AKT MAGAZINE

a kind tribute

issue VI



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COUNRTYSIDE DWELLING

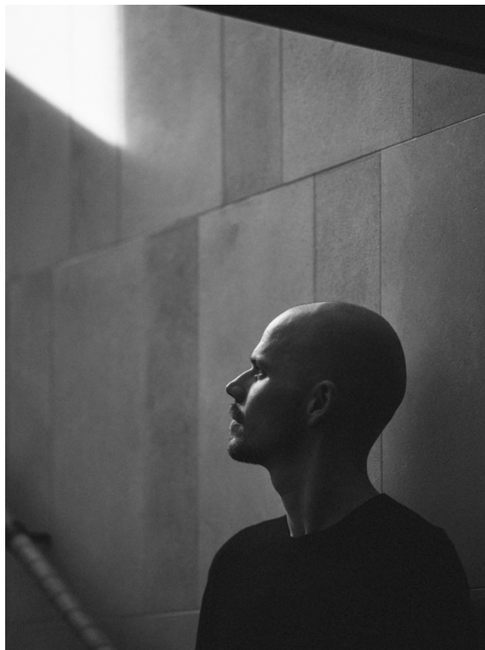
Behind the timeless ambience of this guest house in the south of England is a considered design process. Architect Andy Kerstens retraces his methods for crafting an elevated welcome and an atmosphere that inspires new traditions.

WORDS BY LAKEISHA GOEDLUCK









For the last 10 years, Belgian architect Andy Kerstens has honed the identity of his eponymous studio in the same way he has conscientiously approached each project – with a respect for timelessness and an unwavering commitment to craftsmanship. Often opting for natural materials and routinely paying homage to Japanese design tendencies, there's a purity to Kerstens' work that, though elevated, is still wholly welcoming. An expert in curating adaptable spaces to be lived in, his latest endeavour took him to a scenic valley in the British countryside to transform a guest house on a rural estate into a place where tradition is preserved yet ever-changing.

When you were first asked to work on this space, what were your initial ideas?

We were approached in 2019 and the raw, built construction was already there. It's in a rural area of the UK where there were a lot of planning regulations to protect the heritage of the region. These constraints shaped the architectural vocabulary, from the terracotta roof tiles to the traditional stone brickwork to the modestly proportioned windows that filter light in a particular, almost cinematic way.

The building levels were lower than the standards we're accustomed to because of the restrictions. We wanted to embrace the ceiling heights, so we brought certain elements into the interior to explore the verticality. We opted for stone and timber columns, slender millwork accents and bespoke joinery battens to subtly elongate the perception of space while maintaining a feeling of intimacy. The wooden cladding on the ceiling also emphasises the homely atmosphere.

When embarking on a project like this, where the space is in its foundational stage, what's your creative process?

We have discussions with the client and then we create an abstract mood board. The initial focus is on abstract images, so light, texture and atmosphere. Afterwards, we deliver architectural and interior images to give greater direction to the project. In tandem with that, we create a material-based mood board for inspiration and then the first sketches are created.

We then work on 3D renderings. Our approach is quite atypical because we go into detail at an early stage. We'll look at handles, for example, and use the 3D printer in our office to produce those elements to check aspects like whether it needs to be bigger or if it's pleasant to touch on a human level. Together with the visuals, we present this to the client as the first concept design.

You've used quite a neutral, soft colour palette here. How does this inform the composition?

We always want to create something timeless. When you work with interiors, I think it's important to provide space for the client to add personality over the years. An interior is like a piece of furniture in that it should wear over time and improve. You have to allow for change. For us, atmospheric qualities and sensory experiences ask for a more minimal interior aesthetic, so more attention can be paid to detail. It's not always visible in photos, but we'll use a particular stone and finish it in four different ways. In that way, you're able to see how daylight affects certain textures. It's touches like these that affect the human emotion within an interior, which is important.

Are there particular finishes you tend to lean towards more than others?

Stone and wood are always the base materials that we return to. For this particular project, we sourced limestone with fossil remnants within it from the UK. The irregularities in colour nicely reflected the surrounding countryside. The pink undertone of the limestone also suited the exterior, which features terracotta tiling. We used deeply brushed oak to add warmth and bronze accents for contrast while still blending in with the rest of the interior. Elsewhere, the kitchen island with a walnut base stands out in comparison to the rest of the design.

Speaking of the kitchen island, your studio is known for producing standout pieces. Can you talk through the craftsmanship process behind this?

In terms of the kitchen island, we wanted to take an inverted approach to the design. The idea was that instead of a kitchen island with an extended table piece, we would create a base table and add functionality to it. We wanted to deliver a table made from dark walnut with stools around it for gathering. There's a monolithic limestone slab on top of it with a sink in it. This is completely carved out with cleft edges at the outer sides to give a truly countryside feel and reflect the stone brickwork of the facade. Therefore, when you're looking at it from the living area, the first impression isn't that it's a kitchen island. There's also a nod to Japanese culture here, where the dining itself is close to the cooking. We wanted to create a modern translation of certain heritage elements without exactly replicating tradition.

You've managed to respect tradition by honouring the small windows, but still creating a harmonious synergy between natural and artificial light. How have you achieved this?

We always initially look at how daylight affects the space and the orientation of the house because the primary light source is the most beautiful one. Then, we'll decide which spaces need artificial light and for what purposes. We split this lighting into two categories. Architectural lighting that is purely functional, which we conceal as much as possible, so it doesn't interfere with the design aesthetic. The other is additional light that can be more decorative, like wall sconces or a pendant, as well as floor lamps and table lights that are movable. We prefer to go with vintage pieces to add extra soul. The programming behind the lighting is also essential, as you can create thousands of ambience settings within a room with the same fixtures. We want the lights to work like a smart home system that adapts to the inhabitants' needs.

In terms of the textile window coverings and other fixed upholstery, what were your considerations there?

When you're in the initial stages of building a home, working with foundational materials like stone and wood, it's sometimes difficult to imagine how cosy it can become once additional furnishings have been added. We chose natural linens for the curtains, again to allow more light through. We mainly focused on natural fibres, particularly wool and bouclé, to exemplify that feeling of countryside living. The fabrics don't dominate, but they anchor. Essentially, they give structure to the atmosphere, just as much as the architectural details do.





