



A conversation between architecture and nature

TEXT: EDDI FIEGEL | PHOTOS: AABE

"It's not the architect who creates a building, but the landscape around it," says Bruno Ericum, founder of AABE – Atelier d'Architecture Bruno Ericum, the Brussels-based architectural studio which has been making waves around the world.

The studio has become known for creating light-filled, sleek and streamlined Modernist homes, where the natural surroundings play a pivotal role. The studio has also created apartment blocks, industrial and municipal buildings in 16 countries from Belgium, France, Holland, Greece, Portugal, Spain and the UK, to South Africa, Peru and the US.

However, the aesthetic simplicity of the minimalist 'less is more' philosophy belies the complexity of their construction. One recent project is a private home – 'Prom-

nade' – near the village of Braine-l'Alleud, some 30 kilometres south of Brussels.

Open-plan private home

The owners originally approached AABE with the brief to build an open-plan private home on a large plot of land amidst the Brabant countryside, filled with mature beech and poplar trees.

"What we started with," explains Ericum, "was a wild, overgrown garden and our brief was to build a home. But the owners also wanted us to bring in something of the 'terroir' or landscape."

AABE's response was to create a crescent shaped design, which Ericum describes as "following a curve, like a snail's shell". Throughout the house, floor to ceiling glass picture windows with concealed frames and sliding glass doors al-

low the surrounding countryside to take centre stage.

The house comprises four bedrooms, kitchen, dining room and bathroom as well as an outdoor terrace area and garage, and wherever you look, nature is not just something to be viewed from the window, but a key component, closely interacting with the building.

During the summer months, the 100-year-old beech trees' leaves provide shade from the sun, whilst in the autumn and winter, their bare branches allow more light into the house.

The house is also clad in the blue stone specific to the area, which is weather-resistant and over the passage of time, rather than becoming dulled, takes on a subtle sheen.

To the rear, majestic poplars provide a vertical counterpart to the house's horizontal lines, whilst cantilevered roofs also help reduce overheating in the summer. Bedrooms, meanwhile, face east in order to fully take advantage of the sunrise.

However, it was the inclusion of a swimming pool which proved to be the greatest challenge for AABE. "It was easy to integrate the landscape into the rest of the house," explains Ericum. "The living rooms and bedrooms didn't present any kind of problem, but when it came to the swimming pool, we spent a lot of time deciding where it would work best. Eventually, we decided to build it facing east and it worked perfectly. I'm very happy with what we achieved in the end with the house, especially the relationship between the kitchen and the living room to the natural environment, and the trees at the entrance. You really get a sense of being immersed in landscape and it's a kind of paradise."

The Practice

Ericum founded AABE some 20 years ago and had been working as an architect for 15 years before that. His work very much illustrates his core belief,



which he describes as "suppressing decoration but responding to proportion", and across all of AABE's work, you can see the influence of Modernist masters such as Mies Van Der Rohe, Frank Lloyd Wright as well as Belgians Henry Van de Velde and Louis de Koninck.

He describes Van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion as "one of the most beautiful buildings in the world". Similarly, Lloyd Wright's influence and the way his buildings became embedded with their natural surroundings has been central to his approach. As a young boy, Ericum was

taken to see Lloyd Wright's buildings. "I almost cried entering every single one," remembers Ericum.

Personalised

At their Brussels studio, AABE now has a multilingual team of 15 and Ericum is passionate about using primarily traditional design methods when it comes to creating their buildings. "We always draw and design our buildings in pencil rather than using computers," he explains. "Using a pencil allows your hand to be guided by dreams and poetry. Computer technology just doesn't let you do that, and that's something I believe very strongly in."

This, however, does not stop the practice's creations from looking strikingly contemporary and up-to-date, as is their approach to client liaison. There is an emphasis on smooth, efficient and personalised service, whereby each brief is assigned a project manager who is the client's main point of contact throughout.

It is this combination of modernity and responsiveness to nature which undoubtedly defines AABE. As Ericum concludes: "It's never human design which wins over nature. There's wind, sun, movement and animals, and you have to take all of those into consideration. It's always nature which wins out."



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