

- 1  
The house lies next  
to a flood-prone river.  
2  
Concrete piers lift  
the building off the  
ground, protecting  
it from flooding.  
3  
A smaller, secondary  
structure braces  
and supports the  
main volume.





## Rural retreat

A robust response to a challenging environment.

Finnish architect Marco Casagrande first came to the AR's attention when his remarkable 'walking' barn houses, designed in partnership with fellow Finn Sami Rintala, were honoured in the inaugural AR Awards for Emerging Architecture (AR December 1999). Conceived as a meditation on the decline of Finnish rural life, the project – punningly entitled Land(e)scape – involved hoisting a trio of redundant timber barns on to spindly stilts to make them look as though they were walking out of the countryside and migrating to the city. In a final nihilistic flourish, the structures were set on fire and transformed into blazing memorials to the loss of a pastoral idyll.

Casagrande is now in partnership with Taiwanese architect Frank Chen, and together they recently completed a house in the north of Taiwan, near the Datun Mountains. Set on farmland next to a river and surrounded by tree-covered hills, the remote, rural site has echoes of the walking barns project. Yet for all its bucolic charm, the environment can be harsh, with intense heat in summer and frequent typhoon winds, compounded by periodic flooding from the river and seismic activity.

The commission came from a retired couple who wanted to leave the city and embrace a simpler, rural lifestyle, farming cherry trees and bamboo. When

approached to design the house, Casagrande was living in an abandoned tea factory in the area and had become familiar with the locale. Though climate and site conditions are challenging, he regards his design as an adaptable, responsive entity, capable of riding them out 'like a boat'. To protect against flooding, the house is raised above the ground on a platform, which also acts as a terrace, extending the living area. The main volume, which contains living and sleeping quarters, is a narrow, single-storey wedge, buttressed along its long, east side by a smaller structure housing a bathroom, kitchen and sauna. This arrangement neatly demarcates served and servant spaces, but equally importantly it also enhances structural stability in the event of an earthquake, the smaller body acting to brace and support the larger one. The roof and walls of the main volume project out at the wider north end to form a sheltered enclave for al fresco dining. The roof is also brought into play as a sun deck, accessed by an external flight of stairs.

Perhaps because Casagrande helped to build the house himself, construction and materials have a rough-edged simplicity and honesty of expression. Nothing is fudged or covered up; you take it as you find it. The timber frame is clad in horizontal timber planks, giving the house a barn-like appearance that chimes instinctively with the rural setting. In some parts of





# HOUSE, SANJHIH, TAIWAN

ARCHITECT

C-LABORATORY



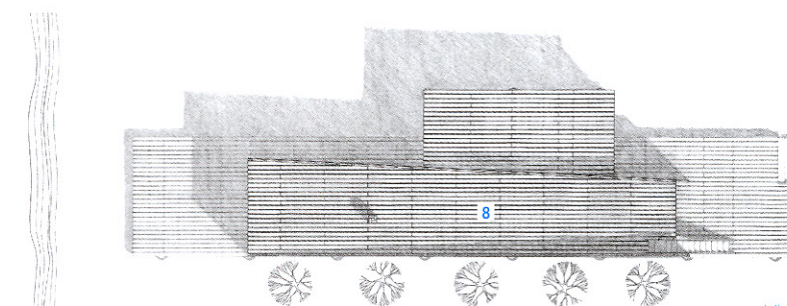
site plan

- 4, 6  
Low windows offer outside views only when occupants are seated on the floor.
- 5  
Natural ventilation cools the interior in the hot summer.
- 7  
A brick hearth anchors the living space but the main material is melanti, a robust timber usually used in formwork.
- 8  
Dining area.

- 1 house
- 2 Datun river
- 3 pond
- 4 existing farm building

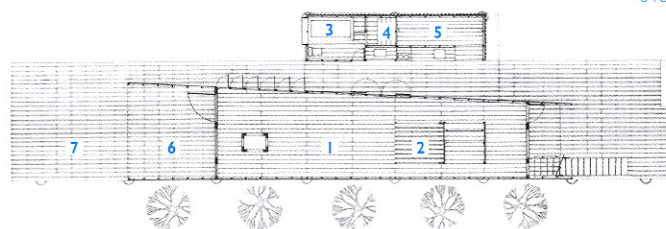
the wall, gaps are deliberately left between the planks to aid natural ventilation and help deflect strong winds. A freestanding brick hearth anchors the living area, and strategically placed glazing frames and defines vistas out to the landscape. A strip of windows at floor level, for instance, is designed to offer views only when occupants are seated on traditional floor cushions.

For the cladding, Casagrande chose meranti, a tropical hardwood with a reddish hue resembling Canadian pine. Though strong and economical, with good moisture and insect resistance, it tends to be more commonly used in Taiwan for formwork because of its rustic appearance. 'When Taiwan was under Japanese rule, there was a vigorous culture of building with timber,' says Casagrande, 'but now brick imported from China's Fujian province has become the norm. In this project I wanted to reconnect with an older building tradition and make use of so-called disregarded materials.' The timber also underscores Casagrande's notion of the house as a lightweight vessel, capable of weathering difficult conditions with ease and elegance. CATHERINE SLESSOR

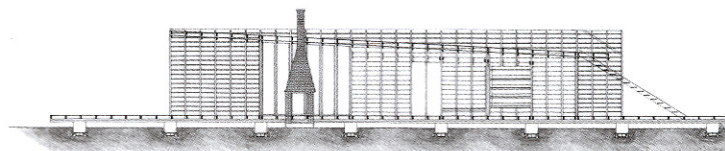


roof plan

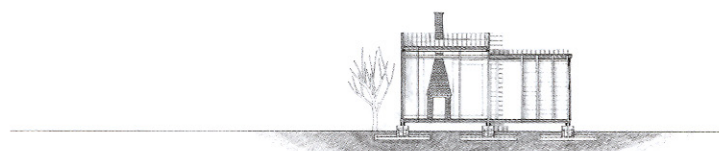
- 1 living area
- 2 sleeping area
- 3 bathroom
- 4 sauna
- 5 kitchen
- 6 dining area
- 7 deck
- 8 roof terrace



ground-floor plan (scale approx 1:500)



long section



cross section

## Architect

C-Laboratory, Turku, Finland

## Project team

Marco Casagrande, Frank Chen,  
Nikita Wu, Shi-Ding Chen, Shu-Gi Bai

## Photographs

AaDa



