

INTERIORS

Manor in the works



Alain de Botton (left), Balancing Barn (far left, below)



Philosopher Alain de Botton is bent on revitalising British 'comfort' architecture, writes Jo Baker

Try to conjure the British landscape and you will probably settle on a building from its distant past, perhaps a Georgian manor house on a sheep-strewn dale or the sooty brick and mortar of Sherlock Holmes' London. British architecture remains a wellspring of nostalgia for those who both live in and visit it. And for writer and popular philosopher Alain de Botton, this is an endless source of frustration.

"Liking modern architecture is a kind of sect here," the Swiss-born de Botton complains from a cosy brick-bound office in north London. "It's like witchcraft, or something slightly unusual. Because Britain industrialised so fast there's a tremendous desire for history. But there's a reason things become history."

As a writer, long based in England, de Botton has dedicated himself to reforming the public understanding of vital themes. His books have addressed love, travel and, most recently, work, and he co-founded a small "cultural apothecary" in London, The School of Life, which sells books and holds philosophy workshops and secular Sunday "sermons" on self-development. His successful 2006 book, *The Architecture of Happiness*, ran in a similarly edifying vein and won him kudos from the Royal Institute of British Architects.

Yet when it came to architecture, he felt compelled towards a more dynamic form of activism. The feeling grew as he explored forward-thinking home design across the world for the television series, *The Perfect Home*.

"You find very good modernism in Asia. There are some beautiful examples of private houses, blocks of flats and civic building across China and Hong Kong; think of the Great Wall project, which has been iconic," he says, referring to the Commune by the Great Wall project - 12 strikingly modern villa projects

designed by 12 Asian architects. He notes that China's flirtation with Western historical cliché seems to be fading finally as its top earners appreciate the way that home-grown architects can mix elements of Chinese geography and geology with new international ideas.

In Japan, de Botton finds that many middle-class families are comfortable using modern architects, producing neighbourhoods that are adventurous but have a shared aesthetic. It's a spirit that he identifies from his upbringing in Switzerland, but which he finds hard to locate among England's suburban mock-Tudor housing estates.

"The point is, when you've got an opportunity to build a house or stay somewhere, do you go for the 'neo-whatever' mansion?" he asks. "Or do you accept that the architecture of our own times can have many of the qualities that people admire in buildings of old, like a sensory richness, a warmth, a connection with history, but they don't have to be museum pieces or kitsch?"

De Botton's brainchild, Living Architecture, is an apt response to this question. The new, not-for-profit venture will see provocative modern holiday cottages sprouting bravely among Britain's mostly rural beauty spots. Three projects are complete and at least three more are on the way, each by a different architect, and each defined by the customary tenets of good modern architecture such as light, functionality and a strong connection with the surroundings.

The scheme is part vacation, part education, and through it de Botton hopes to ease what he sees as the public's suspicion of modernist design, and drum up the kind of popular support enjoyed by other fields of design innovation in Britain, such as product design or fashion.

Yet this is not a project for Britons only. "It's a national mission in the sense that the idea is to raise

standards here, but we're aware that the way to raise the standards is to bring foreign architects here, at least in part," he says, noting that as developers in Britain court the British fondness for home-grown "comfort" architecture, they leave little room for studios with strong modernist architectural traditions, such as those in Germany, the Netherlands and further north in Europe.

De Botton also sees the cottages helping to refresh Britain's image overseas, by letting holidaymakers immerse themselves in the countryside without necessarily taking a trip back in time or compromising on quality.

"People are used to London being hip, cool and modern, but once you go outside of the M25 [London's orbital motorway] you're slightly in the wilderness," he says. "We hope these houses will be clear and welcoming in a way that international audiences can appreciate."

Yet despite these cosmopolitan sensibilities, most of the projects rework the unique architectural style

You find very good modernism in Asia ... beautiful examples ... across China and Hong Kong

Alain de Botton

of their area. The Shingle House, by Scotland's Nord Architecture, is a stark reinvention of fishermen's huts along the stony Kent coast, while the Dune House in Suffolk by the Norwegian Jarmund/Vignæs Architects makes reference to local seaside buildings with a geometrical roof in tinted orange steel alloy.

Projecting into the air above a Suffolk nature reserve, the Balancing Barn is a neat yet gravity-defying affair clad in reflective tiles, but features a local hammerbeam roof, and coming to Devon next year, Peter Zumthor's Secular Retreat will attempt to use concrete and glass to spiritual effect, creating the vibe of a monastery or abbey.

But how have the British responded? Although the national media have retained their usual blend of hype and high-handed sting, local press coverage has been generally supportive. It's a result, de Botton thinks, of striking the right balance between exciting and accessible design.

"We haven't had any fights with any locals," he says, with a smile. "The house in Thorpeness [the

Dune House] is very prominent and has really galvanised the area. People are coming forward and wanting to build their own houses. It's become a complete talking point, which is exactly what we wanted." It is also booked almost solid for the next six months.

Living Architecture has taken a brief hiatus from the countryside with its latest, equally radical project, though it is perhaps more publicity friendly than educational. Its Room for London will perch atop the city's Southbank Centre for the whole of next year as part of the London 2012 Festival, which is a 12-week cultural event to celebrate the Olympic and Paralympic Games.

Bookable from September for one night only per couple, the collaboration between competition winners David Kohn Architects and artist Fiona Banner will resemble a timber boat and offer sweeping views of the London landscape. And this is a view to which de Botton's allegiance remains strong, despite his wider mission.

"I think where Asia has learned the wrong lesson is not so much in

architecture, but urban planning. They're essentially working with a model about 40 years out of date," he says. "Large arterial motorways connect districts, big shed shopping, high rises and parks all zoned separately as opposed to low rise, intermixed work and residential, which are ecological but also where people feel most comfortable."

Of course, this notion of comfort, as many will point out, is at the crux of the equation, and the heart of de Botton's self-set challenge with Living Architecture. For many, true comfort, and thus true happiness, lies in echoes of the home they grew up in, or perhaps the house they idolised as a child, whether modernist or Gothic, airy or dim.

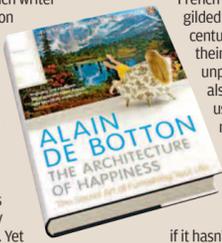
De Botton, who was raised in a "charming" but "brutalist" modernist block of apartments, recognises the paradox.

"I think we picked a good moment. I think attitudes are changing, and will continue to change as more people have childhoods in modern houses," he says. "You've just got to get the babies in!"

How life inspires architecture, and vice versa

The Architecture of Happiness by Alain de Botton is no coffee-table tome. Compact and with its pictures in black and white, it feels as though it was meant to be read. De Botton's sixth book is a conversational journey through humankind's sculpting of space, from its cathedrals to its living rooms; from ancient Rome to Nazi Germany. Inspired by French writer Henri Stendhal's declaration that "beauty is the promise of happiness", as well as his own emotional ties to certain building types, de Botton explores the ways that life inspires architecture, and vice versa. He unfurls the meaning in symbols and silhouettes, and venerates architects for the way they harness universal themes. Yet

he also humanises a few heroes with the forgotten tales of their failures, including the self-indulgent tragedy that Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye was for the family who had to live in it (the Swiss architect barely escaped a lawsuit). The book delves into the sociology of trends and the psychology of taste; why it was that 17th-century French aristocrats loved gilded ceilings, yet 21st-century urbanites like theirs rough and unplastered. But he is also keen to convince us of architecture's main line to the soul, to illustrate how the beauty of a building can reduce us to tears, and to explain why, if it hasn't yet, it should do.



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Doing Away with the Double Chin

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Double chin is perhaps the least expected but most probable result of weight gain. When one puts on the pounds, fats usually first get built up in body parts such as belly and hips. But then before you know it, when the fat gets stored below the jaw, the double chin develops and becomes the most visible sign of being tired and overweight.

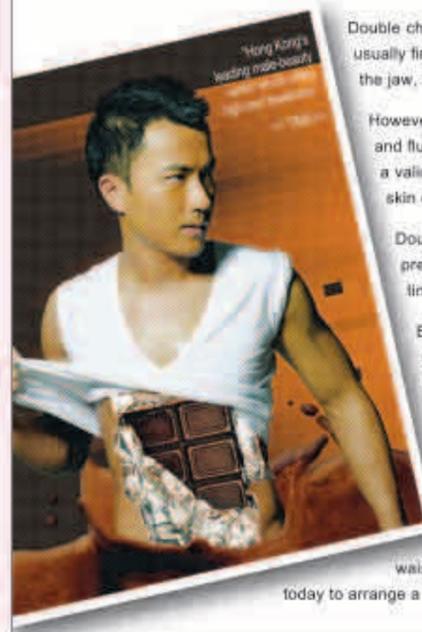
However, not only overweight people get double chins. While some attribute double chin to sluggish lymph circulation and fluid retention around the neck and throat, loss of skin elasticity and muscle tone at the jaw and neck area is also a valid reason. Sometime it is the result of aging; men after 35 to 40 years of age invariably experience some loss in skin elasticity.

Double chin not only affects how one looks but also how well one sleeps. When one lies down, the extra tissue presses on the throat, blocks the airway and leads to snoring. The more serious sufferers can wake up up to 100 times in a night and feel exhausted in the morning simply because their brains never get enough deep sleep.

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