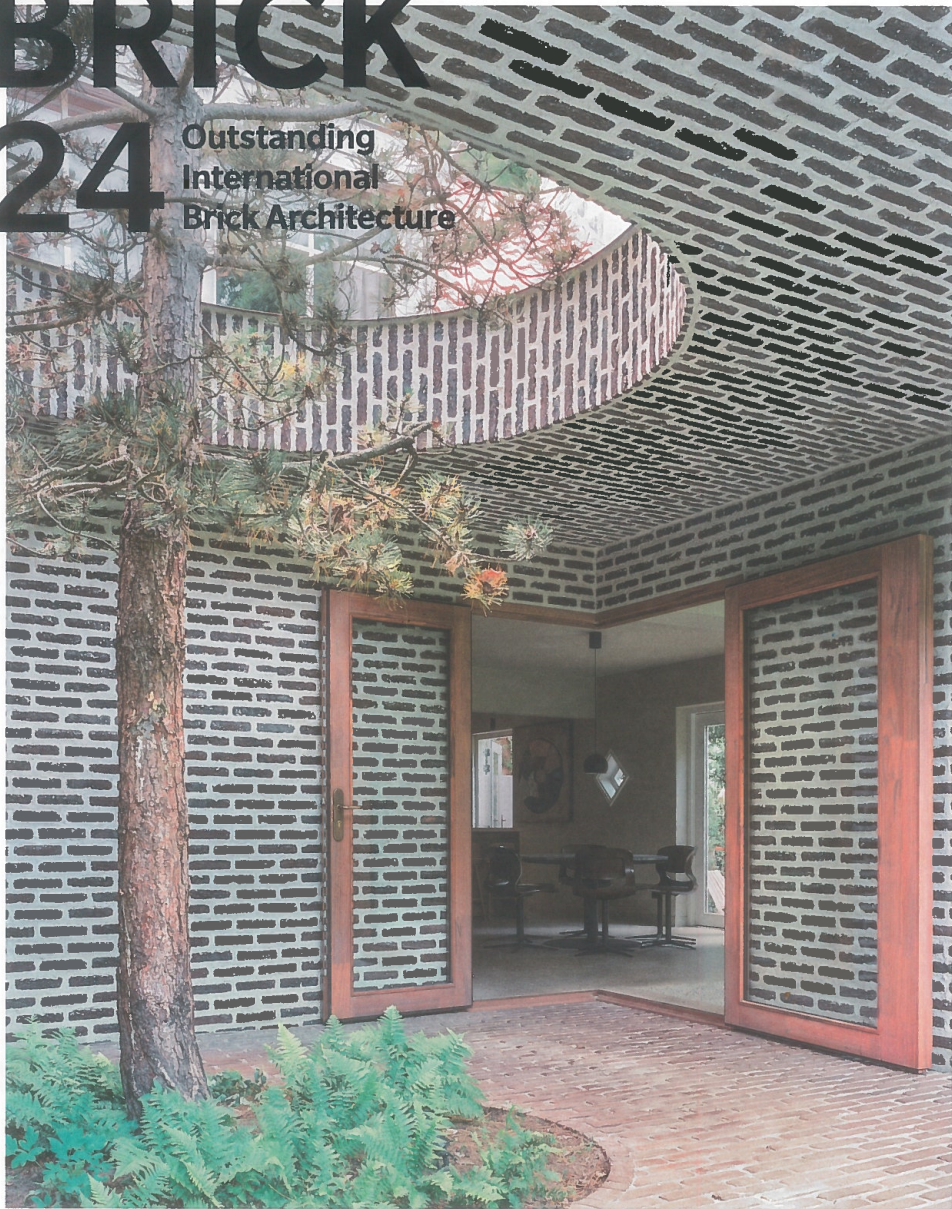


# BRICK

# 24

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PETER VAN ASSCHE

## Tradition Meets Innovation: The Contradictory Nature of Home Design



Peter van Assche

Living can be perceived as a traditional activity. For most people, it is a sanctuary of predictability and safety within our tumultuous world. It is a place where we seek solace from the chaos outside, favoring the expected over the unexpected. Our homes become bubbles, preserving us in a state of slowness, shielded from the rapid shifts of the external world. Yet, it is precisely within this conservative haven that a fascinating contradiction emerges: Home design also serves as a playground for innovation and experimentation.

The sense of security and endurance that brick houses exude is a testament to their traditional nature. Throughout history, safety regulations have played a significant role in shaping the architectural choices of homeowners. The aftermath of the Great Fire of London in 1666 led to regulations that prescribed brick as the primary building material for its resilience and ability to withstand the ravages of fire. This demonstrates how the conservative nature of living can influence the very fabric of our homes, with safety concerns dictating design choices for generations.

The demographics have changed radically over the past decades, and the traditional family, once the nucleus of our society, has been replaced by a rich range of household structures. Alongside singles and single-parent families, we find communities, divorced parents or seniors choosing to live together. The commercial housing market partly responds to the changing demographics with flowery-sounding housing concepts such as "Friends Apartments," "Tiny Lofts," "Urban Millennial Flats" or "Co-living Condos." However, many of these are often just rebranded traditional typologies. Despite our shifting society, the dominant typology of commercial family housing has remained relatively unchanged over the years. It continues to dominate the architectural landscape. Perhaps it is nostalgia that clings to these familiar designs, or maybe it is the inherent resistance to change within our personal sanctuaries.

Paradoxically, as traditional as living may be, it is within the domain of private homes that we witness the early sparks of experimentation. Unlike large-scale public buildings, private homeowners possess the freedom to challenge conventions and embrace new ideas. The scale of a single home provides the perfect canvas to disrupt conventional expectations of living. Before innovations become commonplace, they are often tried, tested and proven in projects where experiment is possible: in the ambitious undertakings of private home projects.

**Within this book, we find projects that embody this potential for transformative material change.**

A prime example of an innovation that has now become widely accepted is the realization of energy-efficient buildings. The first energy net-zero building, likely a private home, revolutionized the way we think about energy consumption in buildings. Such pioneering experiments have paved the way for eco-conscious design principles that seek harmony with our environment. We now observe, after decades of evolution, that this energy efficiency is being incorporated into building regulations, making it a fundamental requirement.

Similarly, the use of new materials has been another avenue for experimentation. Homeowners have taken substances like hempcrete or rammed earth from obscurity to mainstream construction. These developments transcend mere technical innovations; they become cultural paradigm shifts with the potential to influence society as a whole.

Within this book, we find projects that embody this potential for transformative material change. Take, for instance, the Intermediate House by Equipo

de Arquitectura in Paraguay. This remarkable project introduces typological innovation through the use of compressed earth blocks, redefining the architectural vocabulary in a sustainable and culturally resonant manner. Another compelling example is the House PMJ 2.0 by An Schoenmaekers, where an existing structure, deemed uninhabitable, has been artfully revived to embrace its sustainable character. The project serves as a perfect illustration of the RetroFirst campaign motto of the UK *Architects' Journal*: "The greenest building is the one that already exists."

When homes become laboratories of innovation, they possess the power to catalyze societal change. In an era marked by climate catastrophes, demographic shifts and the demand for a circular economy, the ways we design and build must undergo a profound revolution. This revolution is, as EU president Ursula von der Leyen stated, "not just an environmental or economic project: it needs to be a new cultural project." Architects and designers are the harbingers of hope in this transformative landscape, as they are trained to understand and express the cultural significance of almost any innovation through design.

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Cultural paradigm shifts are not about preserving the status quo with superficial adjustments. They are about offering radically new expressions



for the foundations of living that we need in the present and the future. Private innovations provide answers to the questions that our society, as a collective, raises. Questions that leave traditional construction practices empty-handed. How do we provide affordable housing in the city? Can we imagine buildings that adapt to the dynamics of our lives? How do we design living spaces for both humans and non-humans?

The experimental nature of home design grants architects the freedom to envision a better world. They have the unique opportunity to redefine the very nature of living. It is through this that architects can illuminate the path to a more resilient, compassionate and regenerative society.





