

What is Cefn Castell?



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Introduction and historical background

Located in Criccieth, Gwynedd and perched on an isolated clifftop location is the award-winning Cefn Castell holiday home, designed by Manchester-established Stepehnson Studio. Built in 2014, the Castell is a perfect example of 20th-century modernism represented in Wales (Spridgeon, D.2025). The house may look like a standard modern building, but it stands out from the surrounding architecture in North Wales, particularly compared to the traditional Welsh vernacular cottages and Victorian terraced houses. The building perfectly resonates with modern architecture alongside the minimalism movement, whether through its clean lines or its colour palette. Since the building sits on a cliff, it offers some of the best views of Cardigan Bay. Cefn Castell, known for its dramatic location, was built to replace what remained of a 400-year-old cottage previously located on the coastal site, though the cottage wasn't fully demolished due to the significance of its natural materials (Ribaj.com.2015). What makes Cefn Castell even more intriguing is that it uses the remains of the stonework from the cottage to create a new boundary wall (Morgan, S. 2015). Though built in 2014, the house has achieved several milestones and secured its place in modern architectural history in Wales. Due to many positive factors, the contemporary house appeared on the famous Channel 4 '*Grand Design*' series, and was previously used as a filming location for the reality show '*I'm a Celebrity Get Me Out Of Here*'. Additionally, the house was the property winner of a Royal Institute of British Architects Award (RIBA) for its overall design (Ridout, J.2021).

Architectural Drawings

The axonometric (**see fig.4**) displays a visibly Mondrian-inspired open-plan and overall layout. The boundary stone wall surrounds the majority of the house, which is suitable for privacy reasons and enhances the connection with natural materials. The ground floor (**see fig.1**) sets a strong impression of the entire building right from the start. After passing by the porte cochere (2) and going through the main entrance (3), the building welcomes its guests with the open living (4), dining (5), and kitchen space (6), which further leads into utility space (7) and a pond(11). Moreover, the main entrance also leads into an internal courtyard (8). The internal courtyard helps bring more natural lighting and ventilation, while also offering external views and serving as a cover for harsher weather. This presents the internal courtyard as one of the major parts of Cefn Castell in terms of architectural design (Admin,2016). Two en-suite bedrooms (9) are adjacent to the internal courtyard, one of which is connected to it; this is especially effective and helps boost the overall disposition of the bedroom. Overall, the Cefn Castell doesn't feel closed off during the daytime as it's surrounded by natural light on account of the windows that almost frame the building, allowing the interior to feel almost engulfed by the outdoor views. The open plan design strongly influences the connection with the outdoors, whether that's through the large windows or the balcony on the first floor overlooking magnificent views of North Wales. Suitably, the rooms and kitchen on the ground floor work with the interior and exterior to create a fluid and open atmosphere. The interior design and furniture also follow a Mondrian-inspired colour palette, which contrasts perfectly with the generally monochrome colour palette of the building.

The first floor (**see fig.2**) includes the master bedroom (1), a bathroom (2), and a private terrace (3), which can be accessed through the master bedroom. The balcony on the first floor is an ideal addition to the house in terms of the site and the visuals that it offers. Additionally, on the facade of the building, the balcony offers a geometric touch to the building, and internally, it offers an even better visual story of the Bae Ceredigion. (Cardigan Bay) (**see fig.5**) A Mondrian painting is hung around the centre of the house and can be seen from the outside of the house, peeking through the glass. This could be considered as a strong reminder, as if it's foreshadowing where everything that surrounds it came from (**see fig.4**).

Materiality

The Cefn Castell shows off “A crisp composition of white planes and glass walls that would not be out of place on the hills overlooking Las Vegas” (John B Hilling,p260-61). Due to its outwardly modern aesthetic, the house creates a contrast with its surrounding green and coastal site, also considering modern architecture isn’t commonly found in similar sites. Through the repetitive use of glass, the Cefn Castell allows the breathtaking exterior views to reach their fullest potential. Glass also has the advantage of allowing in lots of natural lighting, immersing the house in a reflection of the weather outdoors. As stated previously, Cefn Castle was constructed on top of the remains of a discarded cottage, incorporating its previous stone to create a wall. The client was especially passionate about using locally sourced materials, which, beneficially, helped reduce the carbon footprint in transportation costs (Design Commission for Wales, 2016). The stone wall can be seen indoors and outdoors, forming a connection with natural materials, whether through the natural and industrial material combination used in the house, or the overall exterior facade combined with the surrounding site. Furthermore, the use of the stone wall forms a connection between different ages of architecture, connecting the past and present rather than fully discarding the past. Looking at sustainable materials in the Cefn Castell, the building obviously uses stone, which is a huge positive; it also uses sustainable technologies such as an air source heat pump for underfloor heating (Welch, A. 2015). Considering the controversial clifftop location of the house, the construction had to be thoroughly thought out for proper stability. The house is made up of a steel frame structure and a combination of rendered masonry and a lightweight timber frame construction. This construction type assisted in creating large expanse openings which maximise natural lighting and promote surrounding views. Regrettably, the house construction wasn’t strong enough to deter natural processes from occurring. Due to a landslide and erosion, the house faced repercussions, and the surrounding wall is now overhanging the cliff. To help solve this predicament, the owners are currently seeking planning permission to conduct cliff stabilisation and protect its future (Spridgeon, D.,2025).

A similar composition to the Cefn Castell is the Carreg a Gwydr (‘Stone and Glass’) visible in rural Monmouthshire (South Wales), completed by Hall & Bednarczyk in 2011 (Hilling, J.B. and Unwin, S. 2018,p261). The house is a modern private residence that combines glass and stone all around the building. In terms of design and distinctiveness, both the Cefn Castell and Carreg a Gwydr are extremely effective. The houses manage to connect modernism with nature while keeping everything balanced; they also utilise windows to their advantage with regard to creating an open space and allowing in the most natural lighting.

Ideas and theories underpinning design

The main ideas behind the design of the house are to maximise the coastal views to the fullest and emphasise the connection between indoor and outdoor space through several aspects, allowing the people inside and outside to engage with the outdoor views and really let them sink in. The house almost merges with its cliff environment to create a unique design. In addition, even the bedrooms in the house had meaningful inspirations behind them; the master bedroom and balcony have been cleverly designed to resemble the look of coastal observation stations, which ties everything back to the site and coastal surroundings (Rhys, S. 2017). The ideology behind the design sprang from the owner's interest in art and sculptures, but more so focused on linear patterns and block colours that are present in abstract art, specifically similar to the artist Piet Mondrian, which was used as a key part of the design process, and highlighted through different aspects of the Cefn Castell house (Mairs, J. 2015). Almost all the design tributes in Cefn Castell were purposeful to resemble the Mondrian style, whether from the furniture, colour palettes, the constant use of horizontal and vertical lines, or the beauty of its minimalistic approach. Another noticeable scheme throughout the design of Cefn Castle is that it takes advantage of empty voids to create geometric shapes, which are seen all throughout the walls and roof of the house. This seems to reference Mondrian once again.

Diving deeper into the Dutch painter Mondrian, his art style was heavily inspired by cubism, but it was later that he eliminated descriptive elements from his work, and only in 1917 did his mature, fully abstract style come to the surface. This style is apparent in many of his pieces, for example, composition 55, 1921 (**see fig.7**), which displays abstract art all over, defined by bold horizontal and vertical lines alongside primary colours, also reflecting asymmetry. This artwork also defines the main features of the De Stijl movement, which was an art movement started in 1917 by Piet Mondrian and Theo Van Doesburg. Along with his now-renowned style, the movement was part of the reason that Mondrian gained his international fame (Busignani, A., 1968). Reverting to theories behind the house, another pattern that can be recognised through analysing the house is that it takes advantage of materiality to smoothly execute the idea of blending the past with the present. Through the incorporation of the old cottage materials, it almost symbolises the significance of old architecture and the different approaches that can be taken to preserve it. (Bevan, N. and Evans, H. 2021) As a final point, even the name of the house was intentional. the meaning behind the name of Cefn Castell translates exactly to castle ridge, which is suitable considering the site.

Conclusion

To summarise, the Cefn Castell is a magnificent coastal house that represents contemporary architecture in Wales and perfectly executes the inspiration of Mondrian. Although the house is significantly inspired by Mondrian, it also has its own unique characteristics that adapt to its surrounding site. Different art styles are referenced all over the building, which is why artists could potentially appreciate it more than the regular viewer. Minimalism is portrayed on the facade as it has an exterior look that highlights the beauty of the interior and the site rather than overshadowing them. Cefn Castell could be considered severely successful when you analyse it in terms of design and aesthetic appeal, but in terms of sustainability, it's unfortunately lacking greatly. Shown through the shows '*Grand Design*' and '*I'm A Celebrity*', the house and the views that it offers left many viewers in awe. Though there's more to a building than an attractive facade, and woefully, the unusual site and weather conditions are reasons why the building is currently facing a huge and serious threat that could risk the house falling into the sea. The entrance is at risk, which puts the building in danger of so many losses, since the unstable foundation is a huge problem that needs to be addressed to give the house a longer life. Disappointingly, the disadvantages that came from the beautiful beach site were severe and outweighed so many of the advantages simply due to longevity and safety measures. Along with the strong winds and ocean water, the cliff location makes it a brave risk to build in the first place. Though, as mentioned, the owners are taking action to preserve it by conducting cliff stabilisation, anticipating that this will be a method to hopefully preserve one of Wales' modern architecture gems.

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Appendix



Figure 1 (Stephenson-studio.com, 2025) shows the ground floor plan.

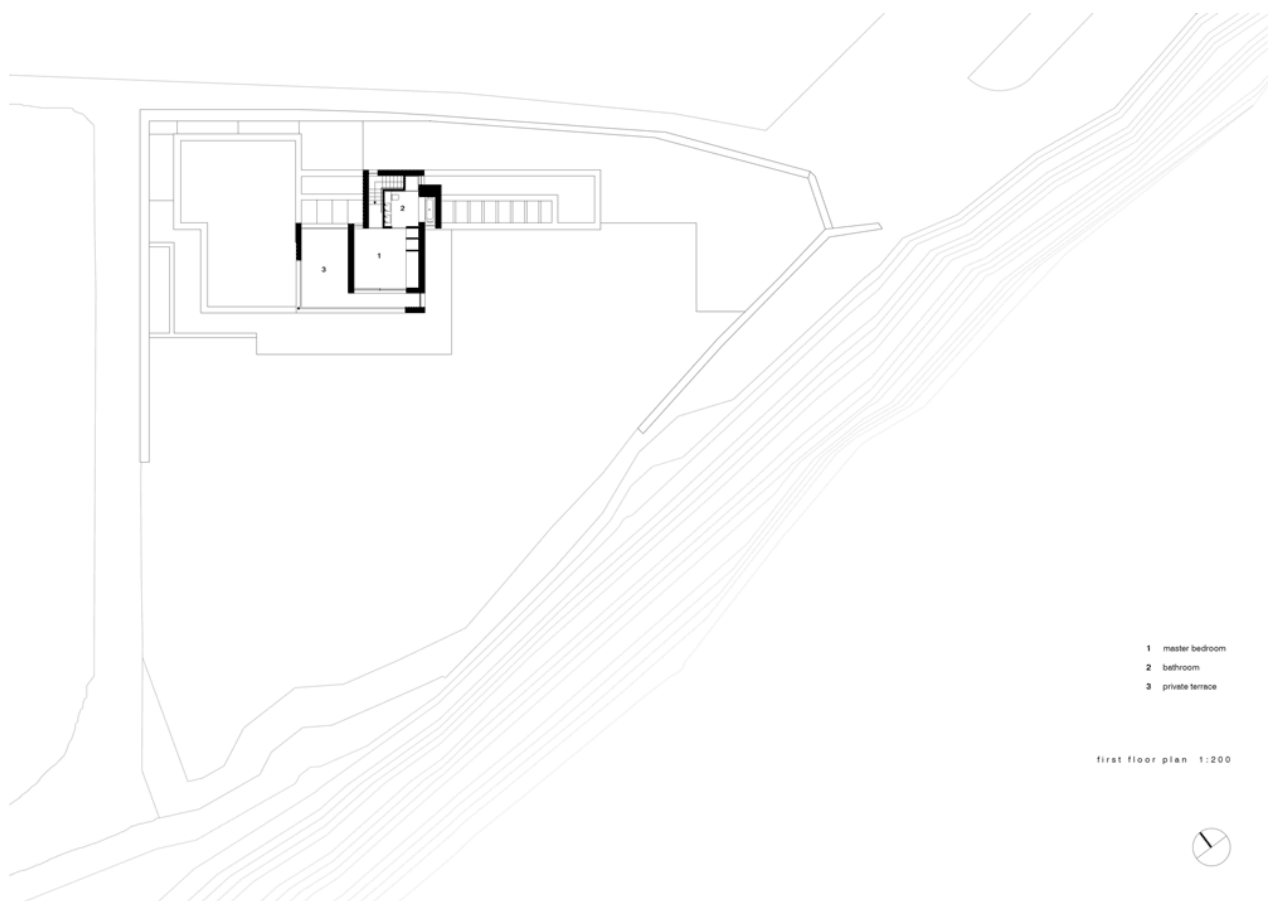


Figure 2 (Stephenson-studio.com, 2025) shows first first-floor plan.

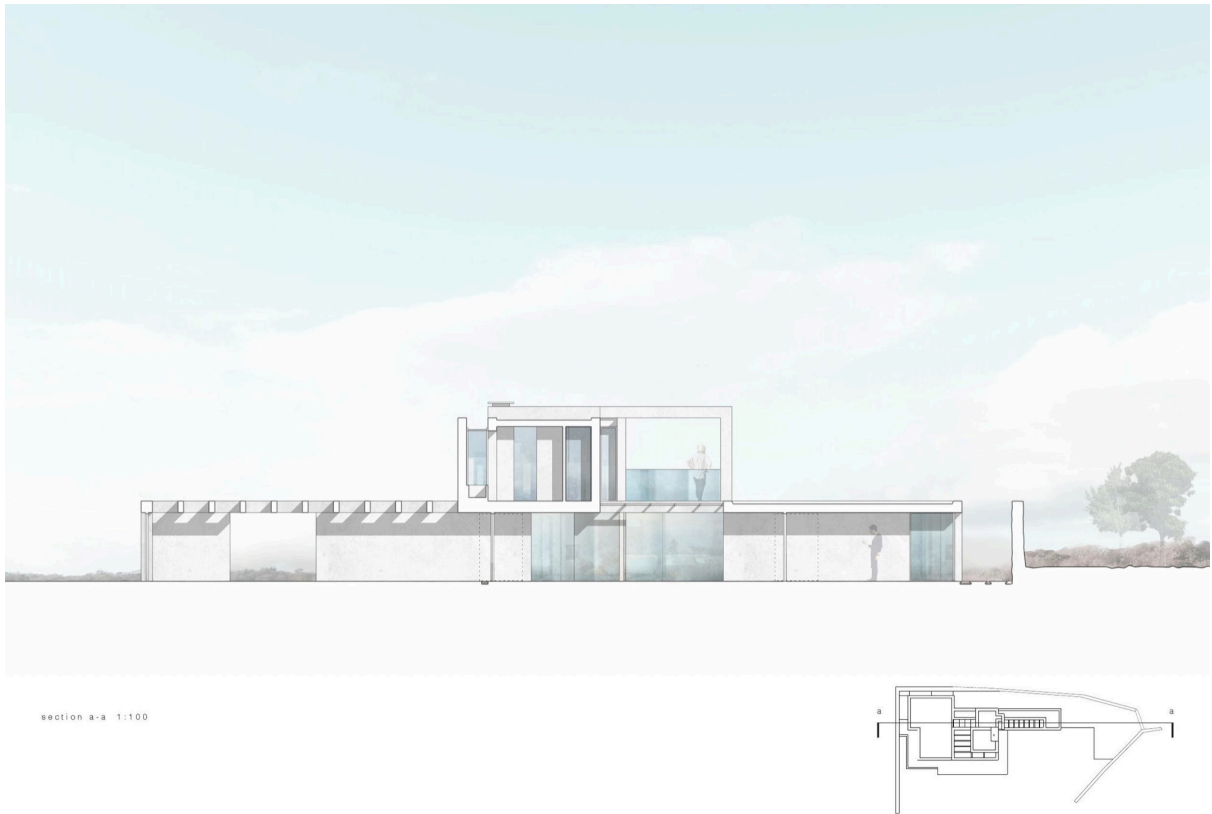


Figure 3 (Stephenson-studio.com, 2025) shows a section of Cefn Castell.

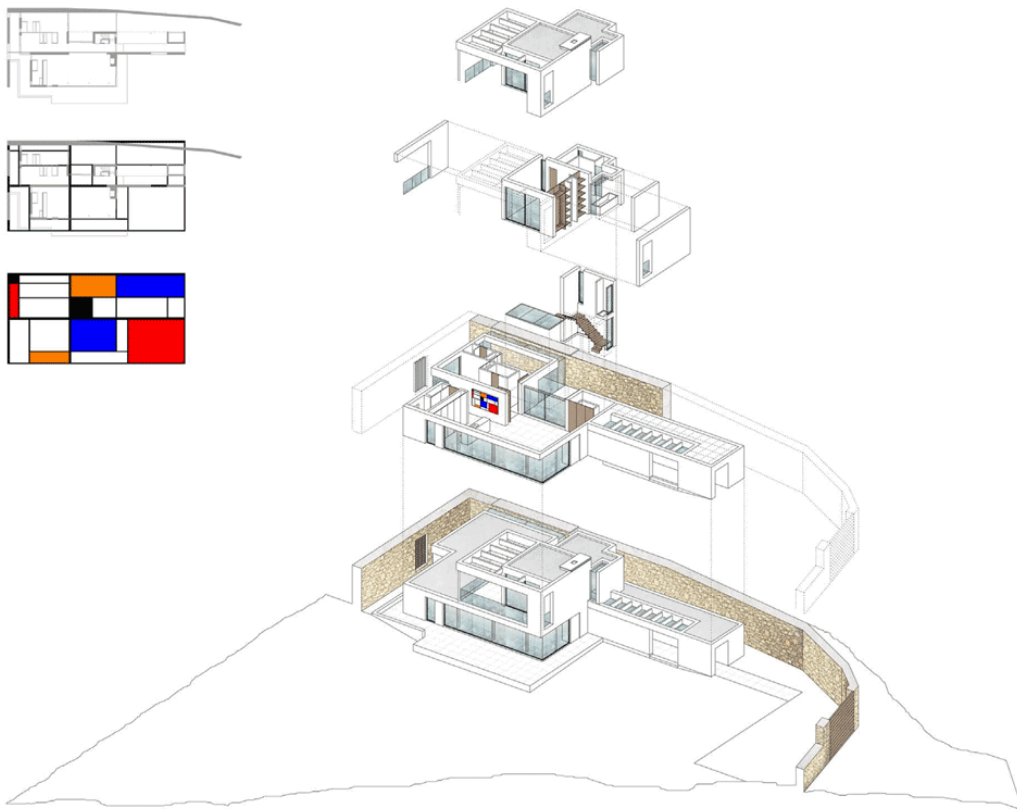


Figure 4 (Stephenson-studio.com, 2025) shows an exploded axonometric of Cefn Castell.

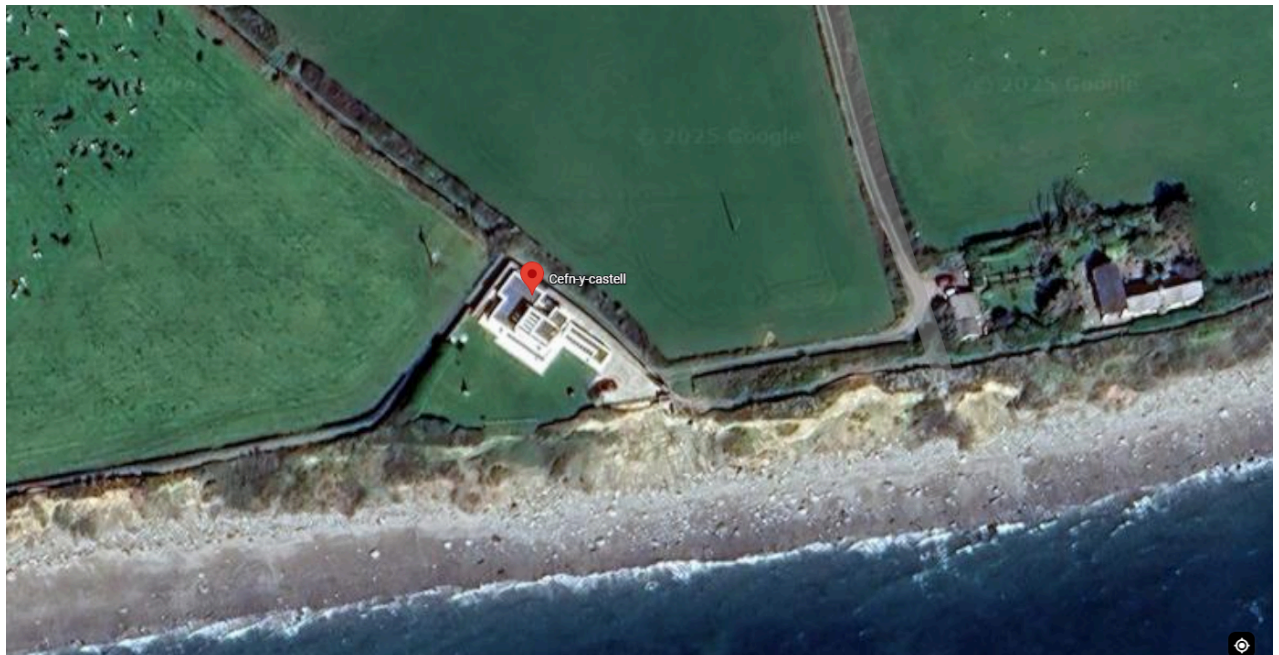


Figure 5 (Spridgeon, D. 2025) shows the location of Cefn Castell.



Figure 6 (Finestretreats.co.uk, 2025) shows the interior of Cefn Castell, including furniture in a Mondrian colour palette.

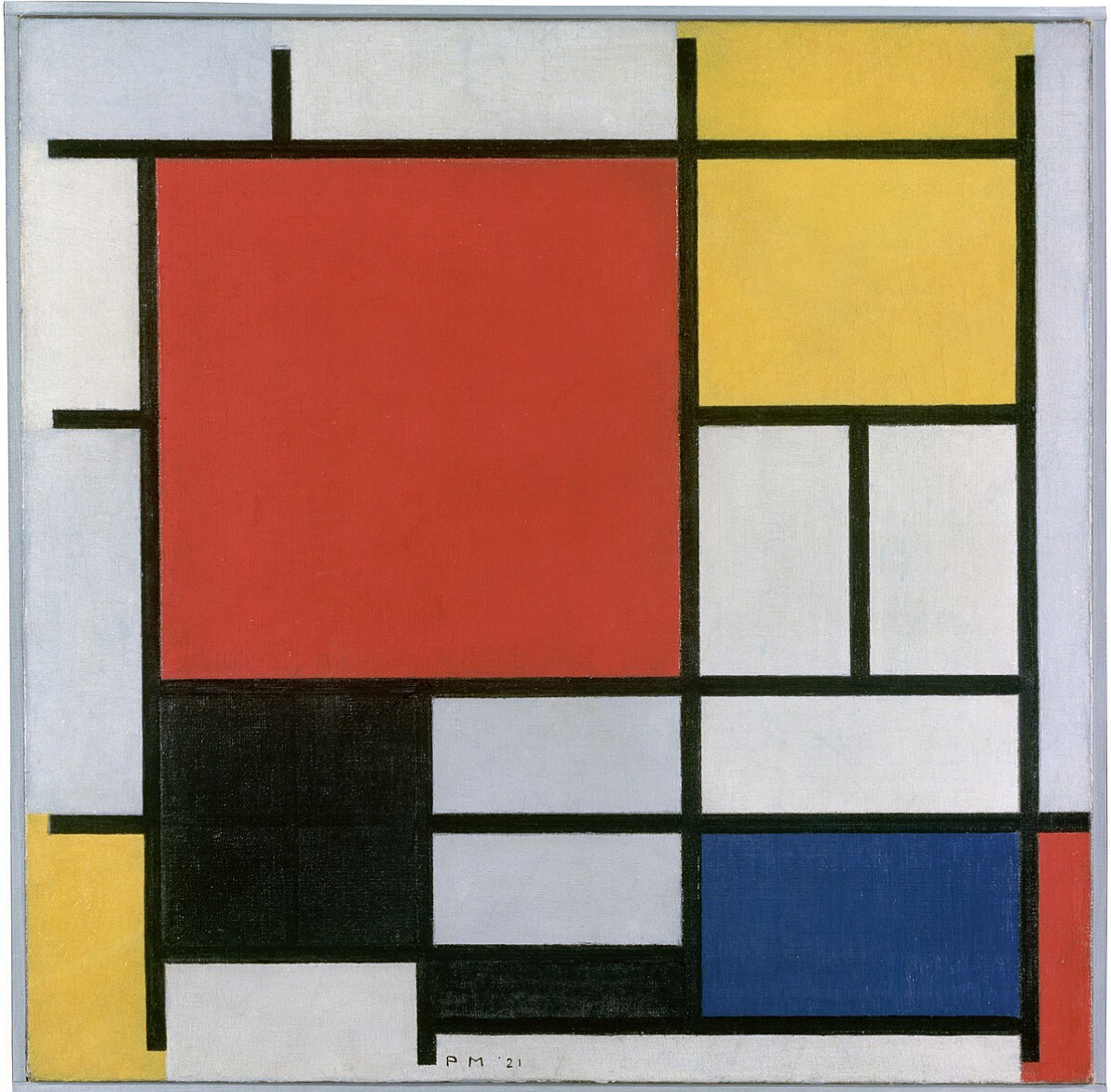


Figure 7 (Busignani, A. 1968, Composition 55, 1921).

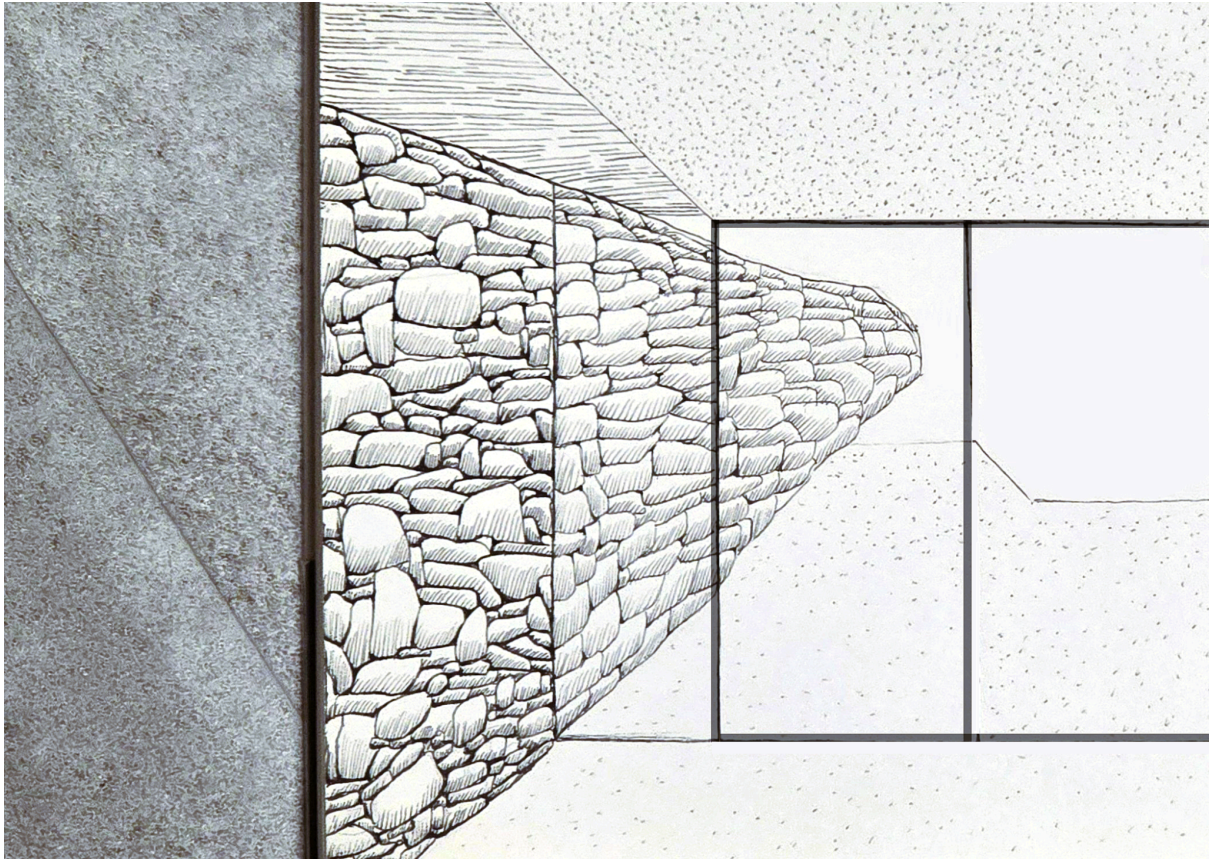


Figure 8 (Sara Izzidien, 2025) shows a drawing of Cefn Castle, which includes the stone wall from the old cottage connected to the glass from the new building.