



# Reflecting on 100 years of house design

We celebrate 2020 by looking at how architecture of the last 100 years continues to influence house design today — and peek into the design trends emerging right now...



According to the *Collins Dictionary*, contemporary things are ‘modern’ and ‘relate to the present time’ — but how literally should we take that? Does it mean that something that was contemporary last month is no longer contemporary? If something was contemporary a day or two ago, does that mean that today it’s old hat? Where does traditional end and contemporary begin?

It’s all a bit confusing, especially in the world of architecture, where the word ‘contemporary’ gets thrown around in a pretty haphazard way. Most of the time, it’s difficult to know when something really is contemporary, as opposed to just a bit unusual, quirky, experimental or plain odd. And, despite the fact that much has happened in the last century, certain architectural features have endured the test of time – right through from the 1920s – and are still seen as ‘contemporary’ today.

### 1920s architecture

A hundred years ago big shifts were occurring in the world of house design, mostly as a result of the post-war demand for cheap housing, but also due to advances in technology and a group of forward-thinking architects who turned their backs on the frill and froth of Victorian architecture.

“The 1920s was an era of change and progression, when the world was turned on its head by the impact of war. The idea of what constituted a home changed forever,” says Wendy Perring, founder and design director of architectural practice PAD Studio. “The decorative, crafted approach to domestic architecture was no longer viable as labour and materials were scarce and expensive, while the demand for cheap volume housing was high.”

Philippa Lewis, author of *House: British Domestic Architecture*, among other titles, agrees that architecture of the 1920s was the antithesis of the Victorian terrace. “There was a massive housing shortage after the First World War and the government policy was to build ‘Homes for Heroes’ (where housing was subsidised) until 1923,” she says. “These houses were low density and often arranged as cul-de-sacs, with three bedrooms and a bathroom and, if possible a front room and gardens front and back — they would have felt refreshingly modern, especially in terms of plumbing and electricity.”

At the same time that these new requirements for low-cost housing were emerging, the Art Deco movement, which began in France, was becoming influential, offering a more abstracted and minimalist take on the aesthetics pioneered by Art Nouveau and the Arts & Crafts movement before it. Later into the 1920s, Modernist architecture began to emerge, too.

“During the late twenties you get Modernism coming in,” says Philippa Lewis. “This was a belief in lightness and air, and this style favoured ‘sun trap’ Crittall windows that curved around the front of buildings and linear, streamlined forms.”



“Huge architectural advances with manufacturing and materials were filtering into Europe from America,” adds Wendy Perring. “This meant steel frame and reinforced concrete could be used for larger spans, taller buildings and bigger openings.”

With these advances came a desire for homes that offered functionality and a very pure, pared-back architectural form.

“You began to get pioneering architects such as Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius (founder of the Bauhaus movement) and Le Corbusier experimenting with how these materials could be used domestically to achieve spaces that were more open and flooded with natural light,” says Wendy.

De Stijl and Frank Lloyd Wright were other well-known architects of the 1920s, with Lloyd-Wright developing his distinctive ‘Mayan’-style houses, typified by textured blocks of cement.

### The 1920s influence today

One of the most fascinating things about the architecture of the 1920s is the way that so many of the ideas and forms from the time are still used today — particularly the idea of open-plan layouts.

“Women gained the vote in 1918, and the women’s rights movement started to have an influence over the design of contemporary houses,” says Wendy Perring. “Women were liberated from the confines of the kitchen and the familiar order of small, cellular spaces for particular activities became impractical for modern living as space was expensive — rooms had to become multi-functional. This was a huge influence on the way we live in and design homes today.”

“With the decline of live-in cooks, maids and other servants there was a rearrangement of internal spaces and architects would have been looking at these changes and trying to get away from the front parlour,” concurs Philippa Lewis.

And it wasn’t just the fact that domestic roles were slowly changing that was affecting house design in the 1920s — it was the opportunities that were opening up to women outside the home too.

“Women were beginning to study architecture and become more than influencers, the most famous perhaps being the Irish architect Eileen Gray, whose

pioneering home E-1027 in France was groundbreaking in the way that it connected the house to the landscape through its large windows and sliding screens used to sub-divide spaces. Today we talk about ‘bringing the outside in’ and breaking down barriers internally — this started in the 1920s.”

“Clients are still most often driven by the desire for a multi-functional kitchen/dining/living space — a real heart or hub to a home,” says Craig Alexander, chartered architect at Oakwrights.

### Contemporary design, traditional techniques

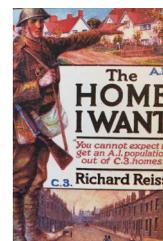
While the term contemporary often conjures up visions of monochrome boxes, oceans of glass, high tech and minimalism, it is important to remember the term means ‘of the moment’. If what’s on-trend right now happens to be building techniques or looks with traditional roots then that whips those things out of the past and into the present.

So what is popular now? Despite the advent of so many new construction techniques and materials, timber frame has grown in popularity, and oak frame has also experienced a renaissance.

“I’m not sure that oak framing will ever really be avant guard or cutting-edge modern,” says Merry Albright from Border Oak. “But its popularity for modern families continues to grow rather than wane, so this is a big indication that it is a contemporary choice and part of the next generation of design.”

Perhaps the enduring appeal of timber has something to do with the way in which it has been adapted to suit modern requirements over the years.

“The revival of oak framing was pioneered by Border Oak founder John Greene in the early 1970s,” says Merry Albright. “To be honest the popularity only ever grew over the past 40 years, and for us this is largely because John has always been very good at continuous innovation and spotting market changes and then adapting oak frame to lead and meet the market. For example, he spotted the potential of SIPs (structural insulated



**ENDURING DESIGN**  
Despite being built between 1949-1951, The Farnsworth House, designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (top), remains distinctly modern in appearance — its huge expanses of glazing, timber floors and terraces still being features high on homeowners’ wish-lists today.

**INSPIRING IDEALS**  
A housing poster (above) has a quotation from Richard Reiss, a British Liberal Party politician, that reads: ‘You cannot expect to get an A1 population out of C3 Homes’ and shows a soldier returning from war wanting to live in a better environment.



### WHAT IS FABRIC FIRST DESIGN?

There is much talk at present of 'fabric first' design — an important and very relevant way of designing homes.

A fabric first approach refers to making the very most of the parts and materials used to actually make up the fabric of the building in order for it to work super efficiently. This method of building aims to place more importance on the actual design and construction of a building. Passive solar design (using the sun's energy through lots of glazing, for example), high levels of insulation, performance glazing, good airtightness and ventilation are all at the forefront of this approach.

panels) more than 10 years before it became standard and this allowed us to take framing in a new direction.

"Likewise we realised in the 1990s that heavy framing was putting people off, so we adapted and began designing houses with less oak, more glass and less rooted to Elizabethan-style oak frames."

It seems that oak frame construction is very much a part of contemporary design, albeit with a few updates that prioritise today's homeowners' needs — namely cost and energy efficiency, natural light and open flowing spaces, with clean lines.

"Combining oak with large areas of glass or perhaps reinterpreting the expected use of materials (think vertical shadow gap boarding and shingles on elevations, off-set bay windows and amplified voids), partnering oak with materials that are from more modern palettes, such as corrugated tin, can really add a new energy to a construction system that is actually over a millennium old," says Merry Albright. "Oak framing translates well into contemporary architecture (see one of Border Oak's designs above right) — but it treads its own path and evolves and shifts."

Craig Alexander of Oakwrights agrees: "Contemporary design doesn't mean shunning quality or natural materials, and an oak frame — even a simple, pared back frame — gives a space a sense of warmth, tactility and quality it can be difficult to achieve in other ways. Vaulted spaces, clear openings and an open-plan layout are all contemporary design features which work well with an oak frame."

Of course, timber frame doesn't always have to mean oak. From a cost and aesthetic point of view using different timbers is another way in which timber frame has leapt into the modern day.

"As a practice that has been using timber frame since the 1980s, we are seeing a move away from oak frames with all their twists and cracks, and towards glulam beams," says architect Roderick James. "They offer clean lines that are crisper and more stable." (See Roderick's own home above left).

"Another, cheaper, alternative to oak frame is just stock timber — just good old six by two and the like,



painted white. This is a trend that adds texture in an affordable way — you can build a whole frame from it. We are trying to push the idea that affordable doesn't have to mean bland."

### The architecture of today

Although there is no single style of architecture that can sum up any era, there are certain priorities and factors that appear to shape what homeowners want and what architects come up with.

Environmental factors, the availability of a wider range of materials and a lack of space on which to build are all playing a part right now.

"The biggest change in the last 100 years is that where people were once using only local materials, now they can come from anywhere, although there has certainly been a rise in people once again trying to keep things local," observes Roderick James.

It is interesting to note that modern advances and the wider availability of materials is not always a positive — where designers once had no option but to create buildings that sat very much within their landscape, nowadays this freedom can result in buildings that look rather out of place.

"I have definitely noticed many architects ignoring good manners, just trying to put modern architecture into very traditional areas — it is not okay," says Roderick James. "I feel there has been a move lately where houses that do not sit properly into the landscape are being built. You get architects just dumping a box into a landscape — it is dreadful. A big square box never sits well in a soft landscape. Even when they include a turf roof and say it blends in — turf roofs can only really blend in when you see them from the air! This is why a lot of the buildings I design have gently sloping walls and textured finishes on the external walls — so that they blend in."



#### SUPER SUSTAINABLE DESIGN

Proving that sustainable design in no way means compromising on aesthetics, this replacement dwelling designed by PAD Studio (above) was conceived to minimise the impact on its site. It is orientated to maximise solar gain, has two green roofs, uses ground source heat pump technology and has a log boiler for heating and hot water.

**A SENSE OF BELONGING**  
Incorporating texture, overhanging roofs and sloping sections can all help a new building sit well within its setting (right).

“If you look back to the 1920s and the designs of Frank Lloyd Wright, rather than boxes, he used lots of overhanging eaves and texture and shadow lines — all of which gave his buildings enormous texture. A lot of the boxes built now are too smooth and have no dimension or shadowing.”

But while there are certainly ill-considered designs out there, there are also those architects designing modern buildings that sensitively maintain a connection to their location. And what seems to be shaping the most successful contemporary buildings right now appears to be an understanding of the need to build homes that will last, in a sustainable way and with a respect for their surroundings — fashions and trends are secondary.

“We believe that architecture should transcend fashion and be built to last,” says Wendy Perring. “We consider the wider context and design houses that will both enhance the landscape and have a relationship with it that benefits the occupants. We have a responsibility to minimise environmental impact as much as possible.”

Craig Alexander agrees that practical needs are now more of a priority than trends. “Current trends are heavily driven by light, space and lifestyle practicalities rather than a specific overriding architectural style. People want light, airy, usable spaces, rather than letting style dictate how they live.”

#### Where are we headed?

“I think conservation will be the biggest influencer in architecture of the future – 450mm thick walls needed to meet insulation requirements, triple glazing as standard – huge but exciting changes,” says Roderick James. “The use of modular buildings will also increase because of labour costs and climate change. In Scotland, where I am based, you pay around £20-30 per hour for trades and when you add the Scottish weather on top of this, modular building makes sense. Unlike SIPs and timber frame, which are put together on site, modular buildings are supplied as complete components that slot together



— quicker, more controllable and cheaper.

“Cost will play a big role in the homes of the future. We are increasingly seeing people who can’t afford traditional materials, such as stone. There is now a much bigger divide between high and low cost architecture.”

“The more contemporary designs we are now producing are not inspired by something from the past but instead look towards lifestyles of the future,” says Merry Albright. “Priorities include natural light, being carbon neutral and sustainable, and homes that increase a sense of wellness and longevity.”

It is clear that natural light, open spaces and a connection to outdoors continue to be important and this translates into a trend for large areas of glazing, terraces and balconies and flexible interiors. But there is also a huge requirement for homes that offer value for money and longevity — while having minimal impact on our planet.

Although this desire to make the most of our natural surroundings is not a new thing, the difference is that we are now lucky enough to have the technology to weave it into homes that also look great.

“It is a very exciting time for architecture — we have big challenges to work with in terms of energy efficiency and climate change,” says Roderick James.

And as we all know, the biggest challenges usually result in the very best ideas. **H**