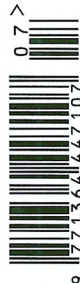


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MOUNTAIN LAIR

Swiss architects Lacroix Chessex balance life on the edge with a nod to the vernacular in a new Alpine retreat

PHOTOGRAPHY: JOËL TETTAMANTI WRITER: JONATHAN BELL





THE HOUSE PERCHES ON
THE EDGE OF A SLOPE IN
LES JEURS, AN ARCHETYPAL
SWISS VILLAGE, AND IS
INSPIRED BY TRADITIONAL
LOCAL STRUCTURES THAT
COMBINE A BARN WITH
A HOME ABOVE



THE BUILDING'S INTERLOCKING VOLUMES CREATE A CLUSTER OF PITCHED ROOFS THAT REFERENCE BOTH THE SURROUNDING VILLAGE HOUSES, BELOW, AND THE ALPINE LANDSCAPE

Hiéronyme Lacroix and Simon Chessex set up their office in Geneva in 2005, having begun their careers with stints in various architecture firms in Switzerland and New York, including a spell at Herzog & de Meuron for Chessex and time with Rogers Marvel architects for Lacroix. Their own work has seen them building at a variety of scales, always taking the very pragmatic (and very Swiss) view that each job is a blank slate for just the right approach. Major projects such as new student lodgings in Geneva – an elegant slab apartment block – contrast strongly with the refurbishment and extension of a chalet in Gryon, where their compact new wooden element forms a tailored appendage to the more traditional original structure.

A new house takes their interest in vernacular architecture one step further. Les Jours is the archetypal Alpine village, a small community nestling in the thickly forested mountains above route D1506, the road that runs between the French resort of Chamonix and the Swiss town of Martigny. For centuries, such hamlets have been built along similar lines, with traditional wooden houses erected on cleared meadows made from the flattest part of the wooded hillsides. This is a predominantly agricultural region, and storage for animals, equipment and foodstuffs has resulted in the creation of a hybrid structure – houses elevated above hay barns, with a clear separation between the two structures.

The new house sits on a slight promontory at the end of a private drive. Half the plot is steep hillside, and the new house is perched right at the edge of the slope. The basement level, cast in solid concrete, is a direct reference to those ancient hay barns. 'In these, the wood construction was lifted above ground and separated by a round stone that prevented mice from getting in and eating the grain,' the architects explain. 'In our project, the»





FRAMELESS WINDOWS HIGHLIGHT THE LANDSCAPE, WHILE THE INTERIOR WALLS, CEILINGS AND FLOORS ARE ALL IN FIR, INCREASING THE SENSE OF LIGHT WITHIN THE THREE-BEDROOM STRUCTURE



concrete plinth and cantilevers are a kind of reinterpretation of this expression of a “flying wooden house”, detached from the ground.’ The effect is made all the more dramatic by the way the house seems to step, just slightly, over the edge of the ridge.

The house itself is formed by two interlocking structures, one set at a 45 degree angle to the other, creating what the architects describe as an ‘Alpine shape’. The form is simultaneously a maquette of a mountain landscape and a self-contained village, the pattern of roofs and façades making a pleasing punctuation point on the terrain. ‘The project questions the shape and the scale of the traditional little mountain constructions,’ say the architects, producing a series of animations to illustrate how the programme is neatly spliced in two, a device

that allows for unpredictable viewing angles both into and out of the house.

The plan breaks up the mass, so the three-bedroom house doesn’t appear overbearing. Depending on where you’re standing in the valley – down below or high above – it appears much smaller than it really is, even reading as two separate volumes from some angles, all the while retaining the archetypal ‘house’ shape of a pitched roof above a rectangular volume. It’s severe, stark even, with a green tint to the vertical wooden cladding that keeps the structure within the region’s distinctive Alpine palette.

Inside, it’s another story. Large picture windows, especially in the jutting cantilevered section, bring the spectacular surroundings to life. Windows also mediate the relationship between the house’s

interlinked structures, setting up a dialogue between each element. The walls, ceilings and floors are all made from one material – fir. ‘It’s a clear strategy not to make any difference between floors, walls and ceilings,’ the architects explain, ‘so that the space is really highlighted by natural light.’ That light floods in through the frameless windows, while components like the staircase and integral benches give the house a feeling of solidity, as if the entire interior has been carved from a solid block of wood.

The result is a house that doesn’t startle with its modernity, but works in harmony with its surroundings. It’s not just a frame for the landscape outside, but a vessel for the life within, its fractured plan serving as a constant reminder of place.★
www.lacroixchessex.ch