

HOLZKRISTAL

Lumbrein, Switzerland
Hurst Song Architekten

When the snow falls in the mountains, Christina Hurst’s home becomes a clear, black punctuation mark on a crisp, white sheet of paper. With its timber coat painted with a dark layer of pitch, this house on the edge of the village of Lumbrein has echoes of the hay barns that dot the mountainsides of the area. But Christina’s house is also markedly contemporary, with an irregular, twisted copper roof and large panes of glass interrupting the timber façade. When she first saw a model of her house, she thought it looked like a wooden crystal, hence the name of the building, ‘Holzkristal’.

It is an extraordinary location to build a home, with mesmerizing views along the valley, which points in the direction of the Italian border. The next valley over holds Vals, with its famous thermal spa; Lumbrein is better known for its artisanal cheeses, and is an escapist haven with few tourists to unsettle the peace. In the summer months, Hurst’s home sits among green pastures, while in the winter the snow fields lap at the door and the house becomes a belvedere for appreciating the epic wonderland outside.

Christina already knew the area, as her mother once had an apartment nearby. Having lived in England before settling in Zurich, she decided that she missed the mountain air and began thinking about buying a property near Lumbrein. But with her son Alex an architect with his own practice, mother and son began to talk about building a house instead. A site was bought just outside the village, alongside a freshly cut road with a number of plots on it that had been set aside for building. Alex began working on a design that would push the house gently into the hillside, with garaging on the basement level and three floors of living space above. His mother had no strong views on what the house should look like, only that it should be flexible and adaptable.

The house’s crystalline shape was partly influenced by the local building codes, which require the slope of a roof to be parallel to the slope of the mountain. But as the house sits on a corner site, Alex and his team came up with the idea of twisting the copper roof. Another planning code requires a large overhang for the roof over the body of the house, usually 1.4m (5 ft). After



The house, with its dark coat of timber, stands out against a blanket of snow in winter; the form of the house carries echoes of wooden agricultural buildings common to the region.





some constructive discussion with the architect about his plans, the local planning authorities allowed the overhang to be reduced down to just 4cm (1½ in.), thus preserving the sculptural outline of the building, which helps to define its unique character.

Inside, a large bunk room with three fold-down double beds sits to one side of the entrance hallway on the ground floor. The middle level holds the main living spaces, where Christina spends most of her time, with a large living room on one side of the central staircase and the combined kitchen and dining room to the other. A large picture window looking up the valley dominates the living room, which also has its own wood-burning stove, while the kitchen leads out onto a modest veranda slotted into the rear outline of the house. Upstairs, tucked within the pitch of the roof, are two other bedrooms with en suites.

‘The house can be used in many different ways,’ says Alex. ‘When all the grandchildren are here, each bedroom can be used as a family suite, and the bunk room can sleep six. Rather than lots of small rooms, we decided to have three large bedrooms, which are each big enough to function as a retreat, like a comfortable hotel room.’

Alex pared down the materials used to a limited palette: concrete to strengthen the base and lower floors of the house; and pine used throughout, interspersed with the big windows. Architect and client worked closely with a local carpenter and builder, who also made the bespoke kitchen and the maple-topped dining table. Vintage pieces of furniture and flea-market finds are mixed with mid-century classics by Le Corbusier, Warren Platner, Harry Bertoia and Max Bill. The house is also built to a Passivhaus standard, with excellent insulation and a ground-source heat pump for the underfloor heating, along with a heat-recovery system to ensure that no energy is wasted in winter. The ethos of sustainability is echoed in the house’s modest positioning within its site, with no formal gardens or landscaping.

‘We tried to reduce the outside elements,’ says Alex. ‘There are just two seating areas outside and the house sits directly in the pasture. The cows come right up to the building, and that’s how the grass gets trimmed.’



ENTRY LEVEL

GROUND FLOOR

TOP FLOOR

Above The interiors were designed for flexibility, offering a comfortable experience for one but also adapting with ease to visiting family and guests, who can make use of the folding beds in the entry-level guest room.

Opposite The sculptural, crystalline form of the house was, in part, a response to the topography of the sloping site.



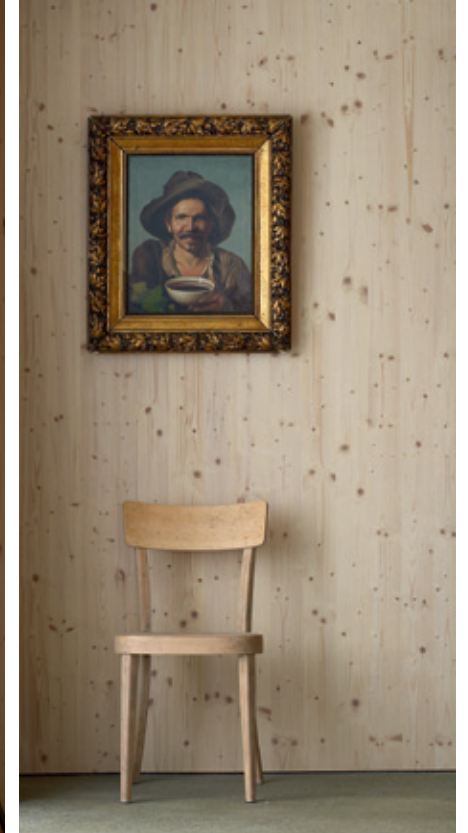
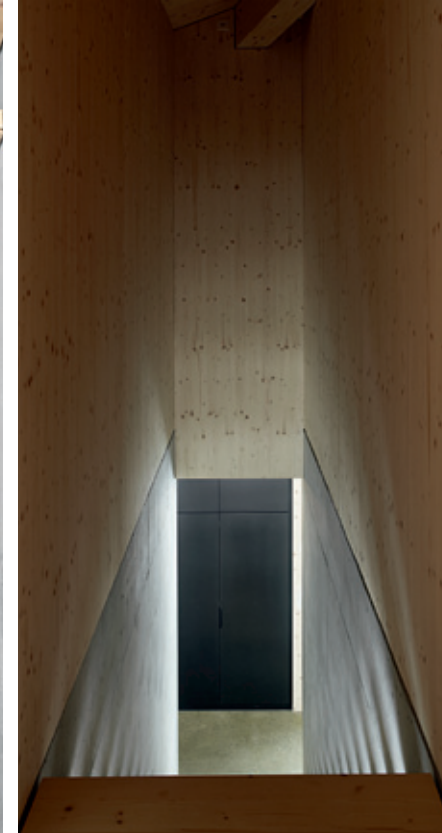
A large picture window in the sitting room offers a panoramic view of the village and neighbouring farms. The coffee table is a vintage Warren Platner design, while the armchair is an antiques-shop find.



Above The dining room at mid-level looks out over the snow-coated pasture to the rear of the building. The paintings in the sitting room are by Kieran Hurst, the owner's grandson.

Opposite The dining table is a bespoke design by the architect, while the chairs are vintage Horgenglarus designs.





Above The portrait of a Swiss farmer used to belong to Christina Hurst's grandparents and hung in a restaurant they once owned.

Opposite Two generously proportioned double bedrooms sit at the top of the house; the chair and ottoman in the corner are by Harry Bertoia for Knoll.