

In a pocket of countryside between Amsterdam, Amstelveen and Ouderkerk aan de Amstel lies a small island of 1200 m<sup>2</sup>, on which Don Murphy, one of the principals of VMX architects, recently built a 500 m<sup>2</sup> house for his family. The house appears both strongly at odds with and comfortably at home in its setting. With its unusual steel and concrete structure and vast glazed windows it resembles nothing so much as an enormous crystallized rock that washed up on the island some indeterminable time ago.

Designing one's own home is quite a frustrating and difficult task for most architects, and Don Murphy was no exception. It was difficult to orient both himself and the building on a site with almost no constraints – this for an architect who masterfully manipulates and inverts the constraints of each project to create something interesting and new. The brief was undefined, with only the strict zoning laws dictating the freestanding pitched roof typology and its position on site. The starting point for the eventual concept was the view over the landscape, which encompasses the tall buildings of Amsterdam in the distance, the vast, flat fields of the surrounding countryside and the view of the planes taking off and landing at Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport. The house is surrounded by water and greenery, yet the connection with the garden is confined to two narrow doors on opposite sides of the building. Views out over the landscape are far more important than actually being outside in that landscape. The house is a monolithic and alien object on the island which in fact acts as its green base. The garden is therefore just a plinth for the house, a soft cushion for a precious stone.

The organization of the internal spaces responds to the family's particular characteristics, needs and passions. It is an 'upside-down' arrangement, with the living room upstairs and

a basement that functions like an attic. The heart of the dwelling is an open, loft-like platform on the first floor. The panorama window that dominates most of the gently inclined wall frames the view of the distant city, bringing it into focus like a strikingly sharp photograph. The importance of the view is further emphasized by the architect's use of colour: all of the walls, ceiling and the epoxy floor are grey, in stark contrast to the green surroundings. The living room, kitchen and dining area are indicated only by the furniture elements, which include a central bright orange kitchen block and low circular and orthogonal concrete walls around staircase openings, which have the effect of freestanding sculptures.

The more private areas like bedrooms and bathrooms are situated on the ground floor and orientated towards the garden, while the basement contains a children's play area, a fitness room and a home cinema. The circulation within the house reflects another family characteristic, respect for the individuality of each member. The two teenage children and their much younger brother enjoy a measure of autonomy, with their own entrance and a choice of circulation routes that may or may not intersect with the parent's areas.

Once again Don Murphy has demonstrated his ability to transcend typical Dutch conditions – this time the stereotypical ideas of suburban living. To be sure, SODAE-House is not about perfection; it is not about the 'cosiness' or about the 'standard' relation between site, garage, house and garden. It is an experiment that provokes and leaves no room for neutral reactions. 'Is that a house?' is the most common question posed by intrigued passers by. Yes, it definitely is. It's a radical but homey place for an unusual family with three children and four dogs. It is a house with a very particular view. ←

## Don Murphy's Sodae House, Amstelveen

NETHERLANDS — TEXT: MAJA VARDJAN, PHOTOGRAPHY: JERDEN MUSCH

