



ARCHITECT

# Zac Monro

Zac Monro is an award-winning architect and TV presenter, who founded Zac Monro Architects (ZMA) in 2000. The practice is experienced in new build housing, commercial projects and public works, as well as having gained a reputation for small-scale extensions and renovations. Zac, 46, presents Channel 4's Inside Out Homes, and co-presents Grand Designs: House of the Year, alongside Kevin McCloud. He has spent the last 20 years transforming uninspiring properties into inspirational homes, and is on a mission to breathe new life into the UK suburbs.



### Describe your childhood home

Initially I lived in a big house in Kent, which I don't really remember, and then we moved to London following my parents' divorce. My first memory is of a tiny house in Wandsworth, but what really stuck in my mind were the houses of the French side of my family. My mother's parents always had interesting homes, which they built themselves in extraordinary places. My grandfather found an incredible plot just underneath a mountain in Provence where he built a really simple house, all on one level. They also had a tiny house on an island in Brittany, and a basic wooden hut in the French Alps which only had a wood-fired stove and was freezing cold. It didn't even have running water for the first 10 years, so being there felt like camping out. Those three houses had a very strong relationship to their surroundings, and were utterly key to my childhood because we spent every holiday together in France. To me there's a great link between families and houses, so I find it very hard to move.

### What inspired you to become an architect?

Several members of my family would have loved to have been architects, and were very supportive when as a teenager I told them of my plan to train as one. I remember telling an uncle that I didn't want to work in an office, though, but would probably be based somewhere more interesting, like a tree-house. He always remembered that, and would remind me of it when I was



working in an office. Breaking away from tradition, bringing in light, and keeping things very plain are all traits which my relatives taught me from an early age, and which I've carried on in my work. When it comes to architecture the French tend to look forward rather than backwards, and wouldn't dream of building a new Victorian-style house. It gave me a different

perspective to the outlook I would have had just growing up on the streets of Tooting. When we had careers advice at school I was told that studying to be an architect was too difficult, though, and I should work in a printing factory, which I did for a short while. It made me realise that it was exactly what I didn't want to do, and although studying architecture is a

### REINVENTED BARN CONVERSION

This 18th-century barn had been converted by previous owners, and was reinvented with a new glazed dining atrium and an oak and Corten steel studio, designed to brush up against the main house.

long haul I did my degree in Cambridge before working for a bit in Paris. I came back and took my diploma at the University of East London, where I learned hands-on skills such as metalwork and woodwork. Then I worked for two or three years before taking my final exam.

### How has your practice evolved?

Anthony Hudson was the first person I worked for where I felt mentored. He has a very specific approach, but is also flexible and open-minded, so it was real joy to work with him. A lot of what I now know I first learned from Anthony, and although I still err on the side of making things as simple as possible I try to ensure that each characteristic of a building is strong and carefully detailed. Once everything has been made clear, and problems have been solved, I'll then look at accentuating different aspects of the design.

Gradually I began to take on small private projects, and then parted company from Anthony on friendly terms to set up on my own. I was quite young, and working alone really made me learn the ropes because there was nobody else to ask.

Working out of a bedroom in the family home wasn't ideal, but gradually I was able to employ others and we converted the

## Profile Zac Monro

Victorian house to be half office and half living space. It was built to be recession-proof - to avoid paying rent on an office - but when our second child was born it became really awkward. I'd be holding a client meeting with a baby on my shoulder, which didn't make for a professional environment, so eventually we moved the practice into its own office in Brixton.

We ended up doing quite a lot of high-end residential projects, including a house for a couple in Brixton which featured on Grand Designs. Nothing really went wrong during the build, so the story showcased the practice quite extensively. We received a few commissions out of it, and at the same time the Brixton area began to boom.

Now we're being offered more public projects, and are part of the design team for 300 new homes in Brixton and 80 new flats in Tooting, as well as working on smaller development projects and one-off houses. It's exactly where we want to be, and getting more high quality affordable housing into the mix is our plan for the future.

### How did you get to become a TV presenter?

After the Brixton house appeared on Grand Designs a few production companies approached me with projects, including Channel 4 who were planning the series Inside Out Homes. It featured 12 quite small projects, chosen to demonstrate different aspects of the construction industry, and I was involved in the entire design and build process. I'd turn up on the day, without any priming, and had to produce a sketch design on the spot. It's how I tend to work anyway, but sometimes we were pushed for time and I'd be trying to come up with an idea over lunch. It's been really good for the practice because people now know who we are.

### Sum up your style

We don't really do style - it's more how you approach things, and our approach is to listen. I am a Brutalist at heart, but contrary to what my mum thinks it's not all about harsh, ugly architecture. It's about honesty; so when a thing looks like a concrete wall it is a concrete wall, not just a cover up of render. What we specialise in is attention to detail.

### Describe your own home

I'm lucky enough to be building my own home at the moment, and am paying for structural engineers and tree reports when all I really want to do is start digging. We live in a tiny ex-council house in Battersea, and behind us is a piece of land which we bought from the council. We're turning this old car park area into a long house which centres around a tree. There will be a large basement and a fairly open-plan ground floor, looking



PICTURES: GARETH GARDNER

### PARK HOUSE

A dark, damp 1950s house with tiny rooms was increased in size with interlocking extensions in wood, blue-grey brick, render and 13m wide triple-glazed doors.



onto the garden through glass. It's going to be clad in either burnt timber or Corten steel, and I do want it to be properly Brutalist, where materials are on display - which isn't always compatible with modern construction techniques.

### What is your top tip for other selfbuilders?

Talk to people who know what they're doing, because detailed planning will save energy, money and time. You wouldn't fix your own broken leg from a YouTube video, so don't cut corners when it comes to employing professionals. Find an architect you trust, get on with, and who speaks your language.



### Finally, how do you like to spend your spare time?

I'm a father of three, an all-weather biker and am passionate about Brixton. I was one of the original directors of alternative local currency, the Brixton Pound, and am involved in creating a three-storey red and

blue steel lightning bolt memorial to David Bowie in his birthplace. I was also air guitar world champion two years in a row, which is one of the things I'm most proud of.

Zac Monro Architects: z-m-a.co.uk



PICTURES: ANDY MATTHEWS

### EYE-CATCHING FEATURES

From larger developments to one-off houses, each of Zac Monro's projects boasts strong forms and eye-catching features.



### INSIDE OUT

Linking indoors and out is key to creating views, bringing in light and opening up spaces.



PICTURE: GEORGE FIELDING

### SWISS SPA

A glazed spa complex for a Swiss house.



### GARDEN ROOM

A flexible garden room for a screen writer was built in timber, waterproofed and clad in mirror and then slats of hardwood to render it virtually transparent.

