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 RETHINK REPORT 04
 Remaking the house

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WRITER
John Stones
 PHOTOGRAPHER
Amber Rowlands

HOUSE QUEST —Global

Preface
 Housing needs a renaissance. Monocle meets the London firm reinventing the town house and talks to pioneering project leaders in Denmark and Japan.

Architects have turned their backs on housing in favour of more creatively rewarding projects. There are a couple of notable exceptions and, of course, there are always the one-off, spectacular houses – but these examples of architectural haute couture don't address the wider problem: how to balance cost with quality of life for the people who have to live in them – and urban planning for the city.

Rational House, however, is an ambitious attempt to provide an answer to these questions by returning to the terraced townhouse model and reinventing it as the ideal home for the 21st century. The project is the idea of London-based architect Robert Dalziel and engineer Tim Battle. They had worked together on commercial buildings and decided to self-finance a new venture.



01 Rational House team (left to right): Mary Battle, Tim Battle, Sheila Qureshi, Robert Dalziel, Amy Battle and Joseph Cefai
 02 Model of the Rational House

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“We’re both retired, but we thought why not use the expertise we’ve got in a new field?” says Battle. “We asked what’s a rational approach to housing – how can it be supportive to people’s real lives? What would we like to live in ourselves?”

Appropriately the inspiration came from Dalziel’s refit of his own London mews house. The house occupies a tight space and Dalziel chose to bring the light down into the entire space by keeping the staircase open. Extending into a basement allowed for a small patio and a roof garden addressed the desire for some private outside space, all without increasing the building’s footprint.

The UK government estimates that by 2016 it will need 240,000 new homes to cope with demand and hence affordable, low rise, sustainable housing is a pressing concern. Apartment blocks, driven by developers with profit rather than quality of life in mind, have been the predominant answer.

It dawned on Dalziel that the Rational House could serve as the blueprint for a novel solution to provide low-rise housing



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of a similar density to five-storey apartment blocks, but with the features such as high ceilings and generous rooms that make Georgian and Victorian terraced houses such pleasant places to dwell.

Dalziel’s home serves as Rational House’s HQ, with the rest of the team working from homes in and around London. Team members include fellow director Joseph Cefai, a materials and prefabrication expert, and Sheila Qureshi, an architect who has a research interest in the urban house. The remain-



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The first owner

Nathan Brown, founder of Lodger Shoes, will be the owner of the first Rational House.

“The architect Robert Dalziel lived next door to us while he was renovating his own home and we kept in touch, meeting now and then to discuss our new businesses. I just loved the philosophy of high-density housing with these proportions and of recycling where you can. And it was a unique chance to get involved in a project like this. I’ll move in with my wife and two kids in September.”



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Rational facts: *A manifesto for urban housing*

- 01 Compact developments create sustainable communities.
- 02 Refined construction is economic and has timeless appeal.
- 03 Urban buildings need to last and adapt over their lifetime.
- 04 A Georgian façade is a well-proportioned façade.
- 05 Clever use of roof terraces and light wells give more space.
- 06 Low ceilings are oppressive, high ceilings are liberating.



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der is a family affair. Battle’s wife Mary, a lawyer, is the company secretary and daughter Amy is in charge of marketing.

As part of the exploration of what the perfect 21st century house should be, the team scoured cities around the world taking features they most liked (such as traditional Parisian shutters) and incorporating them into the Rational House. This research will also form material for a book called *A House in the City* to be published next year by the RIBA.

Down the road, the first example of the Rational House is approaching completion. Its most noticeable feature – which the team hopes will function as an instantly recognisable feature of the Rational House – is the bold façade with large windows. This is prefabricated in

Cornwall and Somerset, using a by-product of china clay extraction that would otherwise go to waste, into which recycled bricks can be set. It’s one of many sustainable aspects of the design.

While Dalziel shies away from the word “modular”, the Rational House format allows for developments on any scale and use. Stylistically the Rational House is inscrutable – cleverly pitched so as not to scare away conservative tastes yet also clearly not mere pastiche.

With its high ceilings, generous space and quality materials, Battle and his team have put a lot of work into moving Rational House from a “one-off good idea” to volume production, with economies of scale permitting higher quality materials than would otherwise be

- 01 Rational House team
- 02 Tall doorways add space at Logan Mews
- 03 Light wells bring natural light into the building
- 04 The roof terrace provides outdoor space
- 05 Brick and concrete samples used in the Rational House
- 06 Shutters for security and insulation
- 07 Rational House plans
- 08 CGI of the Rational House Golden Section-proportioned facade
- 09 Rational House model

possible. London Mayor Boris Johnson has complained that new homes in the capital are some of the smallest in western Europe and, understandably, he and his architectural advisers have shown great interest in the Rational House concept, with the hope that he will open the first house in June.

As well as having the ear of the mayor, Rational House has been getting developers and estate agents on-side. There’s a heavyweight implementation team in place (consisting of 3D Reid, Davis Langdon and Arup), and talks are progressing that could see the Rational House form part of the Olympic legacy development. Estate agents, meanwhile, are positive about Rational House appealing to buyers who might not otherwise consider a contemporary house.

“Rational House has the potential to be a clearly recognisable London style, in the same ways as the 1930s semi,” says Yolande Barnes, head of research for international estate agency Savills. “It is brand new and yet nothing new – the vernacular of the town house, something that has worked for centuries across the globe. What’s so exciting is it’s not just housing but has the potential to form new streetscapes that are flexible and capable of adapting over time.”

It clearly has international potential and Savills has taken the project to Shanghai. But even if it remains a small-scale UK idea, it has in many ways called the developer’s bluff, showing that human, generous and adaptable town houses are still possible today. Cost and density needn’t negate quality. — (M) rationalhouse.com



CASE STUDY 01:
**The housing block
Denmark**

Bjarke Ingels is the founder and principal of BIG, a group of architects, designers and builders based in Copenhagen. Though only founded in 2006, BIG has become one of the world's most sought-after practices, principally for Ingels' innovative approach to housing. He has completed three large housing developments in the Ørestad suburb of Copenhagen and has recently unveiled a new 600-unit project in Manhattan. big.dk

How has the way architects approach the housing block changed in the 21st century?

Our lives and lifestyles have evolved rapidly in the last 50 years and are constantly diversifying. In the heyday of modernism, architecture was governed by the idea that you analyse how people inhabited the home – how a housewife moved around the kitchen for example. The biggest change today is the increase in diversity of lifestyle – people live in all kinds of ways. Hence architects today don't try to cater for the statistical average but provide as many options as possible.

How does this manifest itself in a housing block?

I describe my housing projects as "architectural tetris". I've created as many alternative typologies and diversity of spaces as possible within one block to suit the diversity of the way people might inhabit them. In my VM Houses I followed the basic typology of the traditional perimeter housing block, but in the 230 individual homes there are 80 different types of flat.

Does the way cities are changing affect the way housing blocks are built?

Definitely. In Manhattan, for example, a whole new layer has been added in the last 10 years – greenery, parks, piers, planting a million trees

and more kilometres of cycle lanes than Copenhagen – quality of life in cities is actively spoken about and strived for. I'm trying to optimise the building's relationship with the city and hope this will optimise the quality of life for the people who live in and around it too.

Why have so many architects shied away from housing projects on this scale?

The notion of dissecting a complex situation into constituent parts in architecture is still a very modernist school of thought and many architects don't like this. It's more common today that well-known architects will work on large public buildings – often cultural – rather than residential projects or housing blocks.

Is it an accident that housing is becoming your speciality?

We've received a lot of attention for our housing projects because it's an area that's been abandoned by architectural experimentation and urban thinkers – extraordinary when housing constitutes more than half the urban tissue. Today it's more often left to developers and real estate firms looking to satisfy the lowest common denominator. Housing is a very big challenge – you're catering for a clientele

whose needs are almost impossible to match and dealing with small margins so you have to be smart with your resources. We describe our work as "architectural alchemy" – mixing very basic elements and ingredients to create, not gold, but surprising results.

How do you see the housing block developing in the future?

I think the future will see more hybrids. The 8 House is a mixture of many different areas of life combined – like shops, housing, offices – in one complex. They all support each other. We'll see more surprising juxtapositions in the future – experiments to combine suburban and urban, green spaces with urban density, and indoor and outdoor. Everyone will have options, regardless of how they choose to live. — HM



- 01 8 House, 2010, Ørestad, Copenhagen
- 02 Mountain dwellings, 2008, Ørestad, Copenhagen
- 03 VM Houses, 2005, Ørestad, Copenhagen
- 04 8 House 'architectural tetris'
- 05 Final Wooden House, 2005-2008, Kumamoto, Japan
- 06 House N, 2006-2008, Oita, Japan
- 07 House O, 2007, Chiba, Japan



CASE STUDY 02:
**The individual house
Japan**

One of Japan's rising architectural stars, Sou Fujimoto was born in Hokkaido, graduated from Tokyo University and set up his own studio in Tokyo in 2000. Widely acclaimed, he has won numerous awards for work that includes several pioneering houses. Fujimoto's designs explore the interaction of architecture, people and nature and he has become renowned for living spaces that point to a new way of designing houses. He lectures at UCLA and Tokyo University. sou-fujimoto.com

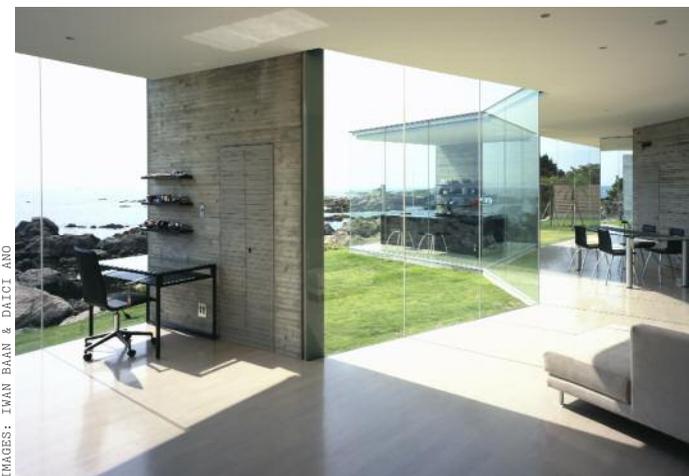
How has house design changed in the last 50 years?

In the 20th century, western-style houses had to have a bedroom, living area and dining room – each space had a name and a specific function. Now this system is becoming blurred and people want more multi-functional spaces. In House N I tried to create a gradient space. The move from inside to outside is gradual and people can use the space how they like, depending on the season and the time of day. I'm very influenced by the traditional Japanese house, which is built in layers and particularly by the *engawa*, the in-between space that is

neither indoors nor outdoors. Designing a house is like designing a landscape – people should be able to walk through or stay in one place.

Has technology had an impact on house design?

There's no doubt that new technology is changing people's lifestyles. I'm interested in how it affects the human body and how I can relate that to architecture. I use my iPhone and the internet all the time and I can see that technology detaches us from nature. The sense of "outside" is now more precious than ever. And that's what I want to translate into architecture.



Are people open to more radical ideas these days? I think so. A new house I'm just finishing for a young couple in Tokyo – House NA – is built like a pile of boxes on different levels. In one way the house is like a single space, but each room is also a tiny space of its own. The clients said they wanted to live like nomads within the house – they didn't have specific plans for each room. The house looks radical but for the clients it seemed quite natural. With House O – which has a beautiful ocean-front location – the clients wanted a simple panoramic box, but we suggested an alternative design that offered different angles and viewpoints.

Is ecology an issue in house design?

I'm very interested in this subject but it's about something more fundamental than using solar panels and recyclable materials. I like to try to build in a way that is sensitive to the environment – using the flow of air and the positioning of trees, for example. But all my houses are air-conditioned. The Japanese summer is very

hot. With House N, the outer shell cuts 70 per cent of the direct sunlight so that has an effect. Ideally, you want to combine practical ecology with an interesting architectural experience.

Is furniture more important than it was?

One hundred years ago the Japanese house had almost no furniture – maybe just a *zabuton* (cushion for sitting on the floor). So to have furniture at all is a big change. I'm interested in furniture that can be part of the architectural landscape and architecture that can work as furniture. I tried that with Final Wooden House where the walls and floor act as both the structure and furniture.

What's the key to good house design?

I think there has to be a good relationship between inside and outside the house. Architecture is not so changeable but the weather, the seasons and the people inside are, so it's our job to find a framework to accommodate those changes. If the architecture is too strong it can eliminate those variables – which we don't want. — FW

