



From the garden, the house resembles an inverted pyramid, transitioning from a triangular footprint to a rectangular crown; landscape design by Entorno. For an exclusive look inside the house by BIG-Bjarke Ingels Group, pick up an AD October 2019 issue on your local newsstand.

AD REVEALS THE FIRST PRIVATE HOUSE DESIGNED BY ARCHITECT BJARKE INGELS

Danish superstar bjarke ingels has designed some of the world's most talked-about skyscrapers, stadiums, museums, and more. Now, thanks to an intrepid client, the architect unveils his first private house

SAM COCHRAN
SEPTEMBER 04, 2019

For many of the greatest architects of the last century, a private house was their big break. The 1964 home that Robert Venturi built for his mother in the Philadelphia suburbs launched his career and ushered in the postmodern movement. Charles Gwathmey's first project was a 1967 Long Island residence for his parents, who gave him carte blanche to create the Modernist marvel. And the Santa Monica house that [Frank Gehry](#) renovated for his own family in 1978 catapulted him to celebrity while introducing the Deconstructivist hallmarks of his later blockbusters. In the case of these talents and more—Philip Johnson, [Elizabeth Diller](#) and Ricardo Scofidio, Michael Graves, [Lina Bo Bardi](#)—private houses served as early laboratories and calling cards. Bjarke Ingels has forged an entirely different path. After founding his own firm, [BIG-Bjarke Ingels Group](#), in 2005, the

Danish-born architect garnered international attention for two Copenhagen apartment complexes, one a man-made mountain, the other a giant figure eight, with bike lanes that rise up from the ground level to the 10th floor. By the time he hit 40, in 2014, he had already undertaken the sorts of commissions that Pritzker Prize-winners have waited lifetimes to tackle—towers, cultural centers, city parks, you name it. But he had never built a house. 'In architecture you can quickly become specialized,' reflects Ingels during a visit to his vast Brooklyn office, where young designers can be seen traversing the floor on scooters. (The firm now employs 540 people, with additional offices in London, Barcelona, and Copenhagen, and some 80 current projects that include headquarters for Google and storm protection for Lower Manhattan.) 'If you do one skyscraper, you are a skyscraper

expert. If you do one hospital, you are a hospital expert. And then you become that architect. Because we had never done a private house, no one asked.”

That is, until a design-savvy entrepreneur with business in Denmark cold-called BIG hoping to commission, as Ingels suggests, a Danish house in Latin America. Says the client, “I had always been attracted to Scandinavia’s simple, minimal, but extremely cozy design. Bjarke was an obvious choice. His work has a truly functional side to it, as opposed to other famous architects who privilege form over function.”



At a Latin American house designed by BIG–Bjarke Ingels Group, a central skylit stair creates a kind of internal fault line.

Practicality, the client stresses, was especially important, given that “the plot of land was not an easy one.” Long and wedge-shaped, with houses on either side, and a steep drop into a forested gorge, the site demanded innovative solutions—all the more so since two mature palm trees already inhabiting the lot needed to be preserved. Ingels was game. “What you think would be the ideal situation but is actually the worst situation is a complete tabula rasa,” he says. “Here there were so many constraints. Those larger-than-life influences provide character.”

An initial design for a series of orthogonal volumes was scrapped due to a miscommunication about building restrictions—all for the best. When Ingels started from scratch, he prioritized the client’s request for a lap pool. Squeezing a 50-meter one onto the property at a diagonal, Ingels divided the land into two triangular parcels, one for the house and one for the garden. That determined the irregular form of the structure, which rises from a triangular base to a rectangular roof, yielding an inverted pyramid with a hyperbolic paraboloid facing the garden. (Ingels tested the complex geometry in models, carving a block of foam with hot wire.) To execute that in glass

would have cost a fortune, so he opted for concrete, cast in situ, with rectangular window walls set back on each floor to create terraces. “In many ways the house is in the spirit of modernism—simple lines, simple materials, rooms as regular as possible—but with the severe influence of one major decision,” says Ingels, referring to the diagonal pool, which he compares to a natural obstruction like a boulder or a creek. “We weren’t guaranteed that it was going to be a great house, but we arrived at something full of character.”

Inside and out, he has choreographed a range of thoughtful experiences. The three terraces frame unique views—all garden at the bottom, all gorge at the top. A single, straight-shot staircase, meanwhile, cleaves the interiors in half, like a fault line, allowing him to split each of the top two stories into staggered planes. (Though the house has three floors, it feels like there are five levels, not counting the basement.) “You hardly notice, but the stair is always bridging these changes,” says Ingels, noting that these slight shifts create varied ceiling heights and a greater sense of transparency between floors. “You end up with a house that has three-dimensional complexity.”

In front, visitors enter through a pulled-up corner of the otherwise monolithic façade, stepping past the pivoting glass door into the middle level, which contains the living and dining areas. (Cars, meanwhile, can descend by lift into a basement garage that adjoins a wine cellar and tasting room.) The kitchen, two guest rooms, and staff quarters are all concentrated within an oak-clad volume inside the house, allowing the three floors to function as one continuous room, with the master suite up top. Each morning the client and his partner descend to the garden level, working out in the gym and yoga room, which look out onto the pool, a black-granite strip that cuts beneath a corner of the roofline and nestles in the house at one end.

Ingels fans, of whom there are now some 645,000 on Instagram—unheard-of for an architect—might have expected a ski slope on the roof, as in his [Copenhill waste-treatment facility](#), or a pile of blocks, like his Lego House, or even an entirely subterranean lair, like his [M/S Maritime Museum of Denmark](#). The architect’s signature, however, has never been a style but a strategy, one that he is now applying to other private houses, in Denmark and New Jersey. “Fundamentally I trust the process,” explains Ingels, his leg swung over an armrest with trademark swagger. “I trust that if you nail down certain parameters, without knowing what the final result will be, you can make great decisions and love what happens. Rather than imposing an answer, you set off on a journey confident that you will get there.”