste of post-war tower blocks or bland air-conditioned offices.

Living Architecture's houses are deliberately varied. One of them [called the Balancing Barn] by Dutch firm MVRDV hangs precariously off the edge of a hill in Suffolk. Another in Thorpeness [called the Dune House] by Norwegian architects JVA has four steel roofs, each of which houses a bedroom and bathroom. A third, [the Shingle House] by the young Scottish practice, NORD, is a stark black box in the shadow of Dungeness nuclear power station. A fourth [called the Secular Retreat], by

1. The Balancing Barn, by Dutch firm MVRDV, cantilevers over a Suffolk landscape.

2. Sliding windows and a glass floor in the Balancing Barn's playful living room.

3. A Balancing Barn bedroom outfitted with bespoke furniture.



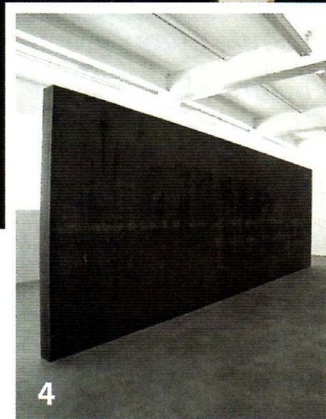
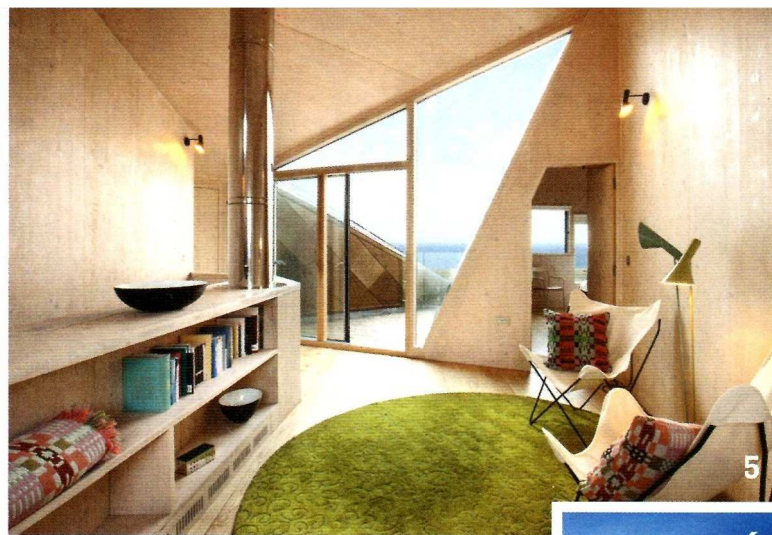


Photo courtesy of imageobjecttext.com



4. The large-scale sculpture "Fernando Pessoa," by Richard Serra, underscores the normality of sorrow.

5. Panoramic views pervade the living area of the Dune House, in the village of Thorpeness.

6. The Dune House, by Norwegian firm JVA, is marked by four steel roofs.

**While the homes you have available are gorgeous and inspiring, they come with a hefty price tag to build. How does the average citizen translate these concepts into reality?**

We will, in coming years, start to build whole communities of accessible, affordable housing designed by top architects. It's taking time, but that's the goal. We are democratic and egalitarian to the core.

**I loved your pop-up boat hotel. I hear that you have plans to move the boat throughout London in coming years.**

The boat hotel was part of the Cultural Olympics, which ran alongside the 2012 Summer Olympics. The thought was to create an innovative one-bedroom hotel perched on the edge of the Thames. It has been such a success that it will be kept on for 2013.

**It is uncommon to see someone sitting on a bus or subway and simply thinking. Are we losing the ability to contemplate?**

From what we can gather, [ancient] Athenians liked the concept that public space should be just that: space where members of the public could meet, exchange ideas, do business, buy a chicken or a loaf of bread.

When we contemplate our own public spaces we get rightly worried by the lack of public interaction in them. We go shopping, but we don't talk to anyone. We crowd together, but we don't get to know each other. We look into one another's eyes, but our minds are elsewhere. We are together, but very much apart.

The anonymity of modern public space is all the more insulting because the possibility of closeness and dialogue is so near. It's particularly weird for two people to ignore one another when sharing the same park bench or railway banquette. This is where the contemporary

addiction to mobile devices comes in. They enrage and puzzle us because they make concrete just how unable we've become to connect with our fellow humans. We laugh at ourselves holding these machines, as we might whenever a guilty secret has been exposed.

**You have said that, 'Heartache may be bad for the soul, but it's great for bookshops.' Why do we often find happiness via pieces of art that convey sadness?**

Given how much time we spend being sad, it's surprising to recognize we may actually not be very good at sorrow. One of the unexpectedly important things art can do is teach us how to grow more adept at suffering.

Consider Richard Serra's sculpture, 'Fernando Pessoa.' It is encouraging an engagement with sadness, taking us in a very unusual direction. The outward chatter of friendship in society is typically cheerful and upbeat.

Serra's work does not deny our troubles. It doesn't tell us to 'cheer up.' The large scale and overtly monumental character of the work constitute a declaration of the normality of sorrow. It is confident we will recognize and respond to somber and solemn emotions. Rather than be alone with such moods, the work proclaims them as central and universal features of life.

legendary Swiss architect Peter Zumthor, is a secular mini-monastery, which aims to bring an ecclesiastical calm and solemnity to the Devon countryside.

The idea has been to avoid the obvious and place houses in locations one hadn't necessarily thought of holidaying in, and to design rooms different from those people know from their own homes. We also want to keep things accessible. Prices start at twenty pounds per night and the buildings themselves, while always comfortable, are far from grand.

The organization has an educational mission at its core, a wish to teach as well as soothe and relax; that there are luxurious toiletries in the bathrooms is just a way of sweetening the pill.

Living Architecture's houses propose a new vision of the UK as a country no longer painfully in thrall with the past; instead, one that is democratic, tolerant, playful, and optimistic.



# perspectives **interview** alain de botton

7. Views of the desert landscape from the Shingle House, located in the shadow of Dungeness power station.

8. The Shingle House's exterior, by Scotland-based NORD, is a stark black box.



*“Traveling can form some of our greatest fantasies. We lie in bed reading a travel supplement, looking at pictures of faraway places, and think, ‘Here I could be happy!’”*

## **You have said that travel experience is somewhat dictated by who we are with. Is it easier to find enjoyment solo?**

Traveling can form some of our greatest fantasies. We lie in bed reading a travel supplement, looking at pictures of faraway places, and think, ‘Here I could be happy!’

But the reality of travel seldom matches our daydreams. The tragi-comic disappointments are well known: the disorientation, mid-afternoon despair, lethargy before ancient ruins. And yet the reasons behind such disappointments are rarely explored. We are inundated with advice on where to travel. We hear little of why we should go and how we could be more fulfilled doing so.

My book, *The Art of Travel*, is an attempt to tackle the curious business of traveling—why do we do it? What are we trying to get out of it? In a series of essays I write about airports, landscapes, museums, holiday romances, photographs, exotic carpets, and the contents of hotel minibars. I mix my own thoughts with those of some great figures of the past: Edward Hopper, Baudelaire, Wordsworth, Van Gogh, and Ruskin among them. The result is a work which, unlike existing

guidebooks on travel, actually asks what the point might be—and modestly suggests how we could learn to be happier on our journeys.

## **I enjoy places like airports and train stations. Do you have a favorite transit activity?**

I have long been attracted to service stations and motels, airports and train stations, harbors and diners; perhaps because, in spite of their architectural limitations and discomforts, their garish colors and harsh lighting, these melancholy places seem to offer an escape from habit and the false fellowship of ordinary life.

Nowhere is the appeal of airports more concentrated than in television screens, which hang in rows from terminal ceilings announcing the departures and arrivals of flights. The constant calls suggest with what ease our seemingly entrenched lives might be altered were we to walk down a corridor and on to an aircraft

that in a few hours would land us in a place of which we had no memories and where no one knew our names. How pleasant to hold in mind, when lassitude and despair threaten, that there is always a plane taking off for somewhere else.

## **Can things like a well-designed piece of furniture really make us happy?**

Beauty has a huge role to play in altering our mood. When we call a chair or a house beautiful, really what we’re saying is that we like the way of life it’s suggesting to us. It has an attitude we’re attracted to. If it was magically turned into a person, we’d like who it was. This helps to explain our passionate feelings towards matters of architecture and home decoration: these things help to decide who we are.

One might say that architecture suggests a mood to us. Its effectiveness could be compared to the weather. A fine day can substantially change our state of mind. Then again, under the weight of sufficient problems, no amount of blue sky, and not even the greatest building, will be able to make us smile. **hd**

To read the complete interview, log on to [hospitalitydesign.com](http://hospitalitydesign.com)