

Enki Q & A

Q - Start from the beginning, What's the story behind your studio?

I have always been drawn to the private spaces in which people live. I studied architecture in South Africa and through my travels I have been fascinated about people and how they live. I love the minutiae of daily life, what people choose to surround themselves with and believe that a well-designed home can have a great benefit to the well-being of our society. Architecture can help by providing them spaces for people to live better lives. The well-being of every street, every suburb, starts with a single home. I set up the studio to explore these ideals. I am passionate about helping people live better lives through improving their homes.

Q - How would you describe your style of work?

We don't have a predetermined agenda for our work, we just want to improve people's lives and allow them to connect better with each other and the natural world around them. The starting point of all our projects is really our client's narrative. What makes each individual unique and special will translate into the project we make for them, which is evident in the architecture we create. Our work is bespoke, and every project is different. If you compare our Danish Mews House to Sun Slice House – they are built biographies of our individual clients, rather than us.

We consider the site and environmental conditions as well as the history of the place we are working in. We overlay this with our brief and through creativity and dialogue a unique project emerges, specific to that client and that particular site.

Q - What does your dream commission look like?

We like to make sure we are a good fit for our clients before embarking on a project. We don't take on every commission we are offered as we need to feel that we can work well with the client and give them what they are looking for. I feel that every project we have worked on has been a dream commission in its own way and we are grateful for the opportunities our clients have given us, trusting us to design their homes. It's very personal.

I was very fortunate to have been able to design my own home in London. It was a major turning point in my thinking about what creating a home means. It also gave me direct insight into how clients feel – going through the ups and downs of the building process. In fact, we built our home while having our second child, which is a common experience for a lot of our clients.

Q - What is something you'd change about the current landscape of residential architecture, particularly in the UK?

I would like to see more consideration of how homes can relate to the sites in which they are built. How homes can connect better to the outside world. Well-designed residential projects can be a key driver for manifesting change within the political and social landscape as a whole.

People need to think about the environmental consequences of how the materials in their buildings are produced and procured. How much energy is involved in making it, getting it to site and what is the amount of wastage.

Q - Does sustainability play a role in your design process?

Sustainability plays a huge role in our work as we want our projects to endure. It is not only about carbon counting but the longevity of the work. We like the idea that our homes can be handed down to another generation with purely cosmetic alterations.

We think carefully about the lifespan of building materials. The more durable they are, the longer they last before needing replacement, which is good for our planet.

We are constantly thinking about the physics involved in producing the materials we use and how they get to the site. Steve Webb, a leading UK engineer asked: "What are the logistics of building with a liquid material that has to be delivered on a truck with a revolving tank within one and a half hours?" He was referring to the use of concrete, the production and transportation of which uses vast amounts of energy and results in a lot of wastage. Cast concrete with steel reinforcement is also difficult to recycle. We tend to use durable materials that are a natural, sustainable produced and recyclable.

Q - Do you find that clients are receptive to sustainable ideas?

Yes, we do - we explain the cost and environmental benefits to them. Architects have a responsibility to strive to produce more sustainable buildings.

A brick company like Petersen Tegl for example, ensures that all of the clay it extracts to make bricks is used. Any waste during the manufacturing process is recycled. They need heat too, [around 1,000°C] to fire the clay bricks, but Petersen have developed a system where the heat used to fire the bricks is used twice. I.e. it is also used to dry other bricks. Clay fired bricks can be used for hundreds of years without maintenance and they can always be recycled.

We try to steer our clients towards using natural insulation derived from waste streams such as pulp timber fire, rather than petroleum-based products. We often work on old buildings that have moisture inside of them so using a product that doesn't trap moisture is more sustainable and also makes sense. This is a constant learning process for us, and we know we don't always get it right, but we have open minds, and we are always learning more about sustainability.

Q - What materials do you lean towards and why?

We tend to use natural materials and steer away from concrete and steel as often as we can. We also try to use recycled material if possible, as in our Brackenbury House project where we reused the bricks from the original house in the new construction. It saves money and the planet at the same time.

At each site we explore what the site requires in terms of material language and usage. For example, questions emerge around whether additions need to express visual sympathy or tension with the existing site. Our Sun Slice House uses new modern clay brick with lime mortar against the aged brickwork of the new house. For example, Black Ridge House and Petersen House in Hammersmith were specifically designed to allow the extensions to be read in contrast with the host building, to allow the integrity of the existing terrace form of the group of houses to be maintained.

Q - How do you ensure a home is timeless?

We are still exploring whether a home can be truly timeless. Every building has its own history, and any intervention becomes a new layer within its narrative once it is added. It becomes part of the history of that place. The rituals of everyday life have changed over the last century and even recently during the pandemic, with the blurring of boundaries between home and work. We want the homes we build to be flexible so that they can be adjusted as the needs of families change.

What we see as timeless are the needs for a sense of security and connection, a love of natural light and being aware of the shifting state of nature outside –the changing weather or landscape. A home is a sanctuary from the world outside and supports the private lives of the users, enabling them to live the lives they want.

Satisfying those needs is the timeless pursuit of architecture.

Q - What would you like to see change in the world of architecture?

I would like to see a more soulful type of architecture, a move away from an architecture defined by image - towards an architecture made for experience.

I often feel that today, there is a neglect of the importance of the senses in shaping architecture – the smell of materials, the tactility, the sound of spaces. How these pervade and occupy a space, creating an atmosphere and forming new memories of a place. Personally, I feel there is something visceral about natural timber and kiln fired clay and their associated atmospheres.

Architecture is a poetic discipline. The South African born Architect, Stanley Saitowitz used to describe architecture as human geography. Just as our natural landscape changes with shifting tectonics and the weather, so architecture is shaped by our human experiences, positive and negative.

I studied architecture under Pancho Guedes in South Africa who said:

"We must become technicians of the emotions, makers of smiles, tear jerkers, exaggerators, spokesmen of dreams, performers of miracles, messengers; and invent raw, bold, vigorous and intense buildings... ". He also reminded us that:

"Building shall yet belong to the people, architecture shall yet become real and alive, and beauty shall yet be warm and convulsive." Architecture is very much a living thing and at its best plays a deep part in how our society and our lives function.