

Revisiting Timber Traditions

A new crop of architects around the world are exploring their local regional architecture—and finding new ways to keep these resourceful ways of building alive.



Wood is one of the oldest and most ubiquitous building materials in existence. For thousands of years, communities around the world have designed durable, sustainable, climate-responsive buildings using timber felled from the forests around them. In recent years there has been a resurgence in interest in these traditional wooden buildings, a re-evaluation of their significance, and a return to the techniques and forms that they championed.

Often referred to as “architecture without architects,” vernacular architecture has historically been understood as referring to buildings constructed by self-builders and communities, broadly encapsulating styles and typologies of buildings informed by local needs, resources, craft, and climate. These buildings and the techniques employed in creating them are diverse markers of culture that illustrate human ingenuity and identity from a time that predates sophisticated technology and industrialization.

The Japanese practice of *yakisugi-ita*, also known as *yakisuga* or *shou sugi ban*, is one such technique. Originally developed to protect and preserve rural Japanese farmhouses and storage buildings that were susceptible to fire, this millennia-old method has made a return to architecture in recent years—even in the West. The technique is traditionally performed by tying three planks of wood together lengthwise to form a triangular prism. A fire is lit inside the resulting tunnel, charring one side of each of the planks of wood. It is a simple and chemical-free process that renders timber watertight, fire-retardant, resistant to rot, and insect repellent. Proofing wood using this treatment has ensured the survival of some of the world’s most precious built history—most notably in Nara, Japan, where the Buddhist temple Hōryū Gakumonji was rebuilt using *yakisugi-ita* in 711 AD after a fire ravaged its original structure. It is widely recognized as the oldest existing timber building in the world.

Today, *yakisugi-ita* is not only common practice in Japan, but has proliferated across

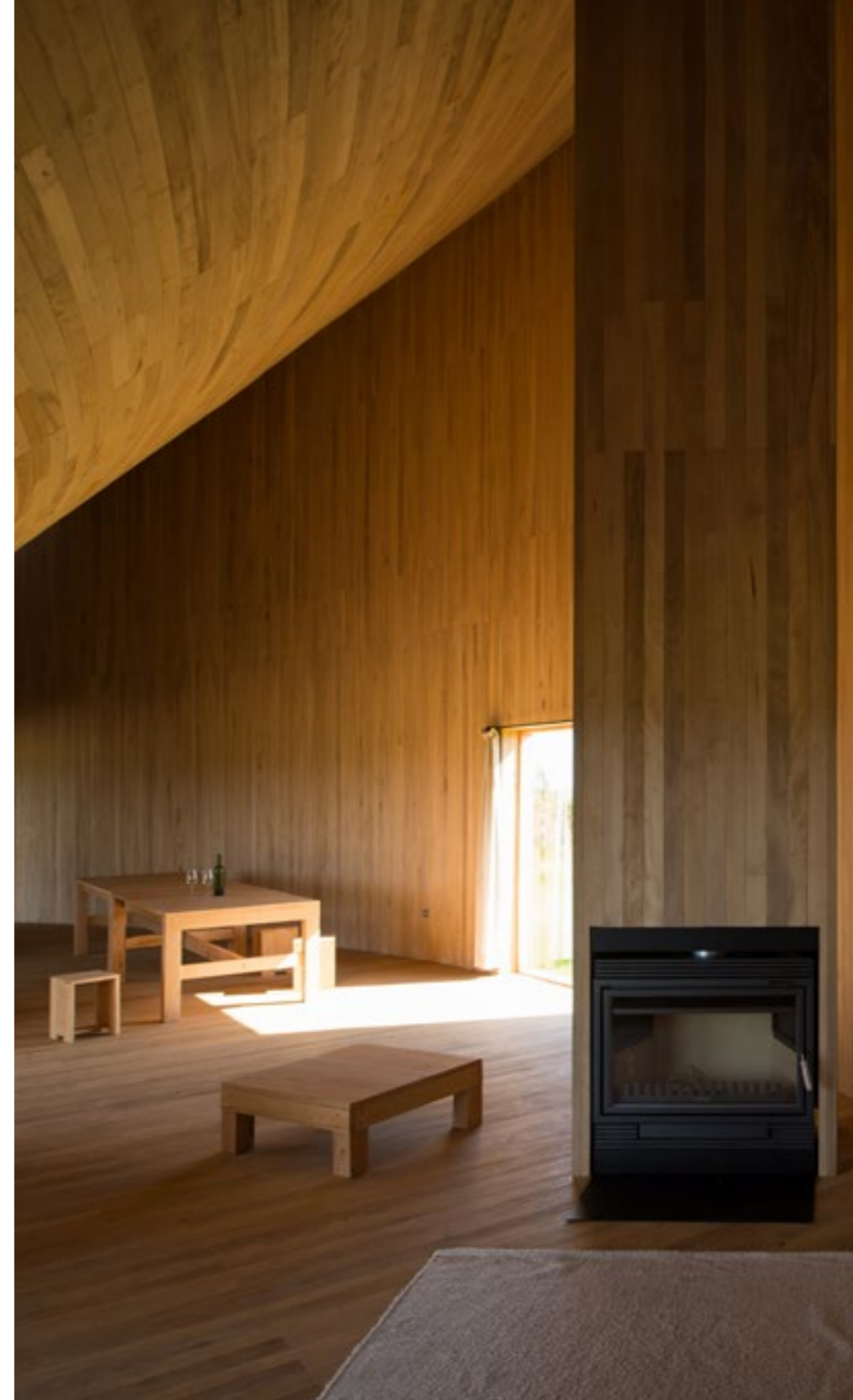
←← Strict architectural guidelines in Manigod, a mountain region in France, lead to Studio Razavi’s contemporary interpretation of a traditional alpine chalet. ← Rather than do away with an existing barn, La Firme preserved the qualities of the original building—salvaging and restoring each piece of the hemlock structure.

the globe. Deep in the fjords of Norway, a pine heartwood cabin by Oslotre has been finished using the technique, making it resistant to the extremes of weather in the mountainous region. The decision was not only practical, but aesthetic, explains Jørgen Tycho of Oslotre: “It gives the facade an instant patina that will change over the time, making the building transform with climate and wind direction.”

While some techniques are suitable for many locations, there are many traditional typologies—like the Alpine chalet—that have evolved for specific climate zones. Chalets were originally used during the warmer months of the year, as farmers moved their cattle up mountains to graze in the wildflower-rich moors of the Alps. The simple structure was built upon a stone base recessed into the mountainside. The upper



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floors were crafted from wood, and typically featured steeply sloping roofs, wide eaves, and front-facing balconies decorated with carved patterns and flowers.

The chalet has since become one of the most prevalent and well-loved vernacular shapes in the West. Its enduring popularity is due not only to its robust construction, but also to its association within the popular consciousness with health and holidays. In the eighteenth century, tourism in the Alps began. As tuberculosis raged, it flourished. Chalets and mountain air were touted as harbingers of health and well-being to a whole generation of the European aristocracy. Today, vacations and chalets are synonymous. So much so that, in places like Quebec, holiday homes are referred to as chalets, regardless of their appearance.

For French firm Studio Razavi, a project in a popular ski destination in Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes, in the east of France, presented an opportunity to work closely with this iconic building style. Operating within strict regional architectural guidelines relating to form, the designers of Mountain House have replicated the design of a chalet, but have achieved a striking modernity by forgoing ornament and utilizing contemporary materials like cross-laminated timber in the construction. “What our design offers is renewal and continuity by focusing on the tectonics of a building,” says Alireza Razavi, founder of the studio. “Our goal was to prove that simply mimicking architectural features of the past would only serve to further erode the cultural asset of architecture in the region.”

In Norway, design practice Snøhetta has given a contemporary spin to a far lesser-known wooden structure: the *gapahuk*. Traditionally, the term refers to a structure that has just three sides and a sloped roof made from timber and branches. These temporary shelters are scattered throughout the Norwegian countryside and are used by travelers when foul weather strikes. As with much vernacular architecture, this is a form that has evolved to fill a specific purpose—one that aligns with Norway’s “right to roam,” which allows travelers to camp overnight in open countryside without prior permission from landowners.

“Drawing inspiration from the traditional *gapahuk*, the cabin is shaped with the aim of adapting to the many varying weather conditions,” explains Snøhetta. “The twisting roof creates a two-way *gapahuk* that gives protection from wind and sun.”

↖ Like traditional alpine chalets, Studio Razavi’s Mountain House in France features a heavy overhanging roof that protects the outdoor area from snow. ← In a Norwegian valley surrounded by glaciers, Oslotre finished a cabin using *yakisugi-ita*, an ancient Japanese technique that renders timber weather and insect resistant through charring. ↑ On a Chilean island with a unique architectural history built in wood, Pezo von Ellrichshausen designed Rode House—a startling timber structure informed by local artisanal tradition.