



A home for the 21st century

A unique opportunity to own a luxury, eco-friendly home designed by the renowned architect Daniel Libeskind is being offered in the village of Orselina, which overlooks the resort town of Locarno and enjoys stunning views of Lake Maggiore.

By Catherine Richards Golini | The Villa Libeskind project is the result of a cooperation between Daniel Libeskind, one of the world's leading architects and *proportion*, a Berlin-based company. Libeskind, whose studio was behind the master plan for the rebuilding of New York's World Trade Center site, is responsible for many of the world's most innovative public spaces, including Berlin's Jewish Museum, the Denver Art Museum, the Royal Ontario Museum and the Imperial War Museum North in Manchester. He's also the architect behind Bern's Westside Shopping and Leisure centre, which opened in 2008. A huge success, Switzerland's largest shopping complex attracted 4.2 million visitors in its first year – and made an impressive SFr 180 million.

An elite club

Domestic dwellings, though, are a rarity: the Villa Libeskind is, aside from two other private homes currently under



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The interior and exterior of the Villa Libeskind in Orselina

construction in the United States, the architect's first design of a residential structure.

What makes the Villa unique is, perversely, that it's not alone: there won't be just one of them but 30 – though there's no danger of waking up one morning to find yourself on a Libeskind-look housing estate as buyers are guaranteed regional exclusivity. The property currently being marketed in Canton Ticino is the very first of its kind in the world.

I asked Peter Rabitz of Wetag Consulting, the real estate company marketing the property, why Orselina had been selected as the location for this unique home. "It's very difficult and rare to get a great lot in a prominent location where you can also build. Just to offer the Villa would be enough, but combined with the lot you get the whole package and that's what people are looking for."

In short, Orselina ticked all the boxes. The chosen plot, with breathtaking views over Lake Maggiore and the surrounding mountains works very well for the house too, as it is a structure that "works very closely with the landscape, with green, with trees, with water" Libeskind says.

Limited edition luxury

The German company behind this unique concept is *proportion*. Established in 2007, its aim is to make great architects and their work more accessible to lovers of contemporary design, while its founders come from diverse areas like art, engineering and business rather than architecture or companies involved in modular builds.

"[*proportion*] was initiated by the observation that it is practically impossible to have one of the leading architects develop a design for you, unless you're best friends with him or her," said Michael Merz, the company's managing director. The Libeskind Villa is the first in what *proportion* plan to be a range of architect-designed, limited-edition homes across the globe.

The Villa is recognisable Libeskind with its asymmetrical, tapered shapes reminiscent of a crystal. The exterior is clad in zinc (in two shades to resemble the material when naturally aged), while the interior – a very spacious 515m² – comes in two styles: the sculptural "Libeskind style" for firm fans of the architect's signature look and the warmer vibe of the so-called "Casual style", which uses softer-looking materials such as wood and stone in warm tones.

"We expect [the Villa] to be particularly attractive to design-minded customers, with a strong sense of art, architecture and design and a desire to experience new spaces and a new way of living. You have to be *in* the Villa to really experience this!" Merz explains.

Eco-friendly design

Anyone concerned that high style is incompatible with a green lifestyle can rest easy, for the eco-friendly structure is fully compliant with contemporary standards of sustainability and makes use of some impressive cutting-edge technologies. "The Villa is a statement in many respects, certainly in terms of architecture and design, but also in terms of sustainable living standards," affirmed Merz.

Constructed largely in wood, today's renewable build material of choice, the house is classified as a low-energy structure and has high thermal insulation thanks to 360 mm of (recyclable) wood fibres and the metallic cladding.

Rheinzink are the German company behind the very contemporary zinc facade, which is not only aesthetically



pleasing – and of Libeskind's favourite materials – but green too: it's low in CO₂ emissions, low in energy consumption during production and easy to recycle.

"Zinc is a material that is very organic," says Libeskind. "[It] gets a patina that reacts with the sky in a way that is truly sustainable, [it's] a material that really grows and ages in a very beautiful way, with subtlety, with colour, with liveliness. It's never just a flat, dull, metallic finish but something that breathes with the life of the building."

Then there's what you *don't* see: the cladding conceals a cutting-edge solar thermal system, which combines a geothermal energy absorber and heat pump system. Though lack of sunshine isn't an issue in Locarno, this happens to be a heat recovery system that makes use of ambient heat and is effective independent of direct sunlight. The system uses the temperature and humidity of the surrounding air as a source of heat, and can even extract energy from condensation. In winter geothermal probes extract energy from the ground to heat the house while in the hotter months the property is kept cool by transferring energy to the ground.

"Nature's own" – light in Libeskind-speak – is one of the principal materials here and the interplay of light and shadow, both internally and externally, throughout the day and night, is a key feature of property. "The shadow and light of the house really create a form that is very unique, that really celebrates those who spend time in the house and those who are outside looking at the house," he says.

Fab! But not pre-fab.

A prototype of the property was built last year in Datteln, Germany – RheinZink's headquarters – which not only gave the public a chance to see the Villa but allowed typical construction risks to be eliminated. Some journalists have misunderstood the nature of the build, dubbing it a posh prefab, and while certain components of the structure will be shipped to the site to ensure a speedy build, Michael Merz of *proportion* emphasises that this is not in any way a pre-fabricated home.

The Villa is located in an amazing natural setting in Ticino, and uses the interplay of light and shadow throughout the day to create unique visuals for those who spend time inside the house.

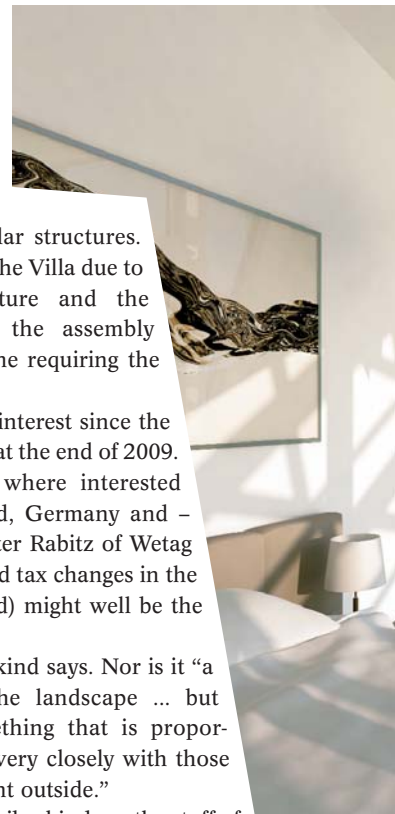


"There are no commonalities with prefabs, not even with modular structures. We cannot and do not prefabricate the Villa due to the complexity of the architecture and the detailing," he said adding that the assembly process is, in the end, a manual one requiring the expertise of skilled workers.

The Villa has attracted a lot of interest since the build project came onto the market at the end of 2009. "There are three main countries where interested buyers come from. It's Switzerland, Germany and – more and more – the UK," says Peter Rabitz of Wetag Consulting, adding that the proposed tax changes in the UK (which will hit top earners hard) might well be the driving force behind this.

"This is not just a house," Libeskind says. Nor is it "a rectangular object plonked on the landscape ... but something that is beautiful, something that is proportioned, harmonious, that interacts very closely with those who live in it and to the environment outside."

Homes of the order of the Villa Libeskind are the stuff of dreams for many of us (Rabitz cites a price tag of around SFr 7 million, which includes all luxury fixtures and fittings) but as a unique architectural and design concept, it's priceless.





Daniel Libeskind
in front of his extension to
the Denver Art Museum, in
Colorado, USA