





In his prolific half-century-plus career, Milanese design maestro Ettore Sottsass has been the creative genius behind everything from Olivetti typewriters and Alessi trays to airports, gas stations and clothing boutiques. "I don't make distinctions among the things I design, whether it's architecture, furniture or objects," says the 83-year-old Sottsass, founder of the Memphis movement. "I don't have a specialization, except my curiosity about design."

Over the past 11 years, Sottsass's insatiable curiosity has extended to homes, which he has built in London, Zurich, Rome, California, Colorado and Hawaii. Though many of his projects boast similar bold colors and simple playful shapes—pitched-roofed sheds, arched doorways, boxy windows—he shies away from the suggestion that these designs share a common language. "I don't think I have a steady attitude toward my architecture," he enthuses. "It's new every time."

Sottsass and partner Johanna Grawunder have collaborated on many of the houses, including Casa Nanon in Lanaken, Belgium, which they designed for a couple with a young daughter. The rambling 8,500-square-foot home is more like a village spread around a landscape than a single building. Sottsass and Grawunder placed each function within its own volume and wrapped the pieces in skins of stucco, masonry block and metal to play up their differences.

Fashion photographer Helmut Newton's moody, chromatic images of Casa Nanon lend an entirely different point of view to understanding the house. Recalls Grawunder: "He didn't photograph it as if it were an object or a sculpture, but as it was designed: as a series of places and paths."

Casa Nanon's gates open to reveal a red tower, the stucco box of the bedroom wing and the corrugated metal garage (right). Above: A colorful doorway surrounds a bathroom (reflecting Sottsass and Johanna Grawunder).

PHOTOGRAPHS BY HELMUT NEWTON.
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master mind

Italian architectural imp and design guru Ettore Sottsass designed this sprawling house in Belgium as a self-contained village opening onto an inner courtyard of cobalt blue.



The gateway to Sottsass's fanciful domestic village is a windowless concrete-block tower painted a scandalous shade of red. "I always give great importance to the entrance," says Sottsass, "because it's like a passport into the house." Inside, the home unfolds around a series of narrow hallways connecting different rooms around a central courtyard. "It's like a Pompeian house, where all the rooms are arranged around the patio," he explains.

As one enters from the red tower, a hallway leads to a professional-quality kitchen midway down on the right and a dining room just beyond. Turning left at the corner, you follow another hallway to the living room; it has a wood-enclosed spiral stair leading to a tiny library perch. "It's a European idea of separating your books from the rest of the house," notes Sottsass. Turning left again takes you to the secluded master suite and a stair that goes to the daughter's bedroom and a guest room above. Sliding glass doors along each of

these corridors open onto Casa Nanon's modern-day Roman courtyard, which is paved in ochre-colored terra-cotta tiles.

Color looms large inside the building as well as out. "Every room has a color that accompanies the ritual going on inside it," Sottsass says. For instance, he painted the dining room a luminous yellowish green and the courtyard's stucco walls a bright cobalt blue because he wanted a "strong, saturated color."

Color doesn't come just from the paint on the walls; it comes across in textures, materials and reflections of light. For example, Sottsass Associati designed the drawers of the dining room credenza, made of leaves of silver-toned laminated plastic, to reflect the colors of the space around it.

The pristine white bedroom wing (opposite) overlooks a garden. Sliding glass doors lead to the sunken central courtyard (above). The yellow-green dining room (top right, with Sottsass, seated) has oval globe lamps by Jasper Morrison for Flos and a laminated-plastic credenza by Sottsass Associati.



One of the most important ideas behind the planning of the house was "to continue it outside, to make places where you can just look at the flowers, or isolated gardens where you can have tea or meditate," says Sottsass. "This is the main point of the design," Grawunder agrees. "Experiencing it from the inside out supports the dynamic lives of the young couple and their daughter."

To wit, there are outdoor spaces of all shapes and sizes tucked among the pieces of the house. There's a pair of narrow paved courtyards on either side of the entry tower, between the tower and the garage (left) and between the tower and the bedroom wing. Each of the master suite's elevations faces a garden: a pair of secluded sitting areas off the bedroom and bath, and a Japanese garden designed by Belgian architect Robbie Mourmans that's sandwiched between the bedroom and living room wings. A covered terrace projects from the dining room to create an outdoor eating area overlooking the large garden at the rear of the house.

Next year, the architects hope to start building a 5,400-square-foot addition on the west side of the house. As in the main house, separate blocks will house separate functions.

Sottsass sums up his intelligent approach to creating Casa Nanon: "We thought about people's lives. We made many spaces where members of the family can find their own places to be, without being on top of each other."

After so many years designing products, you might think Sottsass is happy creating houses that are simply beautiful objects. But Casa Nanon proves the opposite. "We like designing places to live," he asserts, "not monuments." *mh*

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A courtyard squeezes between the entry tower; a stone-clad corridor and the garage (left). The garage opens onto a courtyard of concrete pavers (right); square windows (top) give peeks inside. Top left: An archway wrapped in wooden slats leads from the dining room into the kitchen.

