



The following text and images are courtesy Jef Smith for the design of a house by Vicki Thornton with [MELD architecture](#) in the Tarn-et-Garonne region of south western France. Click on images for larger color views.

Built on a steeply sloping [greenfield site](#), the house is expressed in [two distinct parts](#): a rubble limestone base containing a bedroom, pottery studio, shower and utility rooms below the main living and bedroom spaces in a chestnut clad timber frame. The inflecting timber forms of the upper level are intended to respond to the approach, landscape and surrounding views [\[floor plans\]](#). At one end, the high roof of the front porch is angled to look along the access road, the main living area offers expansive views of the surrounding landscape, and the terrace reveals views of the valley.

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Vernacular materials and elements create a pragmatic aesthetic particular to place. The rubble stone walls are typical of this part of France as are timber shuttered windows and sliding, galvanized steel doors on local farm buildings. Here the timber shutters close flush with the walls to continue the board-on-board rhythm of the chestnut cladding, giving strong vertical shadow lines which compliment the heavy modelling of the rubble stone.

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Internally the walls and ceiling to the upper level [are lined in OSB](#), painted in the bedrooms to distinguish the more private spaces but left "fair faced" on the remaining walls to give a warm texture to the interior of the house. Joinery elements, like the kitchen cabinet doors and [long shelving wall](#) are expressed in phenolic ply, chosen for its robustness as well as to offset the OSB. At the lower level the ceilings and internal face of the external walls are faced in lime render with [timber-lined window seats](#) created in the deep reveals.

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Essentially robust and low tech, the house is highly insulated and utilizes the potential for passive solar heating in the winter, while the high thermal mass of the lower floor and large volume of the timber frame (with sun-shading shutters to south facing windows) enables a comfortable temperature to be maintained in the summer without the need for air conditioning or mechanical ventilation. The house incorporates solar thermal panels for domestic hot water, rainwater harvesting for flushing toilets and irrigation, a green roof, and uses locally sourced materials and labor.

