

METROPOLIS

An isometric architectural rendering of a coastal city. The scene shows a mix of modern buildings, green spaces, and waterfront development. A large body of water is on the right, with a road and parking area along the shore. In the foreground, there are several modern buildings, some with green roofs, and a large green space. The overall style is clean and modern, with a focus on urban design and sustainability.

ARCHITECTURE AND
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Year in Review

Climate Change Challenges
Start-Ups Help Cities
New "Resimercial" Partnerships

Not Your Grandfather's Cabin

The quintessential woody getaway has become a cultural and architectural obsession of late. But why?

By Akiva Blander

Tiny living is now touted as an innovative and responsible residential choice. A recent preoccupation with cabins has inevitably followed. Perhaps comparable to last year's trendy obsession with Nordic hygge culture, which emphasized a certain comfort and domestic splendor, the cabin phenomenon has suffused many aspects of the design world. (There seems, in any case, no escape from the cottage industry of cabin-themed coffee-table books and stylish but useless manuals.)

The fascination is easily explained, at least in part. Enduring cultural notions see in the cabin not just the promise of a getaway but also restoration, primarily through rarefied contact with nature. Indeed, the cabin's smallness can act to "limit the imprint of form on the natural context," says Neera Bhatia, cocurator of the recent *Ways of Life* exhibition in Kassel, Germany, which displayed prototype cabin-esque dwellings that examined the changing relationships between work and domestic life, the individual and nature. These relationships, Bhatia adds, "need to be negotiated through architecture."

For architects, the allure is in the clarity of the program. The univocal purpose of a cabin—basic, temporary shelter—and its small scale invite experimentation with concept, siting, and materials. Further, it offers designers complete control. "There is the possibility to be present in all decisions and get hands-on experience on a complete project," explains Anne Cecile Haug, a senior architect at

Snøhetta who was involved in the design of the firm's Gapahuk cabin project.

A ready-made "social cabin" that "fits into nearly any scenery," Gapahuk illustrates how the typology is being reexamined by more established architectural offices. The design gives particular attention to common areas, such as a spacious living room, a kitchen, and outdoor patios. The move, says Haug, is subtle but intentional, borne out of the observation that cabin dwellers often feel a more magnetic connection to their surroundings than to each other.

But this plea for familial well-being cannot hide the fact that cabins have become a new form of naturalized luxury for the well-off, where social and environmental consciousness comes built in. The Summit Powder Mountain development in Utah, for example, was founded by progressive elites looking to both brainstorm solutions to global problems and preserve the mountain's calm and beauty. Although the development may be in harmony with nature, its structure betrays certain exclusionary and anti-democratic tendencies: "Thought leaders"—often quite wealthy, with often quite similar thoughts—band together to steer humanity toward brighter horizons, literally from above.

Walden Monterey in California, a self-described "forward-thinking enclave" set in another nirvana, markets rustic charm to Silicon Valley's ultrarich shopping around for a second or third home. The 600-acre development on the Monterey Peninsula

comprises 22 lots costing \$5 million each (three have been reserved so far), on which future residents can build their own custom homes. They must, however, conform to two "cultural rules": Houses must be powered by renewable energy, and cutting down trees is forbidden.

As the name suggests, Walden Monterey is about "finding a place where you can disconnect from the world, and reconnect with nature," says Nick Jokogian, the developer behind the complex. Shared amenities like yoga platforms (facing both the sunrise and sunset, naturally), a kids' playground, a trail network, and a Zen garden are meant to aid in this reconnection. Walden's emphasis on sustainability and repose, coupled with its recruitment of well-known firms such as MAD Architects, mirrors a contemporary mode of consumption, favoring simplicity and sparseness over excess and grandiosity, not unlike the "minimalism" trend of recent years. As Jokogian puts it, "You don't need a massive mansion anymore to live luxuriously."

Working with humbler aims (and smaller budgets) than these affluent enclaves are emerging architects producing cabins that are tailored to specific geographic settings or personal circumstances. For example, the 1,000-square-foot Little House, designed by the young Seattle-based firm MW Works, frames precise views of the surrounding forest and Washington's Hood Canal. The design of Garden House in Eindhoven, the Netherlands, by Caspar Schols, is structured according to a long list of programmatic requirements (for instance, a place for grandchildren to stay over, or a space for hosting up to 30 people) given to the Dutch architect by his mother. The cabin's sliding wood frame and shell help accommodate a broad range of activities.

On the one hand, the contemporary reinvention of the cabin type represents a backlash against a technology-obsessed and work-oriented culture. Also, it advances an alternative lifestyle that allows those fortunate enough to retreat from the spontaneity and risks of urban living and public life. "I think people are very attracted to that—getting away from the complexities that we have," says Jokogian. Occasionally, as in the case of Urban Cabin, currently on display at Brooklyn's A/D/O, the cabin repackages a messy metropolitan environment rather than a rural and pristine one—although here, too, the cabin's appeal lies in the quietude it offers.

In many of these cases, the cabins amount to an ecoconscious and bucolic gated community, where residents enjoy picturesque vistas and the wonders of living "close to the land," minus its more threatening aspects. This is an idyllic vision of luxury, simultaneously embedded within and detached from its surroundings. Today, the public sphere continues to be eroded, while self-sufficiency and individual valorization are trumpeted as social virtues more than ever. Could there be a better metaphor? ■

It seems that every nook and cranny of the Pacific Northwest's coastline features a handsome minimalist cabin such as Little House, which looks out over Hood Canal and Olympic National Park. The home was the recipient of a 2017 national AIA Small Project Award.







LITTLE HOUSE
With its vertical-meeting, this compact, 1,100-square-foot home appears larger than it is. The all-over soft pine plywood in the interiors is a warm contrast to the exterior's oxidized black cedar cladding. The home was designed by the small Seattle-based firm MW Works for a Houston couple, who have family down the road.



GARDEN HOUSE

Casper Schols' Garden House in Eindhoven, the Netherlands, was designed for his mother. She provided her son with a laundry list of needs and ideas for how to use the small cabin. With a meager budget (under \$25,000), Schols designed a one-off prefab unit that he assembled in his mother's garage in four months. (The structure, a simple truss construction, makes much use of cheap panels of Douglas fir.) Situated at the edge of a pond, the cozy residence expands horizontally—the walls are mounted on tracks and can be rolled out to accommodate every occasion.







GAPSHUK

Styled by architecture firm Snøhetta as a "social cabin," Gapsbuk is a standardized design that can fit in any landscape. While the double-inclined shell of the cabin is fixed, the interiors can be changed to suit residents—for example, though the architects specified

locally sourced wood for the walls and flooring, these can be easily swapped out for other materials. The project, which was developed for *fridulshytta*, a leading Norwegian purveyor of vacation homes, prioritizes common areas.



URBAN CABIN

At A/D/D, an exhibition and coworking space in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, a hotel on the display. The Urban Cabin is the latest in a series of tiny living prototypes developed by MINI LIVING, an affiliate of MINI (a primary sponsor of A/D/D). Whereas the appeal of cabins lies in the way they frame pristine landscapes, the project draws on the vibrancy of urban life in New York.





WALDEN MONTEREY
 Walden Monterey, a gated community under development in Monterey, California, typifies themes of individualism, reconnection with nature, and changing ideas of what constitutes a luxury lifestyle. The project is produced by a team of architects, artists, wellness and sustainability experts, and other professionals, whom developer Nick Jeagan invited on a retreat to explore and imagine a future for the site. Communal amenities are somewhat sparse, but the buyers of each 20-acre, \$5-million lot are granted full freedom in the design and construction of their cabin homes, provided they are powered by renewable energy and do not destroy any trees. The cabins may range in size from intimate to sprawling (above, left).