



From left:
a corridor in The Life
House; a valley between
Tregaron and Llanbister
in Mid Wales

FIRST PERSON, FAR FLUNG

Wales

A house, and little else, drew a writer on a journey
partway across the world

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The drive from London to the pastoral fringes of Llanbister, a village in Radnorshire, in Mid Wales, had taken longer than anticipated, and it was well after dark when we arrived at The Life House. Though a warm light glowed from its windows, its angular mass projected a certain brooding quality against the night sky. As I busied myself shuttling our luggage and provisions from the car to the foyer, my wife, Belinda, went in to have a look around. When she met me in the entryway, it was with an odd smile and an excitement that her eyes could not quite contain.

The walls of the entryway and the adjacent corridor were built of pale, cream-colored brick, which imbued the space with an airy lightness. Pulling off my shoes, I stepped onto the terrazzo floor. Heated from beneath, it was warm underfoot, a delightfully tactile welcome on a winter night. Opening a door down the corridor to the right, I discovered a

bedroom as pleasingly spare as a monk's cell, albeit a monk's cell outfitted with a bewilderingly complex hi-fi. Behind a second door, the kitchen, where, admiring its matte metal counters and sleek appliances, I mulled the possibilities for our first supper.

I followed the corridor to the end, where it intersected with another. This one, with black brick walls, was gently illuminated at intervals by spotlights in the ceiling. In the near darkness, I became sharply aware of the house's silence and felt suddenly alone. Although the reason still eludes me, the sight of a plain wooden door at the corridor's end left me transfixed, a strange wave of emotion rising in my chest. I remained there for a moment, and continued on. To the left, a bedroom outfitted with a bathtub set into a long terrazzo pedestal; to the right, another, with a small library of books clad in identical silver-gray bindings. Behind the door at the corridor's end was a narrow, high-ceilinged

room built entirely of black brick and in its floor, a slate plaque engraved with a passage from Pascal's *Pensées*: "All men's miseries derive from not being able to sit in a quiet room alone." I considered this, reflecting on the origins of our journey, which was unusual in the respect that a vacation house, rather than the surrounding area, had been the sole motive for a pilgrimage partway around the world.

In a way, it had begun almost a decade ago, at a bookshop in San Francisco, where I came across *A Week at the Airport*, a slender volume by the Swiss writer Alain de Botton. The product of a weeklong residency at Heathrow, the book explored everything from the prosaic inner workings of one of the world's largest transit hubs to the gulf between commonly held fantasies about travel and the psychological and practical realities that so often thwart their fulfillment.



I was enchanted by de Botton’s prose and by his ability to draw such keen insights into the human condition from subjects as seemingly mundane as an airport hotel’s room-service menu or the moment of reunion with one’s belongings at a baggage carousel. Working my way through his bibliography—from novels to essays to philosophical self-help guides—it occurred to me that if books are a kind of temporary housing for the mind, it was in the pages of de Botton’s that I preferred to live. Imagine my curiosity, then, upon learning that de Botton had been busy building houses of another sort entirely.

After the 2006 publication of *The Architecture of Happiness*, which examines the ways in which buildings shape and reflect our moods and identities, de Botton set out to address what he viewed as a deficit in Britain’s architectural landscape. While the U.K. had its share of great modern houses, he observed, most of them were privately

owned and inaccessible to the public. In 2007, de Botton founded Living Architecture, a nonprofit organization that commissions distinguished architects to design houses for specific sites and rents them to vacationers. The hope, de Botton wrote, “is that a holiday in a Living Architecture house will, in a modest but determined way, help to change the debate about what sort of houses we want to live in.”

In short order, the organization debuted *The Balancing Barn*, a dramatically cantilevered structure in Suffolk designed by the Dutch firm MVRDV; *The Shingle House* in Kent, a modernist take on a traditional Dungeness fisherman’s cottage by the Scottish practice NORD; and *A House for Essex*, an exuberant homage to wayside chapels by the English artist Grayson Perry and London-based FAT Architecture. I became especially intrigued by one work in progress: *The Life House*,

From left:
a view of the reading
bedroom at dusk; the
music bedroom

which grew out of a close collaboration between de Botton and the British architect John Pawson.

Pawson’s objective was “to create a modern, secular retreat, where guests can experience the benefits of introspection, solitude and immersion in nature.” To that end, the house would feature two spaces for contemplation, one outdoors, the other in a chamber recessed into a hillside. Each of its three bedrooms, meanwhile, would encourage guests to focus on a particular activity—listening to music, reading, or bathing.

From the outset, Pawson was drawn to the site’s remoteness, which was fitting for a house whose clear division between private and communal space was inspired in part by Benedictine monastic architecture. Somewhat ironically, the Welsh landscape was once peppered with Benedictine monasteries, which, apart from its castles, were the most

splendid buildings of medieval Wales. Tragically, Henry VIII reduced these architectural wonders to rubble in the course of his campaign against the Catholic church.

The idea of a retreat and an itinerary—or anti-itinerary—consisting of nothing more than a week of quiet reflection, appealed to me immensely. I followed news of the house’s construction with interest and not long after it opened to the public, booked a weeklong stay in February. That the U.K.’s weather was guaranteed to be disagreeable was not really a concern, as the trip had little to do with sightseeing in the traditional sense.

On the first morning, I woke in silence in the bathing bedroom, which we’d chosen by unanimous vote.

Clockwise from top left: a slate plaque inscribed with a passage from Pascal’s *Pensées*; the bathing bedroom; a selection of books in the reading bedroom; the living room

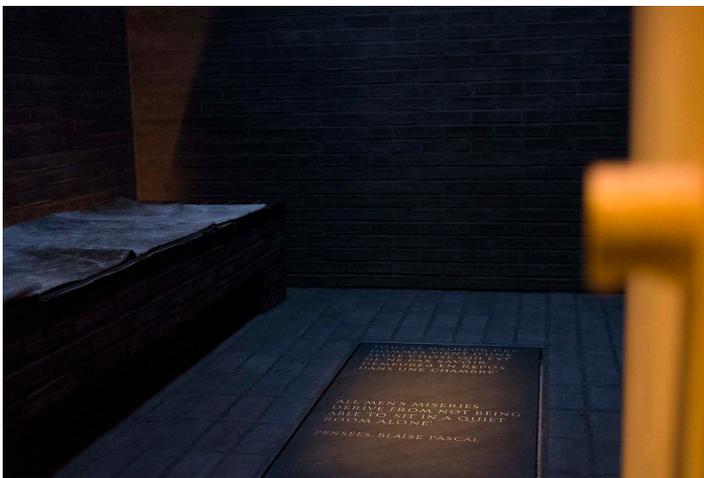
Taking a seat on the terrazzo platform, I peered out at our new surroundings: a broad, undulating valley, which even in midwinter was a splendor of vividest green. The birches beside the house were bare, but the grass was high and lush, and in the field beyond the fence, a dozen sheep

picked their way about on spindly legs. My wife was fast asleep, so I tiptoed to the kitchen to make a pot of tea. Gazing into the living room as I drank, I was struck with the peculiar feeling that I wasn’t really inside a house but rather inside a kind of perfect image. There was something about the proportions of the space, its substance and sparseness, and the way the light refracted gauzily off the pale bricks and the wood and the terrazzo that felt utterly, inscrutably

right. I suppose I was beginning to grasp why Pawson—whose oeuvre encompasses everything from a Cistercian abbey in the Czech Republic to private homes in Mallorca and Saint-Tropez to utilitarian objects like pots and pans and crockery—is regarded as a godfather figure by many in the field of contemporary minimalist design.

I went to investigate the music bedroom’s elaborate hi-fi and curated assortment of compact discs, which included works by Ornette Coleman, Björk, and John Cale, the latter a Welshman, born in the village of Garnant in the Amman Valley. In the pale morning light, the room felt strangely still. I dropped the R&B artist Frank Ocean’s debut album, *Channel Orange*, into the player, and took a seat at the edge of the simple wooden platform bed. The stereo was

“I was struck with the peculiar feeling that I wasn’t really inside a house but rather inside a kind of perfect image.”



From top: the author's wife, on the way to the eastern rim of the valley; the black brick exterior of The Life House, a striking contrast to its almost ephemerally pale interior

incredible, the sound so clear and deep it was almost palpable, but I don't think it entirely explains the tears that rolled down my face as the singer lit up his falsetto on the second track. This sort of thing happens so infrequently that I can remember with specificity every previous episode, of which there had been precisely two. First, 27 years ago in a chapel in Ohio when my friend Demian Austin—who, I would later come to appreciate, is one of the world's great lyrical trombonists—played his solo in the *Tuba Mirum* of Mozart's *Requiem*. And again, seven years ago, in the crypt of the Peterskirche in Vienna, as the Ecuadorian pianist Jonathan Floril played the opening bars of Mozart's *Sonata No. 11*. And now, Frank Ocean, in a house in Wales.

My wife was awake by this point and, after having a bite to eat, suited up for the weather—cold and gray with a fine, misting drizzle—and headed into the valley for a walk. Having left behind a classroom full of first-graders, she was ready for a spot of solitude herself.

It seemed a good time for a bath, and a read. Rather than treating them as separate disciplines, I combined the two. Splashing around with one of the house's artfully bound volumes—Teju Cole's *Open City*, perhaps, or Aristotle's *Ethics*—seemed risky, so I took my own



“At the crest of the hill, a second valley came into view, vast and verdant as the last.”

copy of Bruce Chatwin's *In Patagonia*. Chatwin seemed particularly apt for The Life House. In the early 1980s, the writer, whose father had served in the Royal Navy, commissioned John Pawson to design an apartment as spare as a ship's cabin. Before leaving for Wales, I wrote to Pawson and asked about the experience. “I remember getting excited when I received a letter from him, after the work was finished,” Pawson replied. “Bruce was away traveling, and I thought I was going to open the envelope to

find wonderful descriptions of exotic experiences or praise for my work, but it was simply an instruction to fix a dripping tap.”

Outside, the wind picked up and the mists doubled their pace. I thought of my wife out in the elements and was grateful for the shelter, a sentiment, I imagined, identical to the one shared on inclement days by Wales's earliest known human settlers, a band of Neanderthals who occupied a cave 100 miles north of Llanbister, on the outskirts of Bontnewydd,

Gwynedd, some 230,000 years ago. Happily submerged, gazing at the mists marching down the valley through impregnable triple-glazed windows, I recalled a passage in *The Architecture of Happiness*. “Belief in the significance of architecture,” writes de Botton, “is premised on the notion that we are, for better or for worse, different people in different places—and on the conviction that it is architecture's task to render vivid to us who we might ideally be.” Who might I become, I wondered, were I to remain in The Life House



“Who might I become, I wondered, were I to remain in The Life House for an extended period?”

for an extended period? A calmer, more collected version of myself, perhaps; more reflective, less prone to distraction, though possibly more susceptible to the effects of popular music; someone easily mesmerized by the subtle imperfections of a handmade coal-tinted brick or the quiet ping of a Miele magnetic induction range.

Late the following morning, we set off by car for the town of Tregaron, our only such outing of the week. An acquaintance had recommended a restaurant there, Y Talbot, whose chef was a protégé of the famed Marco Pierre White.

Ducking in from a downpour, we were delighted to find that our hosts had saved us a table by the huge stone hearth, where a fire glowed intensely. After an edifying meal of dill-and-lemon-cured salmon, a Welsh cheddar toastie, and a roast fillet of cod, I only half-facetiously suggested spending the afternoon loitering about town and

Above: one of The Life House's skylights

circling back to Y Talbot for dinner. My wife negated the idea. Tregaron was nice, she said, but she wanted nothing more than to be back at the house.

On our final day, my wife took me to see what lay beyond the eastern rim of the valley where she had walked on the first morning. We set out in a driving rain, a buffeting wind from the west at our backs. A stream ran along the valley floor, and on its banks, in a copse of oak and alder, a lone black ram with spiraled horns nibbled at the lichen growing on a fence post. Following the road upward, we heard a rustle and spotted the swaying tail feathers of a pheasant creeping in the shadows of the hedgerow.

At the crest of the hill, a second valley came into view, vast and verdant as

the last. Perhaps a mile down the road was a cluster of buildings, and among them one that appeared to be an inn. The thought of a pint was appealing, but with the wind blowing a fury and the rain turning to ice as the temperature plummeted, it was time to retreat, half walking, half running all the way to the house, shrieking as the hail stung our faces.

After a steaming shower, I withdrew to the contemplation chamber. Closing the door behind me, I listened to the quiet and felt the heat passing from the black bricks to the soles of my feet. Lying on a bench, I covered myself with a ponyskin blanket. And as

I lay there, a curious thing happened: Nothing. No thoughts. Just warmth and silence, the sensation of the weight of my body, the sound of my breath, and through a narrow skylight above, one cloud after another racing by on the wind. ☺

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