

# SITE SPECIFIC

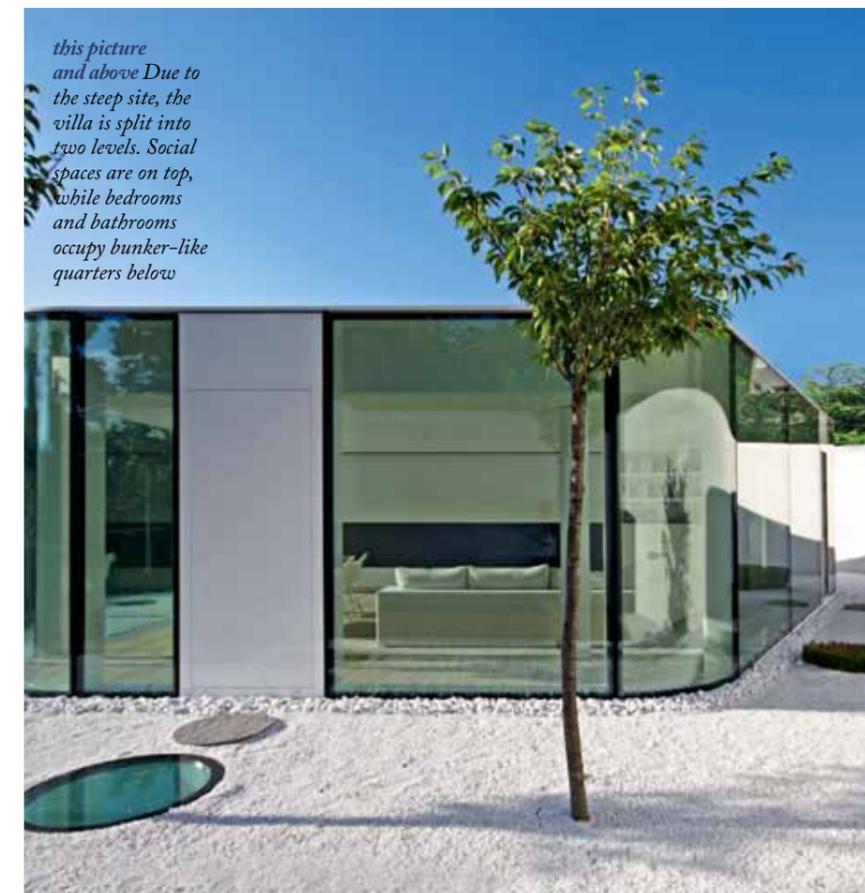
*Nicoletta Messina's home near Lake Lugano in Switzerland was shaped entirely by the topography of the land, with a unique glass-wrapped pavilion at the heart of its design*

*Words Sarah Baldwin*

*this picture  
The architect's savvy use of highly-efficient laminated, insulating glass and rainwater collection tanks ensures the house has great eco credentials*



*this picture  
and above Due to the steep site, the villa is split into two levels. Social spaces are on top, while bedrooms and bathrooms occupy bunker-like quarters below*





**C**arte blanche is how homeowner Nicoletta Messina describes the brief she gave her architect, Jacopo Mascheroni from JM Architecture (+39 02 331 4691; jma.it). Nicoletta bought the empty plot near Lake Lugano in Switzerland with few fixed design ideas in mind; she was just looking for a family home for herself and her children, Olivier, 8, and Mia, 4. She simply told the practice how many bedrooms she needed, and that she wanted an open-plan kitchen, but no en-suite bathrooms. There was one other thing, too; she wanted to make the most of the views.

Mascheroni needed little-more direction – the site itself is steeply sloping, and this was the biggest driver of the design. ‘Rather than trying to level out the land, we decided to work with the gradient and different levels,’ he explains. The topography meant that the villa naturally split into two volumes, and Mascheroni inverted the traditional living-down-bedrooms-up plan, putting the social spaces in an upper-level pavilion to take advantage of the outlook, while encasing the bedrooms in a concrete shell dug into the rock.

It’s the pavilion that’s the show-stopper. With 360° views, the curved, glass structure appears to protrude up and out of the ground, and its flat roof makes it look a little like an over-sized Tupperware container. As well as being shaped by the vistas, its unusual footprint – a bit like a wonky polygon – was also dictated by the site; building regulations stated there was no development allowed within four metres of the boundary line, and the team more-or-less traced this perimeter to give the unusual outline.

Despite the site being the inspiration for the design, Mascheroni is quick to add that the groundwork was one of the most complicated aspects of the build – and attributes a

*below The large sofa in the open-plan living area follows the curves of the glazing and makes the most of the amazing views. The white scheme is offset by a few well-placed touches of black*



*above Almost everything in the house was custom-designed, apart from the Eames DAR plastic armchairs. The 30cm-wide and extra-long Douglas fir floorboards are finished with lye and white soap, which complements the modern look*

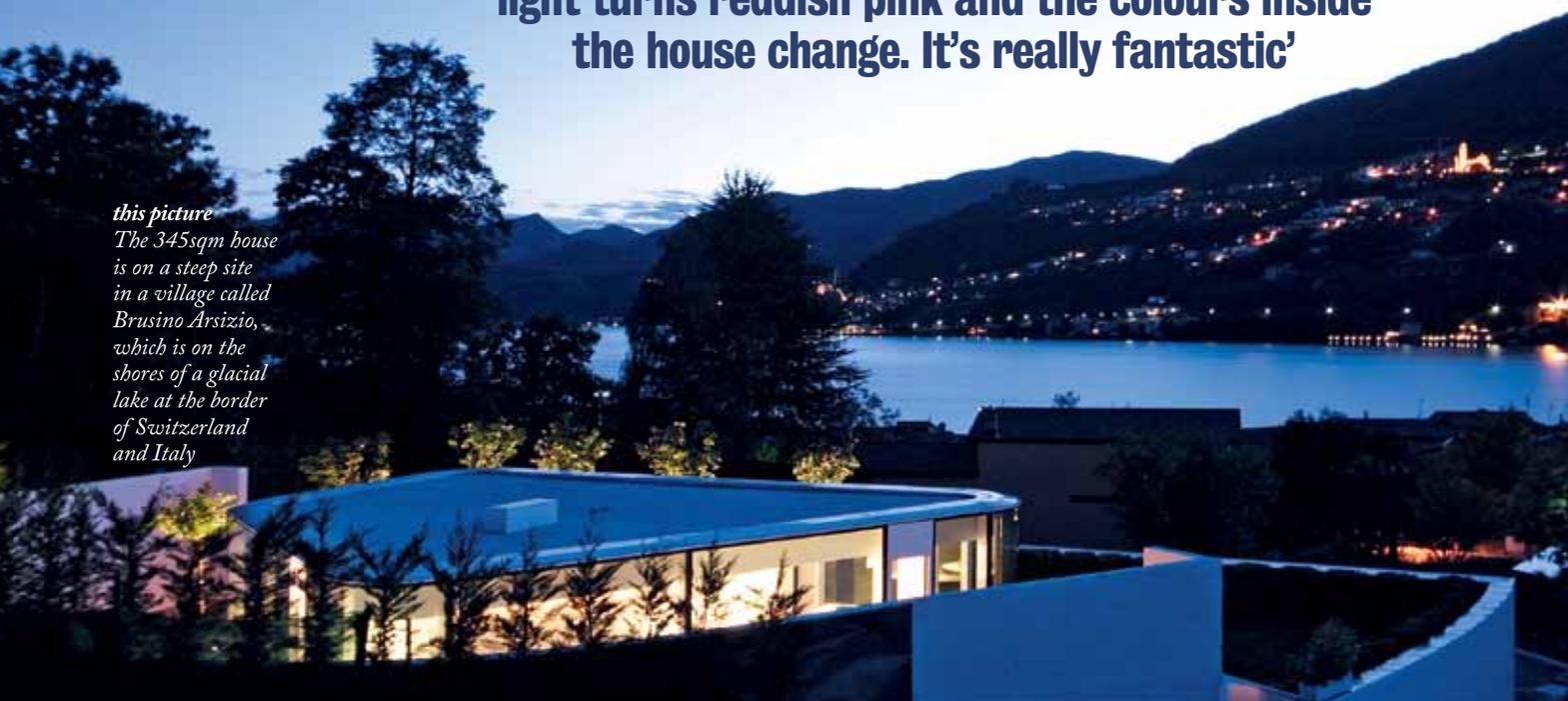
*left and right Storage is hidden behind the clean lines of the kitchen units and recessed within the clever room divider*



## 'Sunset is the best time for me – when the light turns reddish pink and the colours inside the house change. It's really fantastic'

### *this picture*

*The 345sqm house is on a steep site in a village called Brusino Arsizio, which is on the shores of a glacial lake at the border of Switzerland and Italy*



*below The underground level has a larger footprint than the upstairs pavilion. The rooms are sparsely decorated and lit with carefully positioned skylights and spotlights to give the spaces a softer and cosier feel than upstairs*

large portion of the year-and-a-half build time to excavation and levelling, and the construction of the retaining rear wall. Apart from this, it was the frameless glazing in the pavilion that caused the biggest headache; Mascheroni wanted to minimise any visible hardware that would interrupt the views.

Besides making the most of the vistas, Mascheroni's main priority was sustainability; his ethos is always to design with eco principles in mind, which is evident throughout the project. It spreads from simple ideas, such as using the thermal mass of the retaining rear wall on the lower level to reduce the need for additional heating or cooling, to super-fancy devices, like the 85-metre-deep pipes that have been

bored into the cliff-side and form part of a ground source heat pump system. 'This was expensive, but a real investment as bills are now really low,' says Mascheroni. The house also has the latest 5,000-litre rainwater tanks.

Minimalism best describes the interior style; with every room following a pared-back and neutral aesthetic. As with the frameless glazing, the landscape dictated the architect's desire for no solid walls on the upper level. Instead, Mascheroni designed a full-height piece of fitted furniture to sit in the middle of the space and act as a room divider (it also holds the kitchen and an upstairs WC).

The simplicity continues downstairs; the sparsely furnished rooms, lit from above by carefully positioned skylights, have neutral walls and timber floorboards. 'We individually designed every single floor, plank-by-plank,' says Mascheroni. The extra-wide and extra-long Douglas fir boards were sourced from Danish wood-flooring specialist Dinesen (+45 74 552 140; dinesen.com), and designed to avoid ugly joints. 'We used the planks for all the floors, headboards and the bathroom cladding. In the bathrooms, you are surrounded by the smell and feel of wood. It's very cosy and comfortable,' he says.

It was these values that pushed Nicoletta to work with the practice; she'd seen its work in various publications and was inspired by the simplistic philosophy. The house is an ideal family home for Nicoletta, Olivier and Mia, and, although the finish can be called fuss free, the ever-changing landscape that surrounds the property acts as a dynamic backdrop.

Whether it's the moonlight bouncing off the white gravel at night or the play of shadows from the leaves of the trees in the day, the boundaries between inside and out are definitely blurred. 'For me, the best time is at sunset, when the light turns reddish pink and the colours inside the house change,' says Nicoletta. 'It's really fantastic.' **GD**

