

LAURA MAY TODD

How to Get Away

Cabins, cottages, hideouts and the design of retreat

Lannoo

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Introduction

The Design of Retreat

The Design of Retreat

When I was a child, I spent most of my weekends at a small cottage my family owned in the forested wilds of British Columbia, Canada. Most Friday afternoons, both in the hot, dry summer and the harsh deep freeze that is a Prairie winter (we lived in Calgary, Alberta, just past the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, roughly a four-hour drive away), my parents would pack my sister and me into our Windstar minivan and set out westward. There was nothing beautiful about the small house we would arrive at after hours spent weaving through mountain roads. Set in a quiet, remote valley in the Kootenay region, its exterior was clad with cheap aluminium siding, its floors were covered with peeling and yellowed linoleum, and the walls were made of plywood boards printed with a faux timber grain – a classic 1980s look. They were so thin I could hear my sister in the next room breathing as she slept. But it looked out over fluffy juniper bushes and a tangle of crab apple trees – spindly, grey-trunked figures – where we would watch white-tailed deer in the evenings teetering on their back legs to snatch the bitter-tasting fruit, or, if we were lucky, an ambling black bear sniffing for food on its way to or from its winter rest. Just beyond the trees was a field of tall grass scattered with wildflowers, where all day long you could hear the droning of bees, drowned out only by the chorus of crickets that would rise at dusk. If you kept going, the field abruptly stopped at the crest of a hill, where you would enter a pine forest that led down to a lake, a reservoir that meandered all the way to the American border a few hours south.



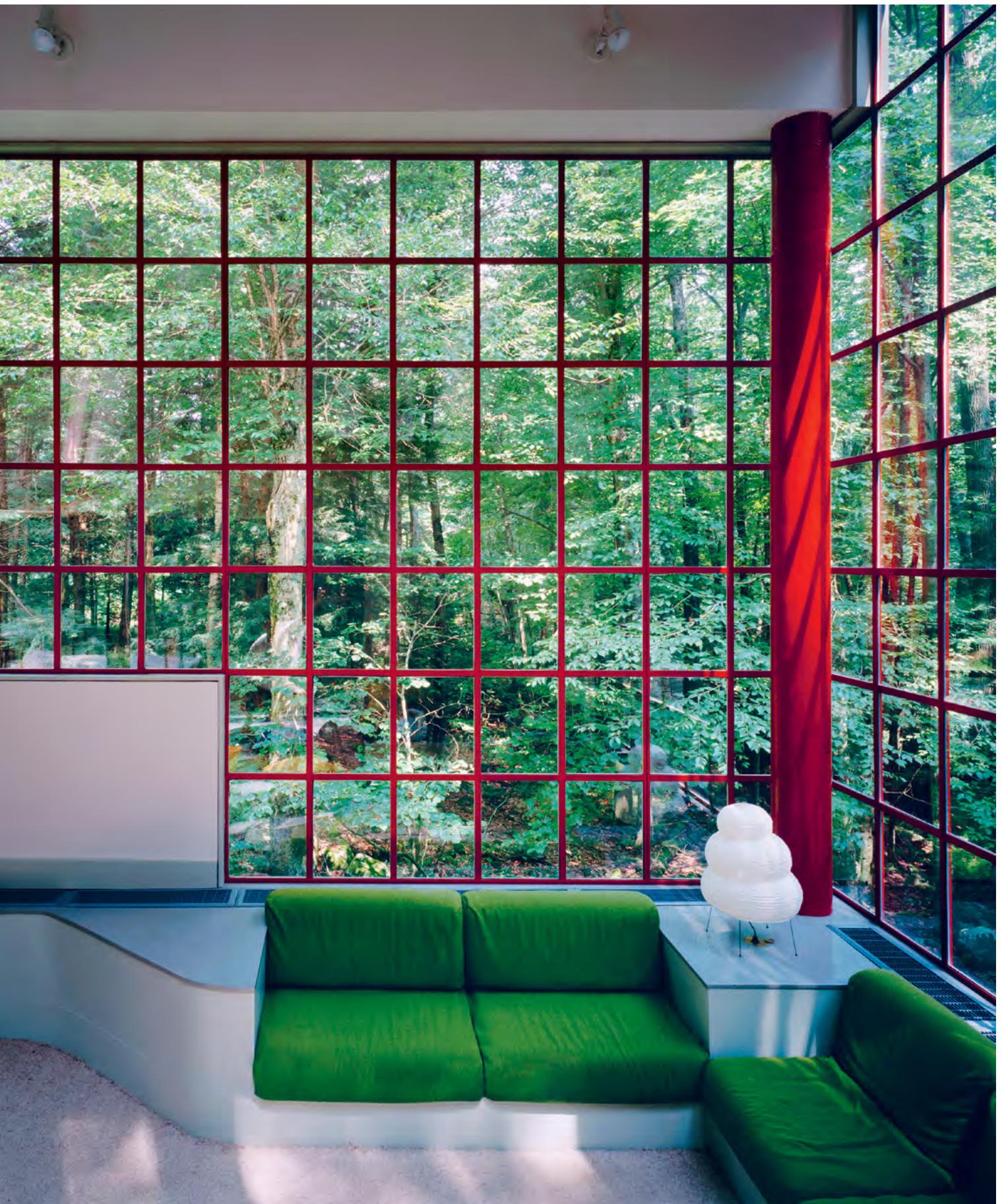




There was nothing special about the house's simple bones, but it was filled with the kind of quotidian souvenirs that give a family home its soul. On the shelves in the small living room, we had arranged our collection of misshapen rocks painted to resemble cars or flowers or frogs. There was a six-point deer antler proudly hung on a wall, which had been shed by one of the stags that frequented the apple trees, a trophy we had found on a walk in the forest one day in late fall. Beside it, there were taxonomic posters of the local fish that my father would pull from the network of rivers that ran nearby: rainbow trout, perch, Dolly Varden (a red-bellied cold water trout inexplicably named for a Dickens character). This is the landscape and its attendant bounty that imprinted on me at an early age, providing the mementoes that shaped my own idea of escape.

As an adult, when I imagine the perfect sanctuary where I would like to disconnect and disappear, my mind conjures a place similar to Forest House in West Cornwall, Connecticut by Peter Bohlin, co-founder of architecture firm Bohlin Cywinski Jackson. The house, a modest family refuge in the middle of a pine forest, was built in 1975 for Bohlin's parents. At the time, it was a quietly impressive architectural statement, a modernist reimagining of the forest cabin, a typology as old as colonial America itself. Rather than playing into the Davy Crockett-esque tropes one may associate with a cabin in the woods, Bohlin worked within the architectural language of his time, masterfully melding the strict tenets of modernism with what is clearly a keen devotion to the surrounding nature and its preservation.







When I first came across pictures of the Forest House, it stirred something within me. It is seductive in a way that only the simplest of designs can be. Slender pilotis hoist the structure aloft, making the home seem as if it's floating above the mossy ground like a ship gliding through the forest – the walkway leading to the front door playing the role of the gangplank. Inside, clean white surfaces and sharp lines guide the eye to the natural treasures outdoors, a sea of pristine pine trees framed by tall industrial-style red-gridded windows. Aesthetically, it is worlds away from the simple cottage I grew up visiting on the weekends, but at its core, it speaks to the same desire to retreat: to completely lose oneself in the depths of nature. I can easily picture myself in the evening sitting on the sofa built into the wall next to the window, the yellow glow of the lights illuminating the house like a celestial orb hovering in the darkness, obscuring the swampy darkness of the woods beyond.

The motivation behind this book, *How To Get Away*, was to discover what exactly that vision of retreat is for some of the most creative and prolific artists and designers working today. Whether that may be their own hideout, or a space they have designed for a client or, in the case of Forest House, for a member of their own family, the notion of escape looks different for everybody. There is something fundamentally out of the ordinary about designing a home for escape. Unlike a primary residence, there is room for flights of fancy: to explore less conventional ways of living that wouldn't fly in the day-to-day.

In these pages, we will travel across the globe to see how those impulses play out. In the Namib Desert in Namibia, we visit an artist-designed house that mimics the local wildlife; in the south of France we peak into a chateau-retreat dreamed up by a prolific designer, while in Lebanon we wander round a stone house built into a mountain. Meanwhile, on both coasts of the United States, we encounter artists who have built their own worlds in wildly different ways.

Whether your idea of retreat is a mud-walled hut in the desert or, like me, a simple cabin in the forest, each designer, artist or homeowner has something in common: once planted, the desire to escape is, put simply, inescapable.

LAURA MAY TODD



Sand & Stone

Even in the most unforgiving of landscapes, one can still find refuge. From the arid deserts of the American West to the rocky ridges of a Lebanese mountain chain, these architects and designers have created inviting oases that brilliantly incorporate their often hostile surroundings.

A Stone Guesthouse Hidden within a Mountain

BHAMDOUN, LAMARTINE VALLEY (LB)
CARL GERGES ARCHITECTS



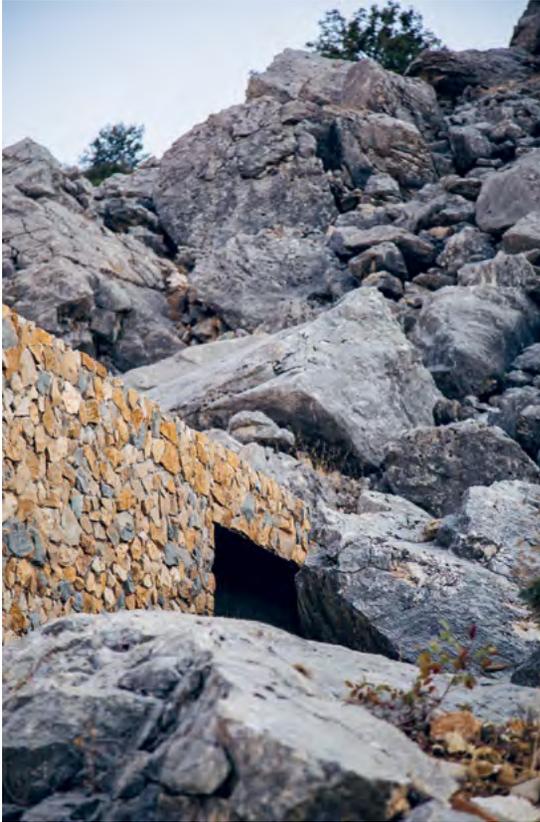
Hidden in the rugged peaks overlooking Lebanon's Lamartine Valley, a vast and remote region straddling the main road to Damascus where Phoenician tombs and ancient rock formations have sat undisturbed for millennia, is this monolithic stone guest house designed by Beirut's Carl Gerges Architects. Created as a mountain retreat within an area known for its fertile vineyards, the house has an imposing facade that gives way to a bright and inviting sanctuary.











Beyond the seemingly severe exterior of roughly hewn grey and yellow limestone boulders is a home perfectly suited for entertaining. Warm natural materials such as reclaimed timber ceiling beams, organically shaped wooden furniture and textiles in the form of thickly woven Berber rugs provide a gentle foil to the harsh surroundings, which are integrated into the design in the form of natural stone interior walls – rendering the structure almost indistinguishable from its landscape.

Gerges turned to traditional North African building techniques for the design of the primary bedroom and bathroom. The cloudy olive-green walls are finished in *tadelakt*, a form of waterproof plaster first used in Morocco over 2,000 years ago that is still common in vernacular building today. The fully glazed wall that extends along the building's perimeter, coupled with the addition of abundant lush greenery within the space, engenders a feeling one is sleeping, bathing and living outdoors.

In a home so geared towards entertaining, the exterior living spaces were naturally given equal attention. A circular sunken fire pit sits at the base of a natural rock formation, creating a dramatic focal point against the backdrop of stone. But the real secret weapon in this home's arsenal of features perfectly envisioned for entertaining is the underground tunnel that leads to a cavernous wine cellar, moodily lit from above by a single skylight, and holding barrel upon barrel of locally harvested wine.



