Home: the place we yearn for, an idea we nurture, a dream we build. For many millions who are forced to flee and wander it is carried in the heart, a driving promise to return. For others, it is a spur to run away and find or create a new one, a better one. Blood’s been spilt for it, tears shed for it, love grown in it.

But go back a bit more, just a bit further – to the actual bricks or the mud or the stone that creates the home we remember or wish for. Where those most dear to us breathe easy, where the hearth is, where the cooking pots are, where the music is familiar.

Where are you? You are in a house, of course. Home is a house that is charged with life or memories, and hopefully both. It is shaped space, filled. It is order in the chaos. It is shelter, however simple, against the open skies and the unblinking stars. Tent, cloth, cave, timber: the house is the oldest human place.

So it is a fine thing to plan and order and create a house. It is the building block of what architects and architecture are made of. And it is a fine thing to explore and analyse and celebrate good houses, because they show us what is possible.

We live in uncertain times (of course we have always thought that). We are increasingly mobile, often out of necessity rather than by choice, and our views on privacy are changing. We are more open in our connectedness and through social media. Are we more open with our houses and the way we live? It is something architects must consider.

There is also a sense that the way we live is changing: for example, increasingly the house is a place of work. So a delightful house is one where there is room for experiment and individualism. This notion of the personal, of the ‘one-off-ness’, is crucial. The house is a place for us, our hopes, and our things; that vase on the mantelpiece, the sketches on the walls. A house needs to hold our objects (however meagre) safely for us. If we are the curators of our own lives, the house is a key
place where we display those things which matter to us and show others who we are.

A house to call one’s own is also out of reach for many. We talk of ‘stepping onto the housing ladder’ and once on that first rung ‘climbing up’ the ladder. A house is invariably an asset even if it is ‘mortgaged to the hilt’, and, in this regard, it can require a certain determination to see it as more than bullion. Yet a unique house, the careful product of an unfolding relationship between architect and client, holds the promise of home — not gold — at its heart.

The AR House Awards have been searching for and celebrating stand-out houses for seven years now. We are not looking for perfection. This year, our expert judges wanted to see projects that demonstrate individuality, and have a clear architectural language — making a contribution to a shared culture. Out of the single house the possibility of a prototype can emerge, a launching pad for something that can benefit many — so this was a consideration, too. The scale of budget is irrelevant; it is the ingenious use of that budget that matters. Each of the final four AR House projects has been visited in person and photographed, explored and examined.

As one of our judges remarked on the perennial pull of the house, creatively, imaginatively, practically, emotionally: ‘It is something that architects will always be exploring. The way we dwell.’

Home: it’s got a lot to answer for. And we’re still learning from it. *Emily Booth*
Alison Brooks
Principal, Alison Brooks Architects
The Cosmic house lives up to its name; it appears transcendent. A single architectural device, the portal frame, is multiplied, scaled and reassembled to create an attenuated, ephemeral spatial sequence. Nature and light permeate the distributed space of this home, a kind of shared terrain for two generations of the same family. This house is infinitely ambitious: first impressions trigger the fear of ‘too much architecture’. But on closer inspection Cosmic appears to have achieved the impossible: absolute adherence to a formal and spatial concept, total control of detail, a sense of poetic, intimate domesticity and lightness of touch.

Takero Shimazaki
Director, Takero Shimazaki Architects
A House for Essex is truly a one-off: a piece of architecture that captures elements of collaboration, architectural language, personality, craft, history, intensity and delight. The project borders between a museum, a guest house, a chapel, a home and an artwork: a fantastic notion of what a house can be. I can imagine it still being talked about in 200 years or more. With the emergence of Airbnb, there is a changing value to what a house is. This typology of the occasional home, as well as the complexity, flexibility and sharing nature of Cosmic, reflect the ambiguity and ephemerality of our present and the definition of a future house.

Aljoša Dekleva
Co-founder, Dekleva Gregorič Architects
Cosmic represents an exemplary experiment in how to push the boundaries of an individual house project. Informed by residents’ living habits and ambitions, it breaks away from the generic model of a suburban individual house and could, to some extent, be a prototype for a continuous suburban landscape of interlocked dwellings. The physical representation of the house is the reflection of the users’ open minds towards living; it does not appear as a defined object with clear boundaries, but it dissolves in a semi-transparent compound of open and closed spaces that blur the traditional dichotomy of indoors and outdoors.
IN THE FRAME

In an unassuming Osaka suburb, 'Cosmic' is an ambitious architectural landscape, writes Kaz Yoneda.
Climbing the approach of a narrow local street, you see a series of highly variegated white structures: a system of adjacent rigid-frame 'gates' that are at times shifted, compressed, raised and stretched in relation to one another. There is no repetition, and the differing sizes resemble a small primitive cluster of human dwellings.

However, as you get closer, it becomes evident that this project is anything but unassuming. With its sheer expansiveness and visual contrast to the typical surroundings of traditional Japanese towns, what appeared to be a collective of differentiated masses can be more accurately described as interlocked rather than autonomous. An immense ground-hugging residential project, its territory is vast and open like a public park. Imagine a village for a family under, not one, but many roofs. The patriarch noted, 'We often gather on the rooftop, or should I say rooftops, to have picnics. My grandchildren jump around the different levels of the flat roofs while grown-ups enjoy the moment.'

Two generations share this ground. Husband and wife live in the southern half, while their son's family occupies the northern half. They are close family yet fully recognise the need to connect and separate in flux when necessary, appropriate, or desired, and at times serendipitously. The older couple intermingles with old friends and neighbours to sustain relationships that span generations. The younger family, on the other hand, is centred around the children.
Each half of the house is generously apportioned; large kitchen and dining room to accommodate simultaneous dinner parties if necessary, or breathtaking bathrooms and bedrooms: rarities of private residences. Each half can always host the other, and vice versa. Furthermore, what is common to these two generations is that they inexplicably comfortable about being open to the outside world.

you then realise that the frame is not about the clients’ identities being necessary manoeuvres to take up an otherwise overwhelming mass programme. The spaces are distributed rather than condensed towards the centre as in the case with many compact Japanese emma kan residences. Furthermore, these also act as eaves and magnified brise-soleil. As light rays filter through the central frame and the agglomeration of smaller frames constitute layers of luminosity, views and hints of the internal daily lives of the occupants.

This sense of unpredictable hide-and-seek is evident from even the outside since the project lacks any element to demarcate the property. Slight undulations of landscaping gently create ambiguous boundaries, allowing physical and visual intrusions if compelled to wander in. Surprisingly, the architect did not have to convince the client to do away with fences: ‘We did not want anything to separate us from the outside. This area is safe and close-knit, we look over each other in the rural area. As long as we had the basic level of security and privacy, we felt no need to build a wall, literally.’ So the perimeter is the foremost of many challenges to traditional privacy issues. Another challenge is the inherent qualities of materiality and directionality for using frames. That is to say, the opacity of frames counters the transparency of its voids. Though generous quantity and strategic positioning of curtains sustain the final vestiges of privacy, the glass apertures expose the interiority. In this regard, the project is as unconventional as it is experimental, only allowed to exist in the delicate confluence of trusting clients’
attitude and general self-restraint of regional culture that forbids crossing a phenomenal threshold of another’s territory.

The initial impression of vulnerable exposure is quickly dissipated by the calculated longitudinal overlapping of simple frame elements, that in themselves would leave two sides exposed, but instead act as a graduated enfilade that shields the most sensitive areas of personal domain. There is a reason for frames being arranged unidirectionally. Closed, opaque verticals face the main thoroughfare on one side and the notional rear of the aggregated whole on the other, further accentuated by the raised earth mound. Conversely, the open, transparent sides form a powerful directional axis that allows the panorama of Osaka on one side. On the opposite side fronting a narrower local street, the ‘moon-viewing platform’, a contemporary rendition of the traditionally outdoor pavilion, acts as a visual buffer to its adjacent neighbour.

The overlapping of differentiated frames also occurs in the transverse direction. The transversal interlock results in two important conditions. Interlocking and shifting in three dimensions creates semi-outside spaces, carefully planned for outdoor programmes and protected by horizontal planes.

These interstitial spaces encourage the interiority to spill out and blur the inside-outside boundary. The experience, as well as the plan, exposes these semi-outdoor spaces as extensions of interiority, and how the frames meet the ground implies lightness without forcing a break with the environment. Various programmes appropriate a different number of frames to attain necessary floor areas. For example, the generous kitchen-dining and living rooms occupy multiple frames while more intimate spaces of bedrooms, guest rooms and bathrooms require one or part of a frame.

The second effect of interlocking is structural stability. A single frame is weak in a longitudinal direction. However, the interlocking of multiple frames at strategic points rigidifies the whole. Considerably, the bending moment and load are not absorbed by the singular totality of a robust frame but by the networked distribution of interconnected striations, which allow the
frames to remain relatively thin. It is a critique of traditional rigid-frame systems that, to this day, predominate the default structural thinking in Japan. Its architectural industry has relied on this structural system to create forms ad infinitum for speed and efficiency, and is consequently facing a rapidly deteriorating infrastructure due to an unquestioned proliferation of a singular modality.

This monotonous convention is eschewed by the deployment of a simple set of operations - slice, scale, shift, intersect - to achieve a novel permutation that belies its simplicistic operational origin. So, through the overlapping of frames, the architect endeavoured to achieve the dual-performance of creating semi-outside spaces and an interlocked structural system, which is allowed to attain thinness and lightness as a summation of these interactions.

The material palette contributes to lightness and appears limited, such as the white finish over the steel structure, the earthen layer, high clarity glass and nature itself. However, this constrained palette is deployed with sophistication. White finished surfaces are immaculately even and corner conditions are crisply maintained. Non-structural walls and ceiling planes are finished in an earthen material to form a gradient that goes from smooth and supple at ground level towards rough and nuanced upwards. Made by local master craftsmen, the texture was decided and applied on site by the architect in an emergent act of design. The combination of glass and nature was also used in a unique way. In many instances inside the project, stone pebbles used for landscaping were also placed on the interior side of glass. This created spatial layering that blurred the transition from exteriority to interiority: from outside, to an outside-like space sandwiched between glass and a slightly raised floor or wall, into a tempered interior, and then finally, in reverse with the process mirrored on the opposite side.

The last, but not the least, material used is nature itself. Natural elements, such as the trees, lawns, a trickling stream, rolling mounds and stonework, are carefully orchestrated and treated as fundamental components that inform spatial constitutions. Though the term 'material' may conote artificiality and manipulation by hand, natural elements are deployed as equally effective components in producing architectural qualities: shades, thresholds, posts, canopies, circulation, furniture and floors. All the while, these natural elements retain their inherent qualities, playing out their autonomous life cycle, and together, engendering a microcosmic ecosystem.

The architect has implicitly stated that this large mansion (go-tei in Japanese; go meaning 'palatial', tei meaning 'mansion') is equally a project about a large garden (also go-tei: tei here meaning 'garden'). In the design period and throughout construction, the landscape and the architecture constantly adjusted and transformed in relation to one another. As such, it is difficult to strike dialectical poles such as natural and manmade. Nature encroaches thresholds, entering into the interior as pebbles and plants trespass upon solid matters. Architecture extends outwards, and traces of human dwelling colonise the landscape as platforms hover over and the dining table entrenches into the ground. Many oppositions fuse in this project.

The house is grandiose in size but intimate in articulation. Each locus performs as a backdrop to intimacy and as a repository for personal artefacts. The spaces are all loosely connected yet separated. Ocular connections are provided by transparencies and yet are obscured by the layering of structures qua surfaces. Physical connections are provided by shared circulation and obfuscated by impenetrable material boundaries. Architecture and landscape, therefore, collude to connect inhabitants when appropriate, like amoebas engaged in tête-à-tête; a nuclear family further nuclearised by successive generations.

This project is an investment in a cultural prototype of how to relate to and interact with society. To be at once open and differentiated, highly connected yet individuated, and seamless yet heterogeneous. The open-minded attitude of the architect and client alike permeates the project. It quashes our hubris to recon with a sensitivity we are losing; that connection to our family, humanity and nature. Not only is the project opened to surroundings spatially, it is also opened to the community. Speaking to the older couple, they fondly recalled 'hundreds of neighbours attending the house-warm ceremony and how the project has become a new landmark', or better yet a shared landscape for the people of the community. Evidently, the neighbours have unofficially anointed the premises as an emergency gathering place in case of natural disaster. Both instances demonstrate that not only the family, but also the community have become enamoured of the project.

Bold, impressive and immense, the visual impact of its coloration and scale belies a non-didactical relationship to its context, the daylight and wind analyses; excavations of contours of the site, breaking up the mass into smaller more sensible scales relating the surrounding homes; and the meticulous selection of vegetation that blooms to animate through the seasons. It is a process to balance the relationship of content with representing an experimental, innovative prototype. This project demonstrates one possibility in the making of a shared architectural landscape.

Contextuality is no longer an appendix but truly sublimated into a performance of production that engender a holistic prototype for living.