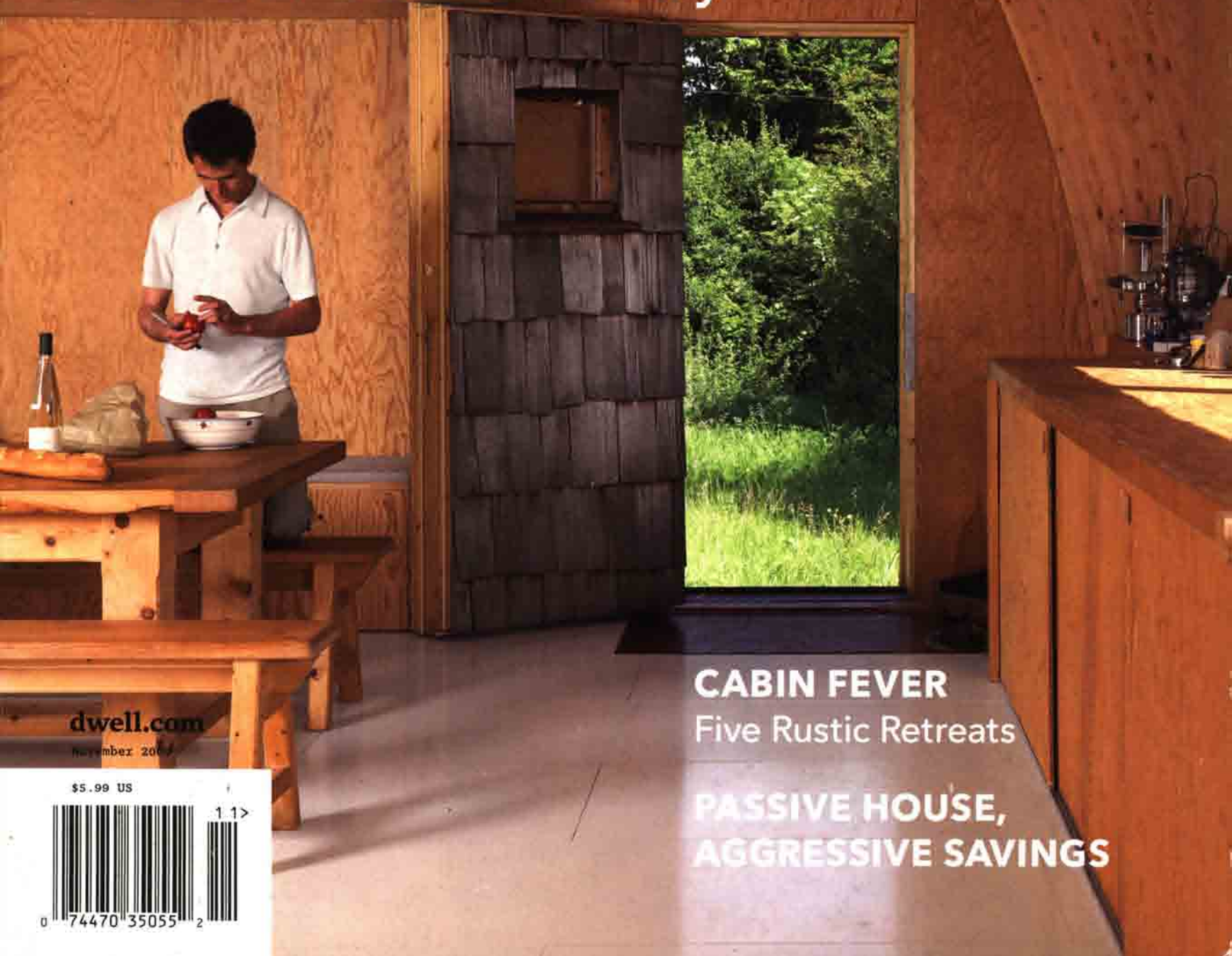


At Home in the Modern World

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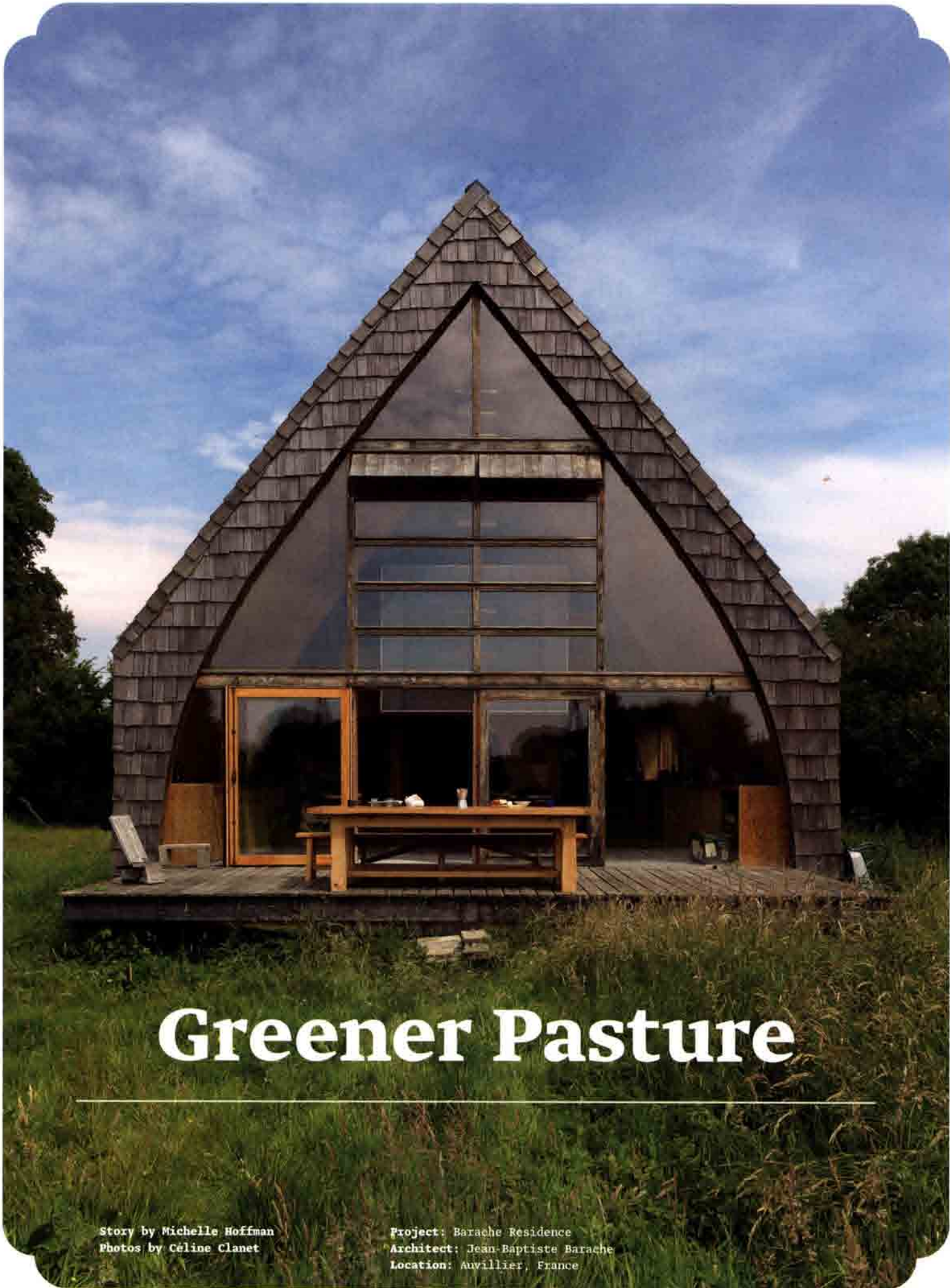
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CABIN FEVER
Five Rustic Retreats


**PASSIVE HOUSE,
AGGRESSIVE SAVINGS**



Greener Pasture

Story by Michelle Hoffman
Photos by Céline Clanet

Project: Barache Residence
Architect: Jean-Baptiste Barache
Location: Auwillier, France



"I didn't want the kind of manicured garden that would mean I'd have to come out on weekends and mow the lawn," says Jean-Baptiste Barache of the country home he built, mostly by himself, over a year and a half. The result: a house that looks like it's just been dropped into a field, casual, with nary a path leading up to it and a front door that can barely be detected on the red-cedar-shingled facade.

Like a little chapel on the prairie, architect Jean-Baptiste Barache's simply elegant retreat in the tiny Normandy town of Auvillier is a modern play on centuries-old forms and technology.



Damp Upper Normandy, a workingman's land of ragged rains and rapeseed fields, is not the first place that comes to mind for an exercise in off-the-grid living. This isn't the Normandy of well-heeled Parisian weekenders and American cineasts who flock to nearby seaside resorts, with their saltwater spas, annual film festival, and champagne brunches. It's a farming land dotted by modest prefab commuter clusters, rusty grain silos, and cows of the white, tawny, and Rorschach varieties. The climate is intemperate; winters are long, summers fickle. But it is exactly what Jean-Baptiste Barache was looking for to undertake this experiment: to elaborate on an architecture seeking to integrate us with, not isolate us from, the elements.

"Constraints nourish a project," he says. And if that's the case, it's been a feast for the architect, whose home forgoes electricity altogether.

"I had no need for a country house," the architect remembers. "I felt the desire for countryside but no desire for private property." The mere notion of land ownership disturbs Barache: "It upsets one's tranquility," he says. But the pull of a project to call

his own was enough to bend those principles. It was 2005, and he was working on naval and floating architecture while secretly dreaming of dry land. So he quit his job and went to work for the only client he knew who would take on such a novice to build a house: himself.

Barache bought a semi-enclosed, hoof-trodden field in Auvilliers, a mere stop sign of a village two hours northwest of Paris. With financing from his brother and his own savings, he paid a local barn builder to throw up a wooden frame. He collected lumber recycled from theater sets, red cedar shingles for the exteriors, and cheap veneer and particleboard for the rest. And then he rolled up his sleeves and got to work. The result—18 months of DIY efforts and \$105,000 later—is a house dropped onto the field. It would be a stretch to call the terrain undergroomed, as it looks like the herd only recently vacated the premises.

This aesthetic was carried over to the house, which is the antithesis of a manicured country home. If anything, the house's debt is to the iconic forms of the French countryside. Its A-frame ▶

Like the barns Barache scampered through as a child, the house divides its length between loftlike open spaces like the living room, which opens onto a small deck perfect for open-air lolling (opposite), and stacked-box nooks and crannies. Cubic bookshelves do double duty as a dividing wall (bottom right) and as a sliding door opening up to a hidden bath (bottom left).



In his kitchen built on the cheap, Barache installed appliances donated by a few architectural Good Samaritans: "I don't even remember where the sink is from," he says. Two built-in sliding-door cabinets house the kitchen basics, and the custom-built dining set, a modern riff on the farmers' table and benches, is large enough to welcome family and visitors dropping in for a meal.

construction—a requirement imposed by the local architectural authority—is so steep it seems a visual quote of the chapels that anchor even the tiniest village. It recalls, too, the barns Barache played in during his childhood, when his parents, acting out the last of the countercultural post-1968 moment, moved to the rural southwest. "Those spots bring up a lot of emotion for me," he says, "very large spaces, with very small niches carved out in them."

In Auvilliers that open space is translated inside by a voluminous living room that stretches 25 feet to the roof and across the width of the house, fronted by a glass facade that looks south onto a deck and the fields beyond. The nooks and crannies in the upstairs sleeping area are equally capacious; the whole room is one giant box of a space where *lits bretons*—cupboardlike beds that can be closed off with a curtain—line the walls. They exude an air of collective coziness, like children at a slumber party wrapped up after a day of communal play.

There's even a kind of barnyard swing—a thick pulley rope that hangs from the ceiling, officially used for scampering up to the roof for repairs, but

unofficially (and far more frequently) for allowing Barache's nephew and niece, who visit the house often, to propel themselves across the room. It's a compact place as a whole—just under 2,000 square feet for two floors and a sleeping loft near the rafters—with equal doses of childhood nostalgia and grown-up philosophy.

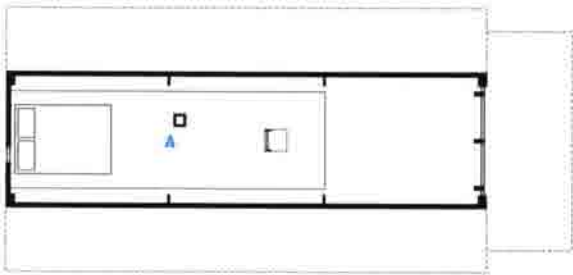
Going without electricity doesn't mean forgoing power, but it does cast daily life in a much simpler mold. A gas canister fuels the simple stovetop in the kitchen; a homemade wood-burning stove diffuses heat through the house in a slow, steady burn. And come twilight, Barache and his wife, Mie, light the wicks on the oil lamps and watch the flames flicker. "I was very moved by Junichiro Tanizaki's book *In Praise of Shadows* when I was designing this," the architect admits. "I love the light of a flame creating shadows. It's a very Japanese notion, beauty that does not reveal itself."

Climatically open living makes the Auvilliers house open to extremes, not only of light and dark but also of hot and cold. The cleverly designed stove delivers heat from the kitchen up to the compact ▶

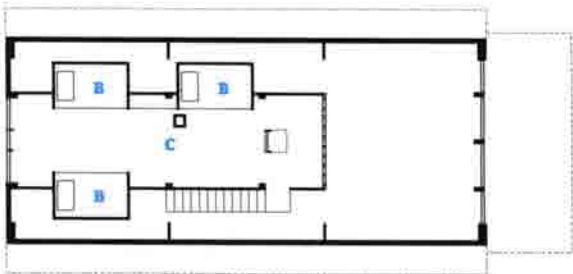


Barache Residence
Floor Plans

- A Bedroom
- B Lit Breton
- C Common Area
- D Kitchen/Dining Area
- E Bathroom
- F Living Area
- G Deck



Third Floor

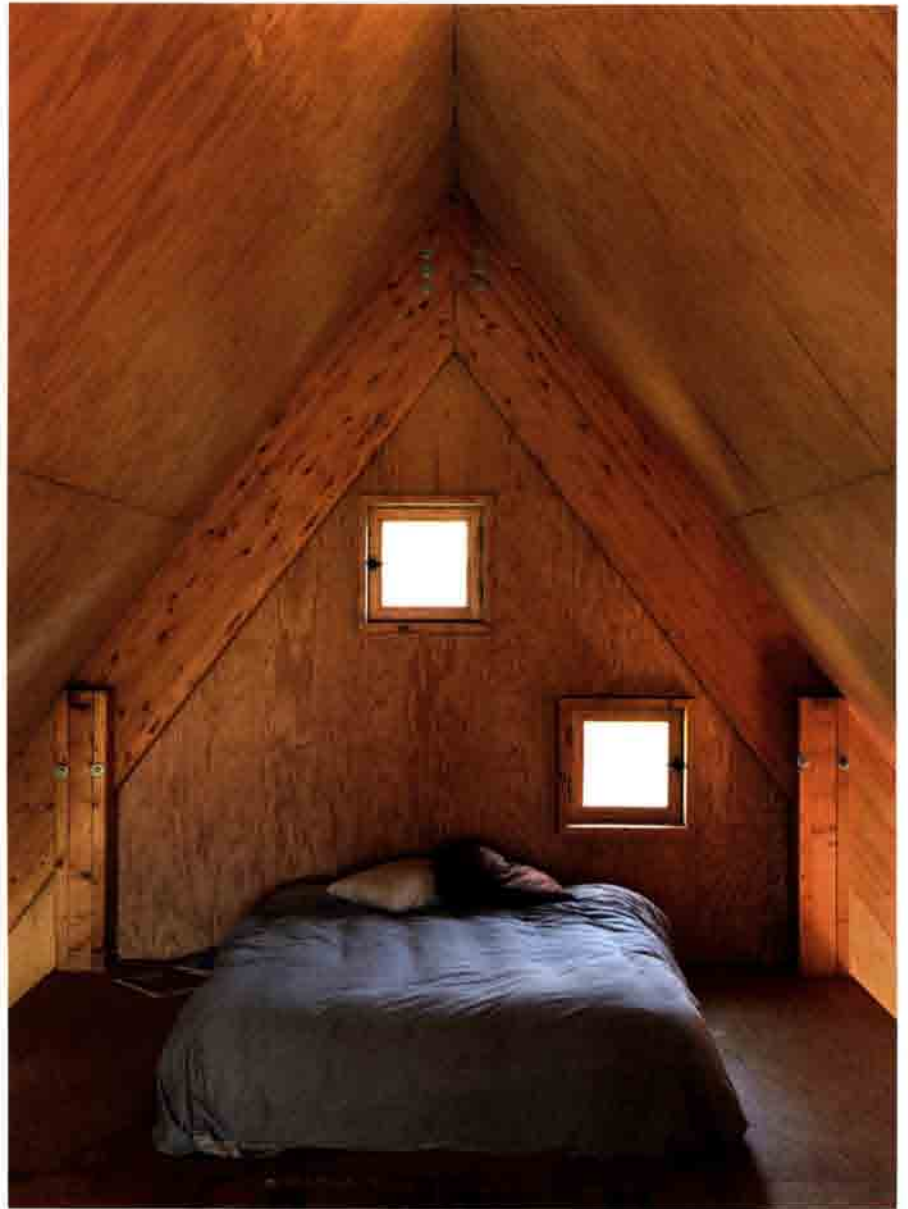
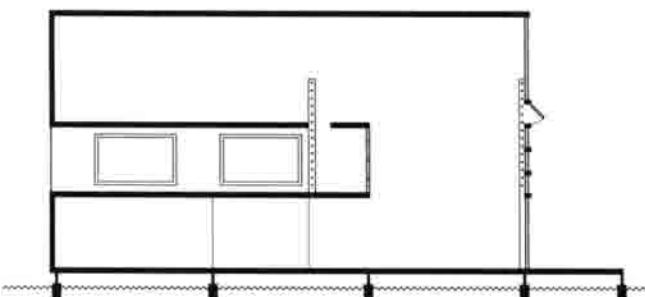


Second Floor



First Floor

Elevation



In the third-floor bedroom (top), peekaboo windows offer a glimpse of the surrounding fields. The second floor houses three lits bretons (left), boxlike compartments where the curtains can be drawn to close sleepers off from the world. Inside, each has a built-in shelf for personal belongings and a favorite read.

A series of horizontal window panes on the rear facade (left) serves as vanes for ventilation and adds a craftsmanlike design come nightfall, when the house is lit up by the flicker of candlelight and gas lamps. The front door (opposite) dissolves into the facade. The exposed-wood motif continues inside (bottom, right), where plywood walls, as well as Barache and his guests, keep things warm.

sleeping quarters through a clay brick chimney, but still the Normandy chill manages to seep in for much of the year. Even that, unpleasant as it may be, makes sense to Barache. "My memories of the countryside are of houses that are cold in winter, and in the summer, hot. It's not unpleasant to actually experience the seasons."

It's what Barache refers to as his own notion of bioclimatic architecture. Rather than building up (read: insulating) against the environment, he seeks to take stock of, and adapt to, its changes. "It seems that I make low-tech homes, a bit like old country houses. They just work on their own." It's a concept born in the barns, but encouraged, too, by trips to Japan, where Mie comes from, and where Barache discovered the old wooden houses with their delicate walls and spare interiors seemingly permeable to the elements. His first commissions for private homes have gone even further along those lines: One house in the often-inclement Burgundy region uses Japanese shoji screens for its exteriors; another has walls that rise like insect wings into the air, leaving rooms buffered by crosswinds.

But despite his happiness with the house, Barache feels like a victim of a mistaken identity. Off-the-grid living has its own coterie of followers, from hard-core environmentalists to conspiracy-theorist energy-independence types. "I think there's been a bit of a misunderstanding," he says. "People think I'm an environmentalist, but this is not an ecological approach. It's not a dogma; it's an experiment."

There's not much the couple misses about electricity in Auvilliers, though the area does lack other things they need—good Japanese food and the honk and grind of their urban Parisian beat. They have no desire to leave city life permanently, no landed-gentry fantasies. But with the surprise that has come of owning property and actually enjoying it, the duo are finding themselves increasingly drawn to its repose. The biggest concession Barache now plans to make is to the needs of his laptop computer. A solar-powered battery will extend his stays at the house and permit him to do a bit of work now and again. But more importantly there will be more time to contemplate the play of light and shadow, the stirrings of a land free from the hum of electricity. ■■■



