



# THE BEST OF GRAND DESIGNS

**Kevin McCloud**

**Celebrating Innovative Houses From Architecture's Iconic TV Series  
Magazine and Awards Programme**





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# THE BEST OF **GRAND DESIGNS**

Celebrating Innovative Houses  
from Architecture's Iconic TV Series,  
Magazine and Awards Programme

**Kevin McCloud**



This book is dedicated to all those self-builders who have the gumption to risk all and commission adventurous buildings from their architects. For your passion, your determination and your self-belief I salute you.

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ABOUT THE PUBLISHER



# INTRODUCTION

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**‘Buildings, if they are to succeed, must be able to receive a great deal of human energy and store it and even repay it with interest.’**

Charles Moore

Le Corbusier said we all need light, space and order just as we need to eat. He forgot to add white emulsion and bifold doors to his list but otherwise was pretty spot-on in identifying the core architectural attractants for modern man and woman. Philip Johnson, the American architect of skyscrapers, said that ‘All architecture is shelter, all great architecture is the design of space that contains, cuddles, exalts, or stimulates the persons in that space.’ Architects have wrestled with these ideas for centuries and each generation has sought to express these ideas in a language that responds to a place and a time. *Grand Designs* has been broadcasting in Britain for 14 years as I write – a mere historical blink of an eye – but it has charted a change in architectural tastes and ideas over the threshold of a new millennium. I’ve seen architects come up with lots of ways to define the word ‘cuddle’, some of them involving concrete. I’ve certainly visited plenty of exalting homes.

This book, like the television series, celebrates the very best of domestic design. It captures some of the change in the way we view our homes in the early 21st century. It brings together the best of the series and many of the homes that have won Grand Designs Awards. The awards were started in 2003 and have been described as ‘the Oscars of British domestic architecture’ so it seems fitting to include some of the most luminary projects alongside the better-known broadcast houses. There are several national awards given to homes, not least the Manser Medal awarded by the RIBA, but this volume draws its inspiration from tight within the *Grand Designs* fold, because the approach of the series, at its core, is about the relationship between a building and the people who built and live in it.

So is it possible, among all these projects, to identify the Big Changes of the last fifteen years or so? Oh yes. It is with the benefit of hindsight and distance. Some of the changes in the built



environment have been slow and accretive. We saw the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE), the child of Blair's labour government, grow into (generally) a force for good. Planning law acquired yet more detailed legislation and grew into the beast with a thousand tentacles – or pages. The law eponymously introduced by environment minister John Gummer in the 1990s (and that resulted in wealthy landowners building questionable faux-Georgian piles in open countryside) was amended into a greener Planning Policy Statement 7 and has now spawned a clutch of sustainable one-off exemplar buildings that are amply supplying *Grand Designs* with interesting projects.

Architectural taste has also slowly moved in the last decade or two: from white modernist boxes to grey modernist boxes; from riven oak cladding to cedar shingle cladding; from picture Windows to those bifold doors. Space, light and white emulsion are as much in demand as ever on such a small European island stuck in the Atlantic with the highest incidence of low cloud in the Northern Hemisphere. There has also been fast change: the rapid decline of CABE and the pulling of the last of its few teeth by the coalition government; rapidly introduced legislation around housing; the National Planning Policy Framework which in 2012 swept away 65 years of planning policy; the Green Deal for home refurbishment; the Localism Bill and a national drive to promote self-build. When *Grand Designs* started few people built their home and an infinitesimal number employed an architect. Now it is seen as normal, if still adventurous.

And there has been change which has crept up on us and bitten us on the ankle. Context and contextual design have become mainstream obsessions of the best young practices. Sustainability, once a word nobody understood, can now be used with discretion in our programmes before the nine o'clock watershed. The green agenda, where once it was the subject of a specialist eco-build, nowadays runs through almost every project we cover, I'm pleased to say.

Meanwhile the spoken language of architecture itself has changed. Once architects began seeing themselves on television, many realised they should ditch the archispeak and enrol in a course in How to Speak Client. The result reflects a big change in the way the profession now models itself as a service industry that wants to understand its clients.

Consequently I didn't want to mark any stylistic or developmental ideas in this book with the usual, arcane, archispeak tags. Terms like 'Contextual Modernism' or 'Concrete Regionalism' are already familiar shorthand for architectural journalists but need detailed explanation in long articles only to be picked to pieces in further long articles. In conversation with my favourite architectural journalist, Isabel Allen, co-author of this volume and ex-editor of *Architects' Journal* (and now my colleague in my housing business, Hab), we dreamed up new, more accessible chapter headings for this book that reflect, if anything, a more anthropological classification of buildings – headings that describe and reflect the motives of the people who built the buildings: their owners.

Some things haven't changed at all. Mediocre buildings still look mediocre. Misled individuals still massacre old buildings with heavy-handed alterations in the name of 'restoration'. People with more money than braincells still build Toblerone houses on private gated estates that are distinguished by their labyrinthine arrangements of interpenetrating red tiled roofs piled one on top of another. That isn't architecture, it's just triangles and lots of maths.

But *Grand Designs* has shown, repeatedly, another way. A place on the margins of the mainstream where people risk all to experiment with technology, architecture and their own lifestyle, all for our entertainment and awe. We showcased eco lifestyles based only upon coppiced wood and dog lick. We have also promoted craftsmanship in a big way. We have held a mirror up to the world of building and home-making and have gently enquired what those ideas mean; we have reflected a taste of the times

and, in a modest way, influenced the taste and ideas of the times. Not many television programmes have been able to do that.

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**Space, light and white emulsion are as much in demand as ever on such a small European island stuck in the Atlantic with the highest incidence of low cloud in the Northern Hemisphere. (Esher Modernist Villa) (© Wilkinson King Architects)**



**The green agenda used to be the subject of specialist eco-builds, but nowadays is a feature of almost every project we cover.**  
(The Straw House) (© Jefferson Smith/Media 10 Images)





**A place on the margins of the mainstream where people risk all to experiment with technology, architecture and their own lifestyle, all for our entertainment and awe. (Suffolk Sliding House) (© Alex de Rijke (dRMM) and Ross Russell)**



**We have also promoted craftsmanship in a big way. (Cruck-Framed Woodland House) (© Ben Law)**

# 01 DIGESTING THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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It's inevitable that we take the first few years of every century, let alone a new millennium, to absorb fully the nutrients of the best of the previous hundred years. This is a vintage gourmet menu that reworks twentieth-century Modernism with a sauce of panache that is fresh enough to appease even the most jaded palate.



# WATSON HOUSE

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With a few honourable exceptions, the key to a really great one-off house is the quality of the dialogue between architect and client. It's all too easy for architect to be reduced to technician, wholly subservient to the client's designs, or for the client to become sidelined by the architect's agenda or tastes.

John Pardey is one of a handful of architects who tends to get the balance right, designing homes that reflect their owners' aspirations and sense of style, whilst clearly belonging to his own highly respected on-going body of work. Which could explain why he appears not once, but three times, in this book as the architect for Attwood House, which appears later on in this section, and the cosy Duckett House featured as well as Watson House in the New Forest shown here.

Charles and Fiona Watson approached John Pardey partly because he lives, works, and builds most of his houses in the New Forest, and partly because they liked his particular brand of poetic, site-sensitive Scandinavian Modernism. The brief was to design a holiday home that would offer an antidote to urban life; an unobtrusive house with a strong connection to the outdoors and plenty of space for the family to gather together.

The result is an elegant pavilion constructed – at breakneck speed – from prefabricated cross-laminated timber panels clad in sweet chestnut strips. Floors and most walls have been left exposed giving the feel of a log cabin and a subtle woody scent. Floor-to-ceiling sliding glass doors wrap round the living space creating a direct relationship between the house and its forest site. In a classic John Pardey move, a central chimney rises above the roofline and anchors the house to its site: a visual celebration of the importance of hearth and home.

The working relationship was not without its tensions. The architect tried to resist the request for a basement cinema on the grounds that it undermined the idea of a house that sits lightly on its site. But the house doesn't look like a compromise. It is gentle, confident, simple and strong – a happy manifestation of the empathy between architect and client.





**The open-plan kitchen/dining/living space has sliding glass doors onto an external timber deck. (© James Morris/VIEW)**



**The house was conceived as a simple pavilion that sits lightly on its site. (© James Morris/VIEW)**

# WELCH HOUSE

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One of the most intriguing things about *Grand Designs* projects is identifying the way in which aspects of the owners' experience and interests weave their way into the design, imbuing the clearest of concepts with a secret code of nuances, clues and references. If you look carefully you can often find secret portraits of the personalities that brought the project into being.

Sometimes, this is a deliberate process – a conscious move to produce a building that is a reflection of the self. At the Welch House, on the Isle of Wight, owned by sail-maker John Welch and his family and designed by architect Jonathan Manser of the Manser Practice, the nautical references seem to have seeped in by osmosis. The gang-plank leading to the front door is a practical solution to the challenge of accessing a house built into a steeply sloping site. The porthole is... just a porthole. Easy to do once you've decided to reduce costs by using opening panels and rooflights for ventilation and having fixed glazing elsewhere. The deck-like top floor balcony is the result of the perfectly logical decision to put the living space on the top floor and take full advantage of the spectacular sea view.

And the arresting black lacquer façade? Well that would be concrete cladding spray-painted with high performance marine paint. Its rich dark hue responds to the desire for the house to blend in with the surrounding trees when viewed from land or sea. And the fact that it's designed to withstand stints at sea makes it a dead cert for withstanding the unforgiving environment of the site.

A series of apparently expedient decisions have stacked up to create a house that is a far cry from the quaint whitewashed cosiness – or the bright-white Art Deco bling – associated with British seaside architecture. In fact, it doesn't really look British at all. For all its modesty and pragmatism, there is a distinct dash of cosmopolitan jet-set chic. Slick, glossy and inscrutable, it has nothing to do with bucket-and-spade homeliness and everything to do with the glamour – and the mystery – of the ocean.



**The top floor living space takes full advantage of the spectacular sea view. (© Morley Von Sternberg)**





**Slick, glossy and inscrutable, the Welch House has a dash of cosmopolitan jet-set chic. (© Jonathan Manser)**



**Glazed corner windows, made from fixed double-glazing, afford woodland views (© Morley Von Sternberg)**



**The spiral staircase contrasts with the sharp lines of the house. (© Morley Von Sternberg)**





**The black lacquer façade blends in beautifully with the surrounding trees. (© Morley Von Sternberg)**



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