03

NEVER TOO SMALL

Creative, compact and joyful ways to design and live.

The Meaning of Made In Japan • Beyond The Golden Turd • A Renovation Revolution
The Cult-Like Cool of Japanese Magazines • Conflicted on Concrete

Joy in a capsule.

It’s peak hour in Tokyo and I’m standing out of the way of a bustling traffic light junction eating a warm *taiyaki* in front of a gashapon shop. My gaze lands on a weary middle-aged man in a suit with closely cropped salt-and-pepper hair.

He’s facing the machines, laser-focused, deciding which one deserves his 300 yen. Finally, he decides. He turns the crank, and a capsule drops into the dispenser. He retrieves it, cracks it open and a scream of joy erupts - he got it! Whatever it was, he got it.

He cannot conceal his delight, despite the disapproving stares from the nearby crowd of pedestrians waiting for the lights to change. He holds up the tiny figurine like a trophy and snaps a selfie, wearing the biggest smile I’ve seen in my five days in Tokyo.

As the light turns green, the man melts back into the crowd and I lose him. I return to my *taiyaki* and discover a trail of custard down the front of my jacket. Joy.

- COLIN CHEE

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Editor
Elizabeth Price
Editor@nevertoosmall.com

Creative Direction
Colin Chee

Art Director
Lara Burke

Editorial Assistant
Eloïse Lachicorée

Proofreading
Penny Craswell

Advertising & Partnerships
James McPherson
james@nevertoosmall.com

Distribution
Ra & Olly
office@raandollyltd.com

Printing
C&C Offset Printing. Co. Ltd.

Marketing & Operations
Lindsay Barnard
Joel Beath

Cover Illustration
Grace Lee

Poster Art
Grace Lee
Sebby T

Masthead design
Sebby T

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James McPherson
Never Too Small Pty Ltd
292 Wellington Street
Collingwood VIC 3066
Australia

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CONTRIBUTORS

Words
Ayumi Taguchi
Claire Williamson
Colin Chee
Elizabeth Price
Eloïse Lachicorée
James Shackell
Jana Perković
Jeremy Williams
Kirsten Drysdale
Kirsty Munro
Luke Ryan
Makoto Kikuchi
Nicky Lobo
Spencer Bailey

• • •

Artwork & Photography
Akira Nakamura
Chim↑Pom
Eilon Paz
Grace Lee
Hayahisa Tomiyasu
Karen E. Young
Kenji Kawakami
Kohei Omachi
Kota Kawai
Minami Kiishi
Nam Tran
Norio Kidera
Rory Gardiner
Sebby T
Todd Selby

• • •

With special thanks to
Sebby T
Takeshi & Megumi Hosaka
Nam Tran & Anri Yoshimura
Spencer Bailey
Vincent Tang
Eva Benamou
Naoto Fukasawa
Fernando Pacheco
Norio Kidera
Camilla Ferenczi
Takuhito Kawashima

Never Too Small
is created by
Colin Chee.

Creative Director
Colin Chee

Managing Director
James McPherson

General Manager
Lindsay Barnard

Head of Digital
Joel Beath

Finance Manager
Petrina Crocker

Video Production
Nam Tran
Jessica Ruasol
Sebastian Tibbs

Social Media &
Channel Manager
Alannah Song

For more creative, compact and joyful ways to design and live:

Website
nevertoosmall.com

YouTube
youtube.com/@nevertoosmall

Instagram
@nvtsmall

Books & Publications
nts-store.com

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What is MUJI?

MUJI was founded in 1980 to realise a vision – to offer products useful to the customer, while retaining balance between life and the objects that make it possible. The concept was born via the intersection of two distinct ideals: no brand (Mujirushi) and the value of good items (Ryohin).

Our focus is to create simple, quality products by thoroughly reviewing manufacturing processes and everyday life. Specifically, we examine each item through three core principles:

1. Selection of materials
2. Streamlining of processes
3. Simplification of packaging

MUJI's emphasis on the intrinsic appeal of an object through rationalisation and meticulous elimination of excess is closely connected to the traditionally Japanese aesthetic of "su" – meaning plain or unadorned – the idea that simplicity is not merely modest or frugal but could possibly be more appealing that luxury. The essence of a MUJI product lies in its flexibility and modesty to fit different lifestyles and individual preferences.

MUJI
無印良品

Contents
Issue 3.

Welcome to the New Stone Age

At Noveco Surfaces, we're not just reimagining solid surfaces; we're revolutionising sustainable building practices with our safe and sustainable engineered stone alternatives.

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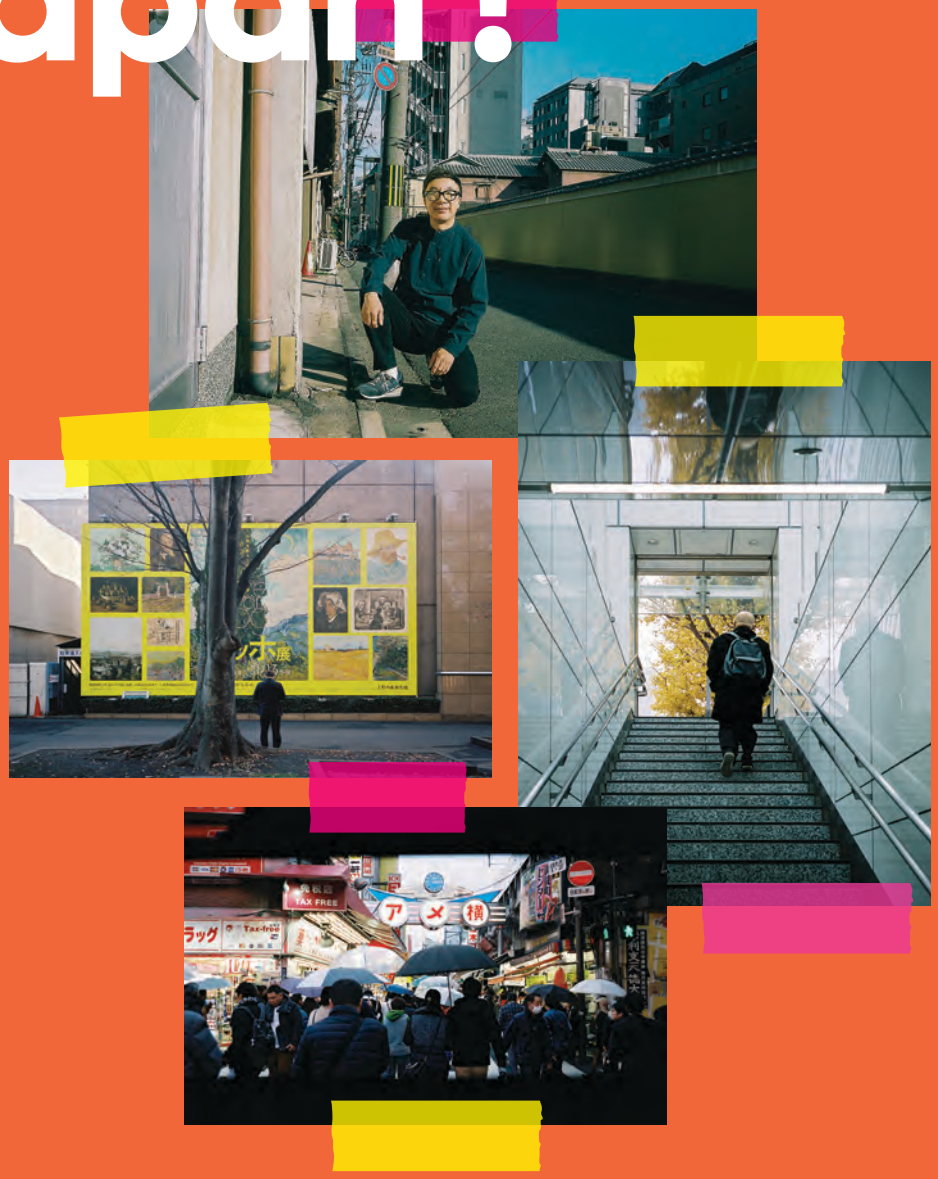


Images: Nam Tran.

We have a secret weapon at Never Too Small. Before he became one of our key creatives, Nam Tran lived in Japan for nine years. This is where he met his wife, Anri, and together they relocated to Nam's home town of Melbourne in 2020. When Nam, Anri and their daughter Kano return to Japan each year to visit family and friends, we eagerly take advantage. These regular trips feed our insatiable appetite for all things Japanese: Nam returns sometimes with up to seven episodes of Never Too Small in the can and ready to edit for our YouTube channel – snackable stories of how Japanese architects are applying their mind-blowing design pedigree to fascinating small homes. Nam also inevitably returns with an updated wardrobe, which in turn inspires a persistent stream of envious compliments: 'nice shirt,' 'nice sneakers,' 'great jacket'. And then there are the snacks. Nam always returns with snacks. Lots of snacks. He knows his audience after all.

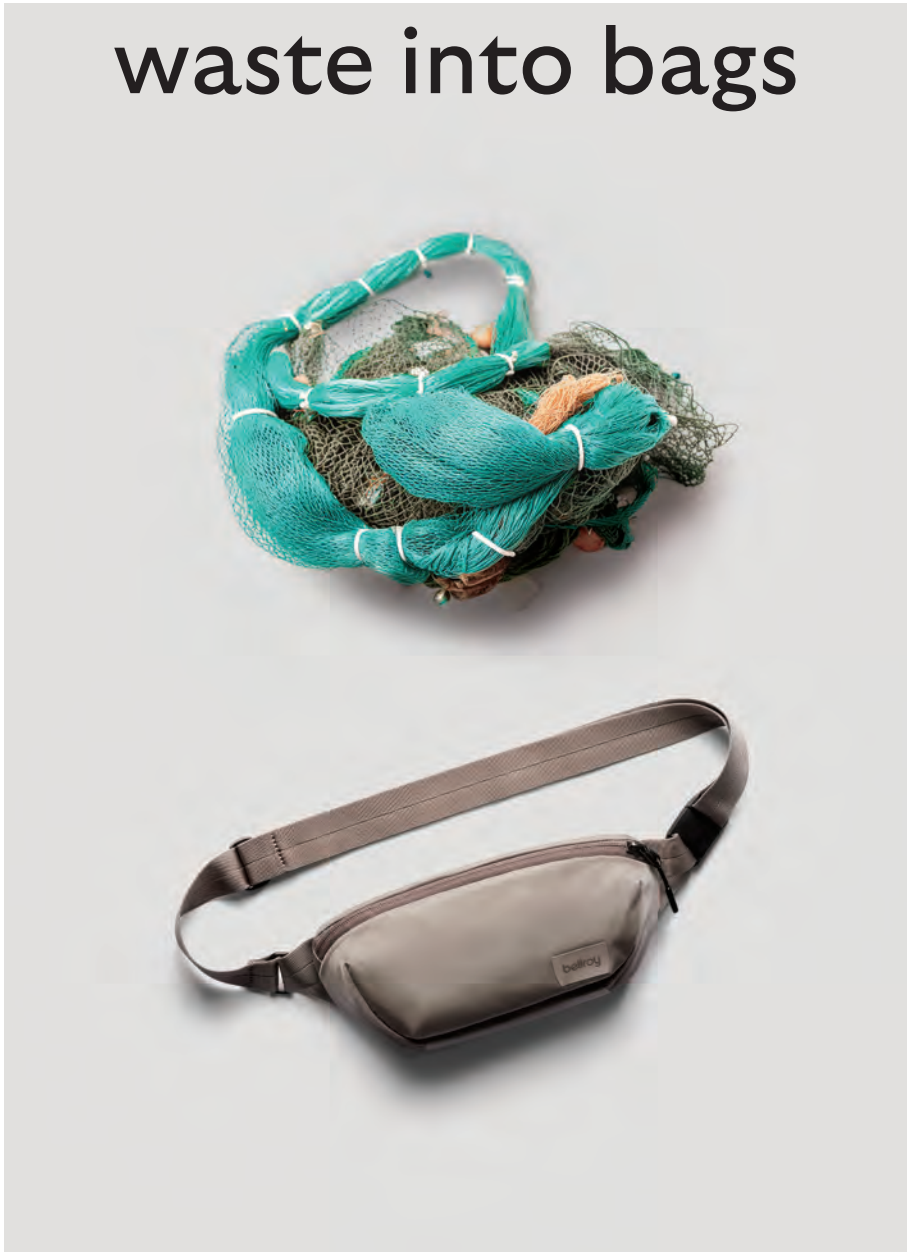
And we like to think we know ours. The episodes of Never Too Small featuring Japanese homes are some of our most popular. This is why it's a no-brainer for Nam to capture all the content he can for us during his biannual visits, because you all love Japan and Japanese design, architecture and culture as much as we do. This is also why we dedicated this entire issue to precisely that. Briefly, we wondered whether we could fill an entire issue with content centred on or thematically linked to Japan but quickly, we worried about how we could possibly jam everything we wanted to within these pages. From a profile on the last living link with Japan's mingei folk art movement, Samiro Yunoki, who only died in 2024 at the age of 101 **(p60)**, to the bleeding edge of Japan's urban art scene **(p144)**, we wholeheartedly embrace the paradoxes of this endlessly fascinating country. What emerges in these two stories, and many others within this issue, is an exquisite balancing act of fun and seriousness, play and rules. Who better to epitomise this dichotomy than designer Sir Paul Smith? You can't get to where he is without taking business a little seriously, but there's always a wink in all he puts into the world. In his interview with Spencer Bailey **(p48)**, Smith discusses his deep, 40-plus-year engagement with Japan and how he's "constantly playing with big and small, or rough and smooth, or kitsch and beautiful."

Further in, we introduce you to the colourful apartment complex that promises something radical: to reverse the concept of death **(p120)**, and take you on a tour of Japan's most smile-inducing architecture **(p132)**. James Shackell helps us to unpick and understand the cult appeal of Japanese magazines in all their wild and wonderful variety, and we also take some inspiration from their beautifully busy and inspiration-laden layouts with our cheat sheet on Japanese interior style **(p194)**. After immersing ourselves for months in all things Japanese, we found ourselves pondering: what is it about Japanese design, in all its varied and prolific forms, that makes it so covetable and so revered? And so James Shackell went down that rabbit hole for us too, to demystify the meaning of 'Made in Japan' **(p178)**. Something that was made in Japan, that we're particularly proud of, is the joyful illustration that we commissioned for our cover (we loved it so much we popped it on a pull-out poster for you inside). This piece is the handiwork of the talented Grace Lee, an Australian illustrator who has been based in Tokyo for more than 16 years.

Since every man and his dog seem to be going to Japan for a holiday (it's no exaggeration to say that half of our team has visited Japan in the last 12 months), we felt it would be remiss of us not to pull together a Never Too Small take on a Tokyo city guide for you (on the other side of your pull-out poster) along with some itineraries for 'Perfect Tokyo Days' **(p222)** from our trusted friends on the ground. If a trip is not on the cards for you though, we have something for you too: four pages of wonderful retailers **(p228)** so you can enjoy a little 'Made in Japan', wherever you are.

Elizabeth Price
editor@nevertoosmall.com

Turning ocean waste into bags



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24 HOURS *in* TOKYO *with* TAKESHI & MEGUMI HOSAKA

WORDS KIRSTY MUNRO

In the back-streets of Tokyo, Kirsty Munro meets a couple bending space and light to bring drama, generosity and a sense of ritual to even the most diminutive of homes.

“Be with you in a minute!” Megumi Hosaka streaks past me, clutching a plastic bag as she dashes out to catch the garbage truck. Inside their Tokyo micro-home, Takeshi Hosaka is vacuuming the floor, which, in a house this size, takes all of three minutes. From the street, I can see the entire house, right through to the enclosed deck at the back.

Though their home is near the centre of Tokyo, the narrow back streets of their neighbourhood feel like another world. Kids ride scooters, neighbours gossip on their front steps, and a cat lounges in the sun, unperturbed by passing strangers. This is why the Hosakas built their 18sqm house here – to feel open, connected, and engaged with the street. “It’s about shifting your mindset,” says Takeshi. “Even in a small space, you can look outwards, and engage with the world outside.”

Takeshi, who founded Takeshi Hosaka Architects and Urban Design Office in 2004, has made a name for himself by designing commercial projects and homes that embrace the elements – light, air, and even the seasons. His work stands in stark contrast to Tokyo’s high-rise apartment blocks, which in many cases seem to be sealed off from nature, with climate control and black-out curtains. Some of his projects, like the *Spring Water Pavilion* near Mount Fuji, let nature in literally – spring water flows through a concrete channel, cooling the floor in summer.

Takeshi’s design philosophy is also informed by spirituality, particularly his interest in the Biblical creation story, which Megumi, raised Catholic, introduced him to. The principles of light, earth, nature, and the cycles of life have been central to his work ever since. Their first home together, *Love House* in Yokohama (2005), reflected this worldview: a microcosm of the world, built around the elements of nature, light, animals and people.

Designing small homes wasn’t a conscious choice – it was a response to the realities of urban living in Japan, where homes often come with tiny footprints. “It’s not the size of the home that matters, it’s the site,” says Takeshi. “What might initially seem like bad conditions often lead to the most innovative solutions. It’s about seeing potential in what you have, not fighting it,” he says, “with meticulous attention to light, materials and space flow, even a small house can feel expansive and full of possibility.”

Many of his designs hide his clients’ inner lives behind blank walls, using skylights and voids to soak up the natural light while keeping the outside at bay. It’s not so surprising in Japan, where a lack of private space has historically necessitated homes that look inwards, with courtyard gardens and outer walls to shut out the world. But, as Takeshi says, the design depends on the site. When not hemmed in by neighbouring houses, he can create homes like *Outside In*, a rural home surrounded by fields, which blurs the boundaries between the garden and the home, opening the space to the elements.

• • •

(Right)
Takeshi and Megumi's former home (and now secondary residence) Love House, in the coastal city of Yokohama south of Tokyo, was designed to embrace the outside world. Image: Masao Nishikawa.

After 14 years in *Love House*, Takeshi and Megumi built *Love2 House* – their current home – in 2019, driven by the practical need for a shorter commute. The plot they bought, just under 30sqm, was divided by a public path, leaving them with only 18.8sqm to work with. They transformed an adjacent patch of land into a productive garden, growing herbs, figs, citrus and grapes.

The front of *Love2 House* is essentially a sliding glass wall that opens onto the pathway. From the home's dining table you can see the garden, and even chat with passersby. At first, they worried about the lack of privacy, but Takeshi says the openness has fostered a closer connection with their neighbours – and kept them on their toes about tidying up. "We like that people are curious about the house," he says. Once, 15 architecture students from Texas showed up, asking if they could take a tour. Megumi enjoys placing small plastic animals in the front window for the children who pass by – today, a plastic sheep gazes out at the fig tree. Around Christmas, they arrange a nativity scene, leaving the children in suspense: "Where's the baby?" until December 25th.

Love2 House is a sleek, one-room concrete cabin designed to maximise natural light. It is built on a main frame with two skylights capping the conical roof to capture the changing angles of the sun in summer and winter. "I was inspired by the Roman ideal of villa life," says Takeshi. "A house should have space for study, bathing, theatre, music, and food." And in the Hosakas' home, each of those elements finds its place. The front section serves as a dining, work and reading area; the kitchen is spacious at Megumi's request; the sleeping area doubles as a place to watch movies or gaze at the stars; and an outdoor bath sits at the back.

(Left)
The openness of Takeshi and Megumi's current home, Love2 House has fostered a closer connection with their neighbours. Image: toreal/Koji Fujii.

The home's open design makes it feel bigger than it is, with a high, cathedral-like ceiling. The roof is formed in two curved sections, each with a skylight to capture the shifting sun. There's a sense of flow and lightness to the space that contrasts with the weight of the concrete walls. The bedroom is partially partitioned by a low concrete slab, and another separates the cooking and dining areas, but they're low enough to lean an elbow on. There's no need to yell from one end of the house to the other.

The concrete makes a neutral canvas for the couple's collections. And while they're careful not to accumulate too much stuff, this is no austere, Zen space. "We don't have painted surfaces or dramatic light fittings, but we have the things we love," says Takeshi. "These are the things that remind us of our travels and our lives." The house feels lived-in, but not cluttered. He collects stones, petrified wood, and models of churches and other buildings they've visited. She has a growing collection of plates and glassware. Takeshi pretends not to notice the growing ranks of coffee mugs marshalled across the front of the record player, as one collection organically encroaches on another.

Just as *Love House* was designed to embrace nature, *Love2 House* is keenly attuned to the elements. In summer, warmth and light flood the interior, giving it a tropical atmosphere. Summer evenings are for sitting outside with a glass of wine. In winter, the house darkens, reminding Takeshi of Scandinavia – a time for hot coffee and Art Blakey records. Megumi loves the nights when stormy weather rolls in. "We sit on the floor, immersed in the storm as lightning flashes and thunder rumbles around us," she says. On this warm autumn day, the front and back doors are open, and light streams through the skylight, bathing the dining table in a golden glow.

Megumi, who grew up in a big house in the countryside, had some reservations about living in such a tiny house. But on one of their first nights in their new home, she woke up to see the stars through the skylight. She woke Takeshi and as they looked up at the stars, she knew they would be happy there. "In the morning when I'm getting ready to go out, I'm already looking forward to coming home again," she says.

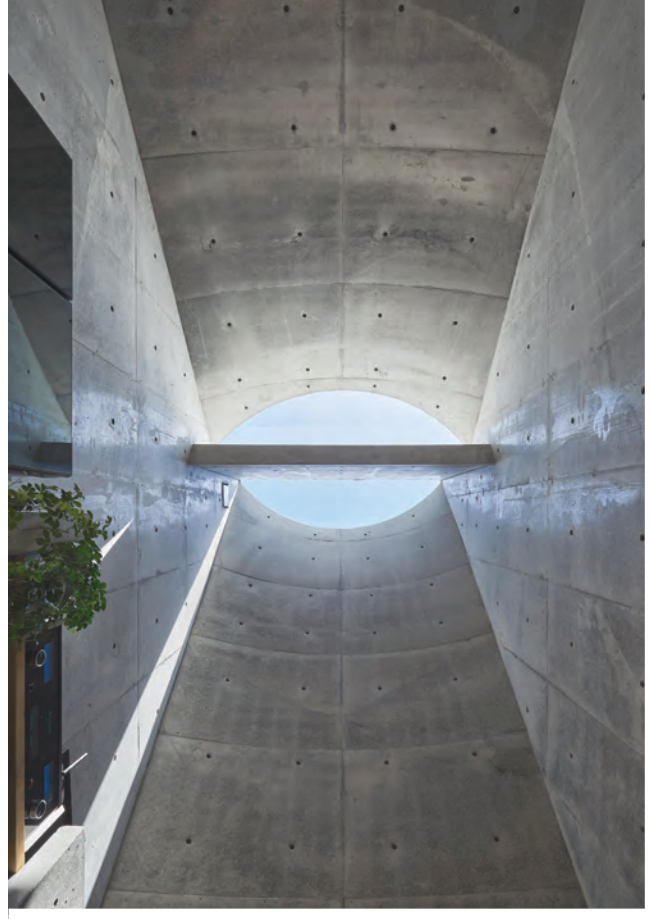
• • •

(Below)

The kitchen and dining space in Love2 House. Image: toreal/Koji Fujii.

(Right)

Though Love2 House is a compact 31sqm/334sqft, its uniquely shaped roof and private outdoor bathing space maintain a vital connection to nature and the elements for Takeshi and Megumi. Images: Nacasa & Partners Inc. (top) toreal/Koji Fujii (bottom).



The Hosakas are not exactly morning people. Takeshi sometimes works till 4am, so their mornings are often leisurely, spent listening to music, reading and eating brunch together before they head off separately to the office. Megumi typically arrives first to handle the day-to-day operations of their architectural practice, while Takeshi lingers over his coffee, organising his thoughts for the day.

At work, Takeshi is patient and observant. When meeting a new client, he listens more than he speaks. He asks questions that reveal the finer details of daily life – like what time they wake up, what music they listen to, or where they like to travel. "Sometimes clients don't know what they want until you ask the right questions," Megumi explains. She's the one who ensures every nuance of a client's desires is captured, even the smallest ones they might hesitate to voice.

Takeshi's methodical side is evident in his neat handwriting, the careful way he grinds his coffee, and the way he gently sets the needle on a vinyl record. But there's also a maverick streak. He has a boyish love for speed and risk. He trained at a military college to be a fighter pilot (slightly influenced, he admits, by seeing the movie *Top Gun* as a kid), until a developing weakness in his eyesight led him toward architecture instead. A hint of that boyish thrill-seeker still lingers in projects like *Inside Out*, a house that invites its resident humans and cats to leap across chasms to access different parts of the home. *House in Byoubugaura* is another project that bids visitors to literally climb the concrete walls that curve like skate ramps. It's no surprise to hear that the children of his clients love their playful spaces.

Concrete is a defining element in Takeshi's designs, allowing him the freedom to imagine new shapes and sculptural forms. Hoto Fudo restaurant near Mount Fuji appears like a freeform cloud floating on the landscape, while the six curved concrete roofs of Shonan Christ Church are set at different heights to capture natural light and represent the six days of creation. Concrete is also practical for Japan's humid summers and seismic landscape. While the concrete is sealed, he seldom paints or covers it. "I like showing the strength and beauty of the materials as they are," says Takeshi. "It's like with people – you're drawn to someone's natural beauty, behind all the dressing up." Concrete also improves acoustics. As music lovers, he and Megumi appreciate the sound-proofing it provides in their small home – an important consideration when you're living close to neighbours.

• • •

Travel plays a major role in Takeshi's creative process. He and Megumi toured Europe on their honeymoon, visiting cathedrals and historic sites. One of his favourite spaces is the Pantheon in Rome (and not only because it is the world's largest unreinforced concrete dome), where the shifting light through the oculus changes the mood of the vast interior throughout the day. He's also a big admirer of Jørn Utzon's Sydney Opera House – another symphony in concrete. He and Megumi spent about three days exploring the interior and exterior of the Opera House in different lights. While everyone else rushed indoors when it started to rain, Takeshi rushed outside to watch the wet tiles glisten in the light. It's this attention to light, material and the experience of a space that informs his architecture.

Takeshi's love of music and vinyl spills into the couple's workspace. Image: Nam Tran.

(Above left)
Takeshi and Megumi with their team at the Takeshi Hosaka Architects studio.

(Left)
A photo book featuring an image of Takeshi in front of the Sydney Opera House, which he and Megumi spent three days exploring on a trip to Sydney. Images: Nam Tran.

(Above)
When not hemmed in by neighbouring houses, Takeshi can create homes like Outside In (2011), a rural home surrounded by fields, which blurs the boundaries between the garden and the home. Image: Nacasa & Partners Inc.

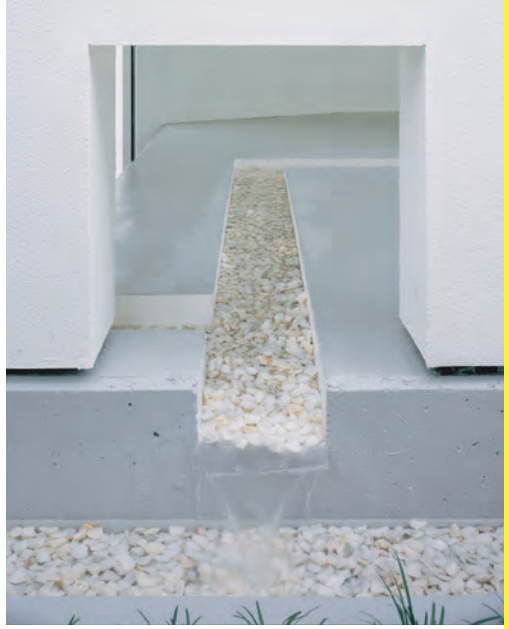
(Below)
The large acrylic skylight spanning the length of the single-storey house means the sky is always in view, bringing the 'outside in'. Image: Nacasa & Partners Inc.

The ceiling of Shonan Christ Church (2014) has been designed to manipulate sunlight and daylight and their influence on the space, particularly during Sunday services. Image: Nacasa & Partners Inc.

Concrete is a defining element in Takeshi's designs, allowing him the freedom to imagine new shapes and sculptural forms. Hoto Fudo restaurant near Mount Fuji appears like a freeform cloud floating on the landscape. Image: Nacasa & Partners Inc.

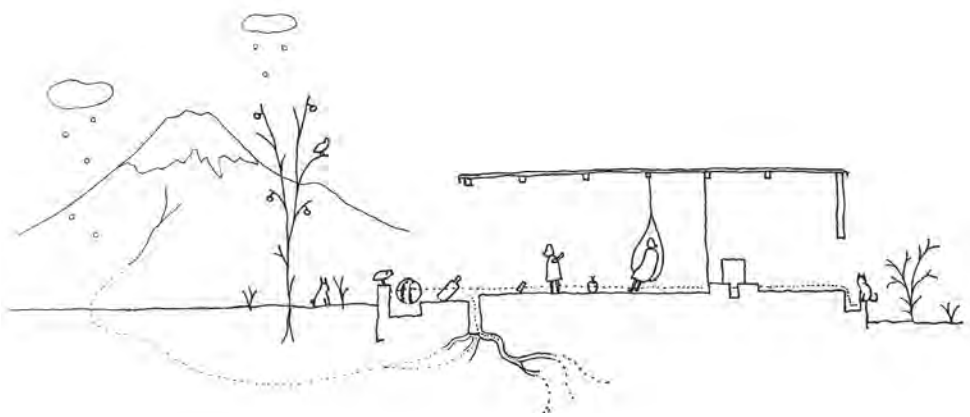
(Right)

Takeshi's sense of play is evident in his design for House in Byobugaura (2012) that bids residents and visitors to climb up and slide down its timber lined concrete slopes. Image: Nacasa & Partners Inc.



Spring Water Pavilion (2004) near Mount Fuji, welcomes spring water in to flow through a concrete channel, cooling the floor in in the hotter months.
Image: TANK Co., Ltd and Kozo Takayama.

(Below)
A sketch for Spring Water Pavilion (2004).
Image: Takeshi Hosaka Architects.



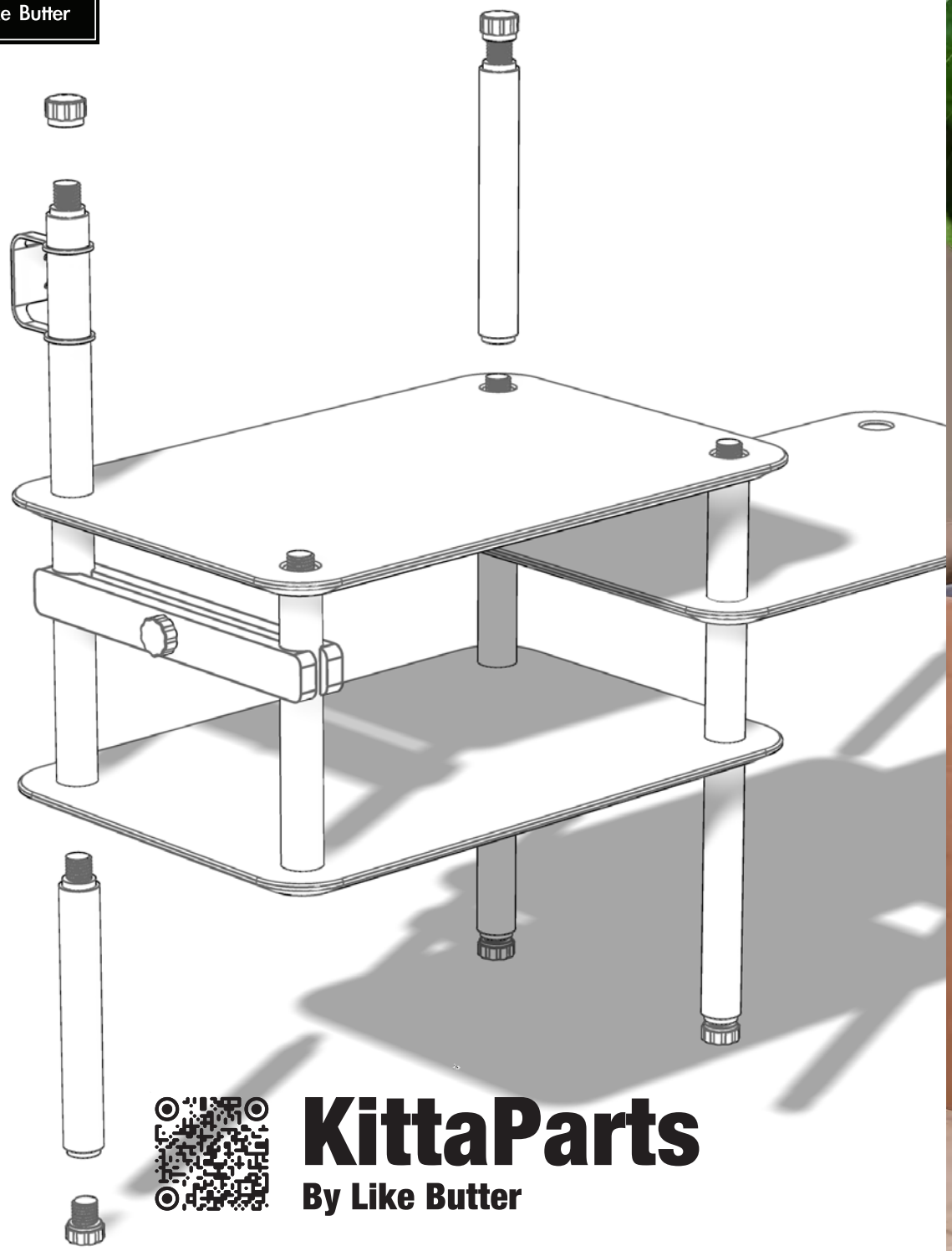
At home, Megumi's influence is felt in the details. As we chat, she prepares lunch – miso soup, rice, pickles, slices of omelette and simmered tofu – a reflection of their idea of luxury: not expensive things, but the time and care invested in creating something meaningful. Megumi manages the daily operations of their practice and is the quiet force that keeps things running smoothly, often nudging Takeshi to move forward in subtle ways – like reminding him to wear a colourful scarf instead of his usual black "architect uniform" or encouraging him to listen closely to a client's true desires. She is also a client; Takeshi added many small details to their house with Megumi's wishes in mind. "A house is a collaboration," he says. "It's not about imposing a concept, but about listening to the clients and translating their needs into a space that fits their life."

Despite their busy professional lives, the Hosakas have crafted a home where even the smallest moments feel meaningful. In the afternoons, they savour the way the light gradually changes on the walls as they read or listen to music. On weekends, they visit Tokyo's vinyl shops to add to their ever-growing record collection. Today, Takeshi plays Rickie Lee Jones and Carole King: perfect for a lazy weekend afternoon. "I like the ritual of choosing the record, carefully lowering the needle," he says. He describes how he sometimes gets lost in a musical rabbit hole – starting with one version of a piece and following it through various renditions. Glenn Gould's piano is a frequent workmate, but on other days it could be Steely Dan, Boz Scaggs, Journey, or Japanese artists like Hiromi Go, Yumi Matsutoya or X-Japan. "Ah, there's no end to this!" he laughs, adding that he could talk about music all day.

As dusk falls, Megumi suggests a walk. We stop at a local gallery where they meet some *washi* paper artists. Takeshi picks out a thick sheet of textured paper and demonstrates how it will curve to form a lampshade. He's drawn to its simplicity and the way light will play off the pressed herbs embedded in the paper. His simple concept for a lampshade is not so different from his *Moon Chair*, a wooden rocker that mimics the crescent of a waxing moon. For Takeshi, the best design is about restraint. He believes materials should speak for themselves, without the need for excessive decoration. "Architecture should be a backdrop," he says "the colours come from the people who live in the house."

Image: Nam Tran.

LB
Like Butter



KittaParts

By Like Butter

An open plan

At street level, a nondescript facade – featuring a large sliding door that reads more like a wall – makes **Masato Igarashi**'s home easy to miss. Once this door is opened, however, a vast and alluring space is revealed: populated by books, rich textures and a pair of architects exploring a playful and imaginative approach to living small.

WORDS MAKOTO KIKUCHI
IMAGES NAM TRAN

(Left)
Architect Masato Igarashi on the roof terrace of his Tokyo home.

Masato with his collection of roughly 5000 books.

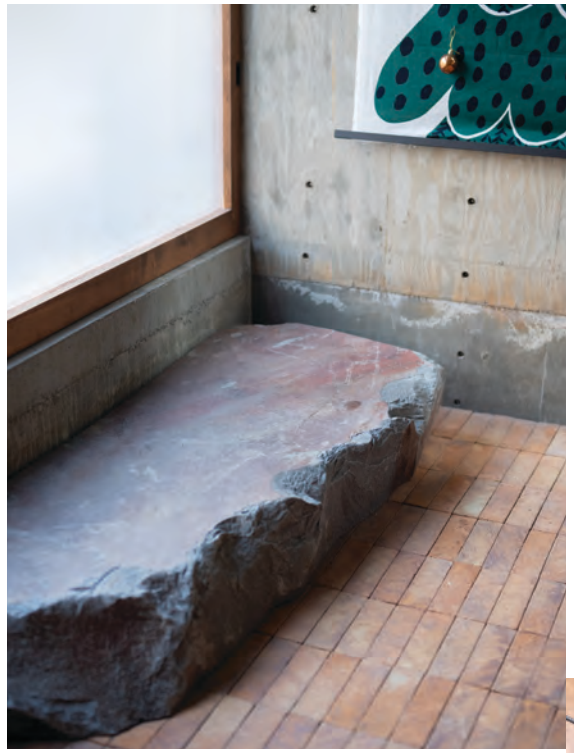
Over the past two decades, Masato Igarashi has accumulated a collection of roughly 5000 books. “I've always liked books and had a lot of them, but the number of them really increased after I started this design job.” The meticulously organised collection is housed in a shelving system that spans the full width and almost the full height of his multi-level home. With no internal walls (unless you count the glazing around the bathroom) and only two internal doors, the books act as a kind of spine to the design of the home: connecting each of the layers, and also telling the story of what happens where.

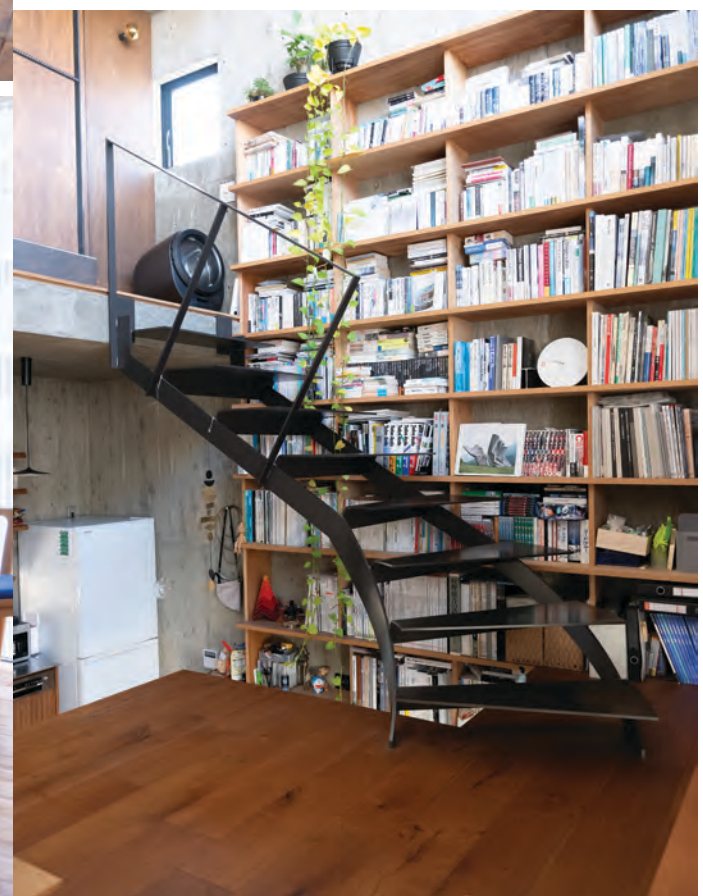
On the ground floor, paved with earthy unglazed tiles and rich in timber, the bookshelves house the books Masato reads most often. These are his architecture and design books – and this is where you will find his office space. Follow the staircases up through Masato’s home and you will find the architecture and design tomes give way to manga, novels and other things that are “not work-related but a little more personal”. One Piece and Doraemon are particular manga favourites. Masato’s wife, Tomoko, also an architect, likes books too but has been more of a bit-part contributor to the home’s extensive collection. “In terms of quantity, it's a 9:1 ratio of my books and my wife’s [laughs]”.

Situated on a 45-square-metre corner plot in a fairly ordinary residential area in Tokyo, Masato and Tomoko’s home is anything but ordinary. Its boxy concrete and glass exterior conceals a cleverly layered space that is essentially only “one big room”. At face value, it’s a challenging environment for a couple who live and occasionally work together in the same space, but it has not come without benefits. “We've become even closer since we moved in here. We can't stay locked up in our rooms when we fight,” Masato laughs. The openness of the space also affords the couple a great deal of flexibility with how they live within it. While the ground floor space facing the entrance is predominantly an office, it can just as easily host a large group of friends for dinner.

> “You can work, eat or relax wherever you want. We change the way we use each room based on our various needs, without limiting its use,” Masato says. It’s an ideal dynamic for a pair of busy architects whose personal and professional lives are often a blurred existence.

The ground floor is mainly used as Masato's office space but can just as easily accomodate a large group of friends for dinner.





(Above left and right)

Each level of the home gently shifts in materiality, bringing a different personality to each, but the bookcase on the southern wall is element that connects them all.

(Botton)

The custom timber bed frame was designed by Masato. The ladder at the foot of the bed leads to the home's roof terrace.

(Right)

The curved staircase leads the bathroom - the only 'walled' room in the home. Its glass exterior can be made private with curtain.

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Masato's practice, IGArchitects, is relatively young, but was a natural progression for an ambitious architect who had honed his skills at larger studios and always knew he wanted to design and create unexpected spaces. "I've loved playing with LEGO since I was little. I would make things according to the instructions, but I liked deconstructing things once they were completed and then building them again and mixing with other things. I decided I wanted to do that as a job." This spirit feels evident in the irregularly stepped mezzanine layout of the home, each level connected by a staircase with its own unique design and personality (the middle of which was designed to not look like a staircase at all, but rather, pieces of furniture). And then there's the roof terrace accessed by a tree-house-style ladder. While the concrete, steel, glass and timber-rich materiality is a far cry from the primary coloured jumble of a child's LEGO creation, there is still something of a child's fantasy dream-style-loft-like house about it.

In the late morning, when I visit, the living space on the second floor is bathed in a soft wash of sunlight from the full height glazing at the upper level of the building. A diagonal shadow cuts across the richly textured concrete of the northern wall. "This is probably my favourite room in the house. It's really fascinating to see how the sunlight comes in at different times of the day and changes the look of the place," Masato says. I'm reminded of Junichiro Tanizaki's 1933 essay on Japanese aesthetics, In Praise of Shadows, in which the author muses: "And so it has come to be that the beauty of a Japanese room depends on a variation of shadows". Tanizaki references the efforts to harness and moderate light in Japanese houses via shoji screens and angled roofs, and how in traditional Japanese tea rooms, the design of the space is such that sunlight will be ushered in, not to spotlight, but to gently illuminate the tea utensils, thus making the act of drinking tea more ritualistic. In this home, it's easy to imagine how the influence of light throughout a day might elevate even the most mundane task or humble pursuit. The flexibility afforded by its layout also means a book could be read or a meal could be taken here, or there, depending on whether light or shadow is desired.

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(Left)
Masato enjoys the way daylight illuminates the concrete walls and alters the character of each of the spaces throughout the day.

(Top right)
Plants feature throughout the house with a mobile house plant garden located on the same level as the bed 'room'.

(Bottom right)
More house plants and a collection of succulents are also found on the ground floor.

The way the light falls on the concrete walls also illuminates its texture. Each of the large concrete blocks that make up the walls bear a wood grain patterned 'finger print'. Each block of concrete was cast, reinforced and cured on-site and in place. One after the other. It's not an uncommon process in Japan but still, painstaking all the same. "I value the sense of texture. Concrete tends to look inorganic, but by transferring real wood grain patterns, the colour and shape becomes uneven and organic," Masato explained. The timber tables in the home's office space also shared this 'organic' look and feel. "This kind of texture makes stains and scratches less noticeable, so you don't have to be too nervous about taking care of it," he says. "It's just like people getting wrinkles as they get older. I choose materials that will develop a certain character as time goes by."

The concept of buildings and people ageing together gracefully is not new. In traditional Japanese homes, when shoji screens are torn, they are reattached; when tatami mats get worn out, they are repaired. Regular maintenance and acts of repair prolong their life and allow the materials to acquire character and story. "A house must be lived in. I don't like houses that only look good when they are built, but deteriorate when you start living in them".

Beyond patina, this idea of longevity and the home's next chapter was a chief consideration for Masato from the very beginning. Masato was determined to design the home in such a way that when the time came to let it go, it could potentially be reused for a variety of purposes without having to be dramatically altered or demolished.

> "I hope that what we use as a house now will be used as something else – perhaps a café or a museum – when it is passed on to other people, and that it will remain in a different form and be used for a long time," Masato says.

"Unlike clothes, you can't just replace a house when you get bored of it. It costs a lot and has a big impact on the environment and the community, so we have a responsibility when we build it."

The joyful funhouse world of

Paul Smith

INTERVIEW SPENCER BAILEY
PORTRAIT WILL ALDERSLEY

The cheeky, happy-go-lucky spirit of British fashion designer Paul Smith can be felt across everything he does, from the trademark stripes of his clothing designs to his multifarious collaborations, whether with Maharam textiles, Mini cars, Burton snowboards, or even a suite at Brown's Hotel in London. Though Smith may run a business with expert tailoring and a mastery of colour at its core, everything he creates seems to suggest, with a wink, "Don't take yourself too seriously". Beyond designing clothes, Smith also serves as a mentor to the next generation of designers. In 2020, he launched Paul Smith's Foundation, through which he helps guide young creatives as they develop their careers. Fifty-five years into his business, Smith now operates shops in more than 70 countries around the world, from New York and Los Angeles to Paris and Hong Kong.

In this interview – originally recorded for the Time Sensitive podcast, produced by the New York–based media company The Slowdown, and excerpted exclusively in these pages – Smith discusses his deep, 40-plus-year engagement with the country of Japan; how two gifts from his father changed the course of his life and career; and his ever-growing collection of rabbit ephemera.

SPENCER BAILEY: I'd like to start this interview on the subject of Japan. This year [2024] marks 40 years since you first opened your Tokyo store. Japan is your brand's strongest international market and, over the past four decades, you've opened 165 stores across the country – just Japan. *[Laughs]*

PAUL SMITH: I know.

SB: Let's start with your first trip there. It was in 1983. What brought you there? How'd you respond to the place? How do you think you became such a phenomenon so quickly?

PS: Well, I was standing in my store in Covent Garden – I was often in the store myself – and my office was above, and this Japanese gentleman came in, and he said, "Can I talk to you?" I said, "Yeah, of course." He had more about me than *I* had about me, which was press cuttings, photographs, fashion shows. He turned out to be a scout looking for European designers. There was one Italian, one French, and I was the English/British one. They ended up choosing me, and then they invited me to go to Japan in '83. I went with my wife because we always used to try to go to a brand new place together. The two of us went economy via Alaska – with my long legs. [Laughter]

SB: Oof.

PS: It was nine hours to Alaska and then another nine hours. Then we got on the train. We flew to Tokyo because there was no direct flight to Osaka, but the company I was working with was from Osaka.

Then we got on the bullet train, which of course was very exciting. The thing that blew my mind was that we arrived in Osaka and the train pulled in and the three people we were meeting were standing at the door where I was getting out. It seemed like, "How do they know which coach I'm in?" And they said, "Mr. Paul, we are very sorry." And I said, "Sorry?" "Train is three minutes late," they said to me, and that was the start of the phenomenon of my relationship with Japan.

It went on from there, and I've been well over a hundred times now. I think the success is just based on the love of Japan and my work ethic and trying to calmly understand both people's points of view, really.

SB: Tell me some of your experiences there that maybe stand out, including, perhaps, befriending Rei Kawakubo – that might be one.

The Paul Smith store in Tokyo's Ginza district. Image: courtesy of Paul Smith.

PS: Yes. The first thing probably was the fact that, in ’82, ’83, there were very few *gaijin* – foreigners. And being quite tall, if you came across a group of school children, it was always, “*Ohhh!*” That was absolutely mad and interesting. Of course, now we’re so familiar with Japanese food, but then, the food was amazing and different. I was so fortunate that I had one Japanese friend who was a designer who was making some bags called Porter. They were quite cult then and continued to be thought of very highly. We were good mates.

So I met him, and he then introduced me to a lot of people from the press and stylists. One of the people was Rei Kawakubo from Comme des Garçons, who is notorious in being quite shy, quite hard to have a conversation with and almost impossible to actually ever meet. But we met and became quite good friends. Still, if I go there, I will try and speak to her if she’s in town.

SB: You’re someone who can truly say, “I’m big in Japan.” *[Laughter]*

PS: Yes, that’s true. In more ways than one, yes.

SB: You mentioned you’ve made more than a hundred trips there. You go, from what I understand, at least twice a year for around 10 days each.

PS: Yes.

SB: Beyond the business, what’s kept you so engaged and wanting to keep going back?

PS: I made a lot of good friends there that are not my world – not in fashion. There’s a very beautiful magazine called *Casa Brutus*, and it’s one of my favourite magazines in the world, and *Pen* magazine, as well. And both of those, the editors and the writers for those magazines are just so interesting and so passionate about the subject that they’re working on. It could be ceramics or pottery or something, and the ghost from Raku ware and Bernard Leach and the history of Raku ware in Kyoto. But then they’re talking about mountain pottery and the finesse of creating a piece of pottery, and they just dig in deeper than anybody else, really. If they were doing a magazine on pen knives, there’d be, like, forty pages of pen knives.

(Left)
Smith in his first store in 1979. Photo: Stuart Harrison. Image: courtesy of Paul Smith.

SB: There are many quite obvious connections between your background and interests and what you do and Japanese culture. There’s, of course, the craftsmanship, but there’s also the attention to detail, the obsessiveness with going in depth in one area or even just the surreal juxtapositions between things.

PS: Yes, the love of contradiction and opposites. I’m constantly playing with big and small or rough and smooth or kitsch and beautiful. I did a collaboration of shirts with Comme des Garçons, and they were all hand-buttonholed and hand-stitched, and they were absolutely mad. They probably never sold one, but both Rei and I adored the project because it was so self-indulgent. *[Laughs]*

Then I fell in love with Japanese joinery and woodwork, for instance, and learned a lot about why their joints are so intricate, which I never realised. But years and years and years ago, all the houses were wood and they were built out of wood that was quite mature and had for a long time just been sitting there. But then, eventually, as they built more and more houses, the wood wasn’t so mature and often because it’s very humid, often the joints would just twist and they weren’t that stable. So they invented all these *amazing* woodwork joints, which were double joints so that they couldn’t twist. Things like that, where just the passion and the detail…. It’s just lovely.

SB: You’ve spoken about how in Japan they respect age, that wisdom.

PS: Yeah, I love that.

SB: This feels like something we should adopt in Western culture more. I’m not saying that we don’t, but we definitely don’t to the degree that they do in Japan. What do you think about that?

PS: The whole world is moving so fast that I don’t think we consider many things enough anymore. I don’t think we appreciate every day like we should. I don’t think we appreciate simple things like conversation, love, touch, emotion, calm, hobbies. What’s so lovely there is that they really respect *experience*. With an older person, yes, you might not be able to walk very well or you might be hard of hearing, but they really respect that you’ve led a life which is to do with a certain job or a certain way of life, or you’ve brought your family up in a certain way, and it’s really charming and lovely, really great.

SB: Now that you're 77 and you have more than five decades in business, a remarkable feat – *more than* remarkable – what are the bigger reflections that you have about the subject of age or about things that occur over a long span of life experience?

PS: I think the first thing is that I've been in business for, I think, 54 years this year. The thing I'm most proud of, really, is continuity. Especially in business, so many people just want to build a business which they then sell on after 10 years or 15 years – that's the whole motivation is to actually build a business to then sell. So continuity has been really, really lovely.

Getting older, I think the key thing is not being too proud or silly to think that you can't relinquish some of the points of your business to younger staff and trying to observe the talent of younger people around you, and then really bringing them on to have a bigger job. And that's, for a lot of autocratic people, which probably I am, I don't really know, but just try and make sure that you've got a team around you that you give them a chance rather than always try to interfere with the decisions they're making.

SB: As I was preparing for this interview, I was looking at what's been written about you over the years, trying to decipher and understand what drives your success. Of course, a lot of people have written about this notion of "classic with a twist," which goes back to the early eighties. But *The Guardian* has said, "He has always succeeded because he has anticipated the shape of things to come."

PS: Yeah, I think that's true.

SB: So this forward-looking quality. And the *Financial Times* has mentioned your "good-natured boyish enthusiasm."

PS: Yeah, I think both of those are true. *[Laughter]* Hopefully you've seen that already today.

SB: Our friend [the design critic and editor] Deyan Sudjic has written of the "private flamboyance with public sobriety" of your clothes, which is, I thought, a really interesting way of speaking to the visual charm that is the Paul Smith brand.

PS: Yeah, well, they're all lovely things – thank you, all of you – but I'm interested in *life*. I'm interested in new ways of doing things, and I'm interested in communication. I'm interested in why, how. I suppose it's child*like* rather than child*ish*. It's the fact that you question, "I wonder why that bottle has got a dimple in it," and then you realise it's very sensible, because that's exactly where your thumb and your first finger go to stop you dropping it. So there's all sorts of everyday observations that – things you notice.

> You know, even just coming from the airport today, I took two, three photographs out of the car window of billboards that had been graffitied, and they had interesting graphics on them, and that'll probably end up turning up as an element of a shirt print or on a window or something.

SB: Turning to your personal collection of art, objects, and ephemera, one element of it that I find really entertaining are the bunny rabbits that have seemed to sprout up everywhere.

PS: That was a huge mistake because obviously what I should have said was diamonds, because I was on a train in the eighties with a friend from New York, actually, on a train travelling, and I was daydreaming looking out the window. He said, "Why are you looking so intently out of the window?" I said, "If I see a rabbit, my next collection will sell really well." I just made it up. And he came back to New York and sent me a rabbit, and he told somebody who told somebody, now I get between six and twenty rabbits a week. As I said, what I should have said was diamonds – "I'm looking for diamonds, between six and twenty a week." That would be brilliant. *[Laughter]*

Yeah, so we've got boxes and boxes of rabbits everywhere. Wooden ones, ceramic ones, rather beautiful ones, little kitsch ones. We've got one rabbit sender from Rimini, Italy, who sends rabbits on a very regular basis. What's so delightful is that there's never a demand, which I think in this "What's in it for me?" world is really amazing. It's just so humbling.

Rabbit figurines that Smith has been sent in the mail. Image: courtesy of Paul Smith.

SB: And you've used this humble medium of clothing to actually transfix and transform some of these people's lives.

PS: Yes. Without knowing it, just probably the little sense of humour that – you open a jacket and see that there's a patterned lining or the sweater I'm wearing with a little hidden stripe at the back that you don't see from the front. Just little things.

SB: Let's go back to your upbringing in Nottingham, England. You were the youngest of three children by eight years. Your father, Harold Smith, was a credit draper, and I think perhaps more importantly in your life story, a passionate amateur photographer and co-founder of a camera club. When you were 11, he gave you these two life-changing gifts: a camera and a pale-blue Paramount bicycle.

Let's start with the camera. Looking back now, how do you think about how taking pictures has transformed your life? Even listening to you talk about the pictures you took on the way from the airport today – there's your dad's impact.

PS: A Kodak Retinette camera with his Zeiss lens. He built a darkroom in the attic of our house. And my father – are you familiar with Heath Robinson?

SB: No.

PS: Heath Robinson was this completely mad inventor, and I'm sure my father was Heath Robinson number two. The ladder to get into the attic was held by a piece of rope and a weight made out of a paint tin and filled with lead…. There were all sorts of mad things.

What was amazing about the camera was the fact that you have – if we talk in inches – you have a quarter of an inch of a viewfinder or one or two centimetres: this tiny little hole where your viewfinder, where you look through to get your shot, what you're going to look at…. And of course, it was film, so it was pocket money. It was a roll of 12. You didn't see the photograph until you finished the roll and you developed it, so every shot was precious. Now, of course, we take twenty pictures at a time with our camera, which is a phone, and then delete them. The thing was, looking through this little gap, it taught me to look and see, which never had occurred to me before.

The other thing I learned from my father was humour. He was a great communicator, but also he *worked*. I came home from school one day and in the garden there was the white sheet from my parents' bed on a washing line, and then three fruit boxes with a rug on top of them that was wired at the edge. He said, "Oh, before you do your homework, just sit on the rug and pretend you're flying." I was like, "Dad, I've got my—" "It won't take a minute. It won't take a minute." So I sat there, age 11 or something, cross-legged with my arms lifted up as though I was on a flying carpet. And three weeks later or something, he showed me this photograph of the famous Brighton Pavilion in the south of England with its onion-shaped top to it – it looked like it was from the Orient or somewhere – and I was flying across this pavilion on a rug. Of course, he'd taken the two negatives and put them together. That was mind-blowing.

(Left)
Smith as a child playing a prank on his father. Image: courtesy of Paul Smith.

(Above)
Smith in a cycling uniform as a young man. Image: courtesy of Paul Smith.

Then the Paramount bike was a second-hand bicycle bought from a man from the camera club. He said, "If Paul ever wants to join the local cycle club" – called the Beeston Road Club – "he'd be welcome. And if he wants to come out at the weekend with the club members, there's normally about 20 of us. We'll make sure we take care of him." So at the age of 12, I started doing that, and then that same year I started racing and realised that I liked the camaraderie of racing. That helped me in my business, definitely, about playing to strengths and weaknesses. The day you're on a mountain, you help the mountain climber and the day you're on the flat, you help the sprinter. So with 1600 staff, you understand people's strengths and weaknesses and use them accordingly.

SB: Of course, this led to your introduction to Pauline [Denyer], your wife, who was a fashion graduate of the Royal College of Art – first became your girlfriend, then business partner, then designer, and then wife. Speak a bit about her impact on Paul Smith.

PS: Enormous impact. In fact, I would say, without being too humble, that I probably wouldn't be sitting here without her influence, because she went to the Royal College at a time when they were still teaching couture fashion. That's very much about how things are made. She used to talk in these strange terms, almost talking about architectural terms, like the proportion of the pockets and the opening of the rise of the trouser or the opening of the jacket. She would talk about Palladio and I'd have no idea what she was talking about – the perfect proportion that Palladio did with these buildings – and then the perfect proportion of two pockets sitting on the side of a jacket, and then how they were made and what pad stitching was and what a dart did.

What does a dart do? A dart creates fullness at the end when it finishes, and that's how you get the piece that goes over your chest. And then, of course, she was there with David Hockney, Peter Blake, Joe Tilson, all those pop artists… a very important time at the Royal College, as well, because she's a bit older than me. She came to Nottingham to live with me, and I was living at home with my parents still. It was fairly mind-blowing. Two dogs, two cats, two kids, and a lady from London, aged 21.

SB: Right, she had brought two kids from a previous….

PS: Yeah, she was married with, I think they were 5 and 7 or 6 and 8, something like that.

SB: And you're 21 at the time?

PS: Yeah. So I got instant family. Two Afghan hounds – and I looked exactly like an Afghan hound. *[Laughter]* And two long-haired cats, two-long haired kids, and suddenly renting an apartment and having to suddenly worry about how am I going to afford to keep….

Luckily, she was earning quite good money. We lived together for many, many years. Then she said, "I've got to go and live back in London." She's a Londoner. She was famously at the Hammersmith Art School, aged 15, and I think she's still the youngest person ever to go to the Royal College. When we both moved, in her case, back to London. Then I moved to London, and it was good. And then eventually she said she wanted to get married. So we got married and, completely by chance, it turned out that I got knighted on the same day, which was not planned at all.

(Left)
Smith with his wife, Pauline Denyer.
Image: courtesy of Paul Smith.

SB: This was in 2000, right?

PS: Yeah. I got knighted in the morning. She became a Lady *[laughs]*, and then got married in the afternoon, and then a party at the Tate Modern in the evening. It was a busy day. *[Laughter]*

SB: Speaking of Nottingham, I just want to touch on that because it's really the roots of the brand. You opened the first shop in 1970, just two days a week, but it was open. Then in 1974 you incorporated the company and opened your first full-fledged Paul Smith shop, also in Nottingham. But it was your first London shop that I think really brought the awareness. This was in 1979 at 44 Floral Street in Covent Garden. I wanted to bring up this Floral Street space because it's quite remarkable. It's a compound, really.

PS: Deyan wrote very nicely about it for *Design Week,* I think it was called. He said there was no other shop like it. The first minimal shop in England, as far as I know. It was quite a few years later when the Japanese came to Europe in the eighties, '82, '83, but it was very minimal. It was done with a friend of mine from the Slade School of Art, who was a sculptor. He and I loved Mies van der Rohe, the Bauhaus, Le Corbusier, and the dream was: shutter-board, concrete staircase. Because I'd bought the building in '76, all on borrowed money, and then couldn't afford to do anything to it. I'd never been inside.

But I bought it by looking at it from the outside, from a retired baker whom I'd never met, who was very kind because he indirectly lent me the money to buy it. And then when I eventually went inside, I realised that it didn't have a staircase, but it had four floors, and it had a goods lift for bananas – not even a lift that you could stand in. It was just for boxes of fruit. So the process was long, but it was fantastic in the end. I think that was really the key to knowing people like Deyan Sudjic, Norman Foster, Richard Rogers, Vico Magistretti.

SB: It built a community around the....

PS: Yeah. All came to this shop, John Hegarty and a lot of the Saatchis, Jack Nicholson, Harrison Ford, all those people just came to... It was *tiny*, the shop. Tiny, tiny, tiny [...]. 300 square feet, on the ground floor. But it was just so modern and so different. Also, it tied in with me going to Japan for the first time. So I'd bring back these amazing things like matte black watches and matte black cigarette lighters and a watch that was a robot and used to talk.

On top of that, I managed to get to know Dieter Rams, and I was the first person to stock the Braun calculator. There was the Braun calculator, a matte black watch, a pen from the Pompidou Centre, which has the famous ventilation... The pen was like the ventilation shaft that curved at the top. My little shop attracted all these people who adored design.

SB: Today, you have shops in more than 70 countries around the world, from New York to Los Angeles to Paris and Hong Kong. You've said, "Our business was built very gently and very slowly." Obviously, from that first Floral Street shop to now, it's quite a journey. What would you say has been your philosophy, if there is one, on scale and growth – day by day, month by month, year by year?

PS: The main thing is that Pauline and I started the business when I was 21 because we thought it might be a nice way to earn a living, and that was it. So it's never been, really, about money and expansion. Of course we've been offered – and now that I'm 77, maybe I will think about letting somebody buy into it or something. Because you can't be around forever, but we've never been attracted by any of that at all. But as you get to a certain age, you think, "Well, maybe it's the time to take care of the younger staff and do something like that." It's never been a business that's been motivated by money. It's been motivated by having a great day and really enjoying it.

This conversation has been condensed and edited for length and clarity. Listen to the interview in full at timesensitive.fm or on Apple Podcasts or Spotify.

By the many, for the many.

WORDS JAMES SHACKELL

PHOTOS NORIO KIDERA

In February 2024, Samirō Yunoki, the last living link with Japan's *mingei* folk art movement, passed away. He was 101 years old. "Humans need to be excited all the time. It doesn't matter what the subject is," Samirō Yunoki told an interviewer in 2013.

By this stage, the Japanese folk art legend was 90 years old, and still going strong, powered by some inexhaustible, Terminator-like creative drive. He would still be dyeing and creating custom illustrations, fonts and artwork four years later, when Roman Alonso, the founder of Commune Design, tapped him on the shoulder and asked him to contribute to the new Ace Hotel in Kyoto. He was still exhibiting six years after *that*, when the Japanese Folk Crafts Museum launched a retrospective for his 100th birthday.

That was the thing about Samirō Yunoki, the last of Japan's great *mingei* artists. The dude didn't know how to stop. He really was excited *all the time*. By life, the universe and everything.

When Samirō passed away in February 2024, he severed a direct link to the founders of Japan's *mingei* folk art school, and it's hard to understand Samirō's legacy without first understanding the concept of *mingei*.

Literally translating to 'art of the people', *mingei* was a 1920s artistic movement, the brainchild of Japanese philosopher Sōetsu Yanagi. It emphasised the beauty and craftsmanship of anonymous, everyday objects, made by anonymous, everyday people. As a young man living in Korea, Yanagi became obsessed with the pottery of the Yi dynasty (1392-1910). Simple, unpretentious, and churned out by the thousand. In these rustic pots and cups, Yanagi saw a beauty equal to anything in the Kyoto Imperial Museum. In his brain, they'd somehow made the categorical leap from 'thing' to 'art'.

When he returned to his homeland, Japan, Yanagi brought this new philosophy with him.

> *"It is my belief that while the high level of culture of any country can be found in its fine arts, it is also vital that we should be able to examine and enjoy the proofs of the culture of the great mass of the people, which we call folk art. The former are made by a few for the few, but the latter, made by the many for many, are a truer test. The quality of the life of the people of that country as a whole can best be judged by the folkcrafts."*
>
> *Sōetsu Yanagi*

One of the Japanese artists Sōetsu Yanagi drew into his orbit was famed potter Hamada Shōji, and together with Kawai Kanjirō, they went on to spread *mingei's* down-to-earth philosophy throughout Japan, creating a new school of 'folk artists'. And this is where Samirō Yunoki enters the picture. He was lucky enough to study under Hamada Shōji at the Ōhara Museum of Art in Kurashiki.

(Left)
Samirō Yunoki was a die-hard collector of beautiful stuff. "Things are good when they are fun," he said.

Samirō continued to create and remain active as an artist throughout his nineties. He was still exhibiting at the age of 100.

This was in 1947, during the American occupation following World War II, when Japan was undergoing the kind of cultural and economic upheaval not seen since the end of sakoku[1]. Samirō himself had been drafted into the army as a young man in 1943. His wartime experiences, along with the devastation Japan endured, influenced his worldview – and his art. When the country emerged from the ashes, he committed himself to peace, beauty and joy. And so he got to work, throwing himself into the Japanese technique of *katazome* – dyeing fabrics using a rice-flour paste applied through a stencil.

From 1949, Samirō began exhibiting with the *Kokugakai Tenrankai*, a society dedicated to Japanese arts and crafts. He would eventually become its president. In 1950, he became a full-time lecturer. In 1958, his textiles were shown at the World Exhibition in Brussels, earning a bronze prize and gaining his colourful dye-work a much wider audience. He illustrated picture books, dabbled in painting and sculpture, and continued to push the limits of Japanese fabric design through the latter half of the 20th century.

Samirō was born in 1922 – the same year as the formation of the USSR and the discovery of penicillin. He was still painting, dyeing and drawing when Trump took The White House (the first time). Quite an innings, by any definition.

The principles of *mingei* really resonated with Samirō. Simplicity, beauty, humility, functionality. When asked once why he chose to draw a chair and bucket for a book cover, he said, "It's something you see on a daily basis. There's something admirable about it."

Of course, one of the founding tenets of *mingei* is also anonymity – strictly speaking, Japanese folk art should be made by 'unknown' craftsmen – which becomes tricky when you're taking Brussels by storm. Samirō never courted fame, but like most talented people, fame found him anyway. His work had a similar vibe to that of American architect and textile designer, Alexander Girard[2]. A kind of colourful, child-like whimsy. The simplified forms of nature and everyday life.

Put it this way: it's hard to look at a Samirō Yunoki canvas and not smile. His designs seem to trigger some sort of involuntary reflex in the viewer's facial muscles. And this might have something to do with another mingei principle.

Mingei's founder, Sōetsu Yanagi, believed that "beauty of health" was critical to good design. By this he meant that the best folk art was somehow imbued with the attitude and spirit of the artist. If the artist was joyful, the work would be joyful, and would go on to spark joy in others.

1 Japan's sakoku policy of enforced isolation lasted around 214 years, from the 1600s up till 1853. During this time, Japan was more or less cut off from the outside world (apart from some carefully controlled trade in port cities like Nagasaki). The end of sakoku pretty much marked the end of the shogun era, ushering in the Meiji Restoration and turning Japan into a modern, global power.

2 Affectionately known as 'Sandro', Girard was one of the key figures in post-war American design. Samirō saw his colourful print work as a big influence, and even travelled to Santa Fe in the 1970s to check out Girard's epic folk art collection.

This is certainly true of Samirō, whose three-storey house was famously chock-full of folk art, toys, paintings, knick-knacks, curios and *objects d'art*. He was a die-hard collector of beautiful stuff.

> "Things are good when they are fun," he told an interviewer once. And he meant that literally: the goodness of an object, or an artwork, directly correlated to its level of fun. Fun was interesting, and vice versa.

"Life is not all fun and games," he told Roman Alonso, "but find something that makes you happy, or find something interesting in your daily life, even if it's something small, like receiving a letter that made you smile. Even if it's a cloudy day, if you can find even just one fun thing for yourself, your life and work will be more enjoyable."

Samirō was the last living link to the original *mingei* school. But he wasn't the last *mingei* artist. Over a 70-odd year career, he inspired a new wave of craftsmen and women, and you can see Samirō's colourful fingerprints in everyone from Lisa Congdon and Yuko Shimizu to the detailed line work of Jen Corace.

Mingei itself has faded slightly from the post-war craft boom of the 1960s – the weird paradox between anonymous, hand-made folk art and the popularity and commercial success of such art was never really reconciled – but you can argue its spirit lives on. There's still a Mingei International Museum in San Diego, California. And the legions of garage ceramicists and part-time textile designers on Instagram show no signs of slowing down. As the world becomes faster, less tactile, more homogenous, we tend to seek out the slow, the tangible and the unique. People will always be drawn to beauty and simplicity. Humble objects, made with attention and love.

And fun. Don't forget fun.

• • •

Photographer Norio Kidera spent more than 10 years documenting the life and work of Samirō Yunoki. The resulting images are featured in: Time with Yunoki Samiro *published by Graphic-sha and* Bessatsu Taiyo Special: Yunoki Samiro *published by Heibonsha Ltd. We are most grateful to Norio for gracing these pages with her precious work.*

mountains.jp/kidera | @noriokidera

(Left)
Samirō's home was famously chock-full of folk art, toys, paintings, knick-knacks, curios and objects d'art.

Project: Tokyo Blue
Design: Kei Makito, Roovice
Size: 59 sqm/635 sqft
Location: Tokyo, Japan

INTERVIEW ELIZABETH PRICE
IMAGES AKIRA NAKAMURA

Transforming a three-bedroom apartment into a studio and using it as a canvas for Danish design, African art and clinical-industrial chic might read as a bold move. Make no mistake – it is. But couple, David Buchler and Koichi Tanabe clearly knew what they were doing. By the time David and Koichi met architect Kei Makito of Roovice, they were ready to tear down walls to emancipate their precious view of Mount Fuji that was only visible from one room in the apartment. They also had a singular vision of how their home could be reimagined to better support their lifestyle and bring together their distinct interiors styles – David's influenced by his South African heritage, Koichi's by his Japanese upbringing – as a unique expression of their shared story.


ORLAN
CARNAL ART
PIETER HUGO
D&DEPARTMENT
PROTEAS
ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE
LISA LYON

You were very hands-on with the renovation of your apartment. Did you come to this with a lot of prior experience?

We actually had no experience at all with tearing down walls or tackling such a major renovation ourselves. I remember we watched a few YouTube channels every now and again to see how others approached it and also reached out to a few friends with experience for advice.

What was the experience like of living in your apartment while renovating it?

[Laughs]. We don't recommend it. It was a slow process that we did ourselves for nearly two years. It was rewarding though, every time we broke through into another room or discovered something exciting, like the original pink tiles in the bathroom or a bit of floral wallpaper from the 70s.

There seems to be more and more concrete appearing in contemporary Japanese apartments. Is this more about aesthetics and practicality, do you think? Your concrete ceilings are a direct result of your practical decision to remove the ceiling boards to achieve more ceiling height for instance…

For us, I feel it was more the aesthetics of it with a bit of luck that we could gain some extra height and floor space. Over the years, we've seen more and more spaces being built or reformed around Tokyo with a distinct industrial look. It's definitely direct and honest, but also durable and no-fuss. Peeling away layer upon layer of ceiling board and wallpaper that had been added over the decades we discovered a rough broken concrete that just appealed to both of us.

You clearly value the charm of these imperfections and what they bring to your space…

The walls are broken and fractured and there were many flaws that we wanted to keep exposed. The bathroom floor is made of wood and our carpenter carefully cut it to shape around the parts of the broken wall so that the floorboard could fit just perfectly. Our custom joinery storage pod was made to fit like a jigsaw puzzle – at one corner, it wraps around an irregularly shaped concrete ceiling beam. The contrast between the texture of the broken concrete walls with the sleek stainless steel in the kitchen along with the shiny, blue floor really appeals to us, too.

In what ways have you embraced these little stories?

We stripped the apartment down to its bare essentials – it's given us everything it can. We now hear exactly when our neighbour upstairs takes a shower because the pipes are all exposed. The light switches on the walls have cables running out of them that create a kind of linear drawing along the walls.

You altered the floor plan of your apartment significantly by removing all the walls and transforming a three-bedroom apartment into a studio apartment. It's such a bold move. Did that feel risky or was it always clear that this was what you wanted to do?

What we wanted most in our small Tokyo apartment was a space that maximised natural light and felt open. The open-plan design was key to making the apartment feel much larger than it actually is. When we first viewed the apartment, the view of Mount Fuji was what sold us, but it was only visible from one room. We wanted to find a way to bring that stunning view into other areas of the apartment as well. We can be in different areas of our home but it still feels intimate, like a shared experience. Living in a small space, we don't often have guests staying over, which makes it easier to live without walls between the bedroom and living room. We both enjoy each other's company, so having an open layout allows us to move around freely while still being able to see and talk to each other.

> The flexibility of the space is something we really value too. It's easy to move the furniture around and create entirely new, functional areas – like if we didn't want the studio workspace opposite the bedroom, we could simply switch it to where the living room is now. We love that adaptability and flexibility a lot. It keeps things exciting.

We also think our daughter Sophie, a four-year-old British Shorthair, really appreciates having a space with no boundaries to run around and play.

(Top left)
The split floor finishes of polished concrete and blue PVC tiles not only demarcate the living and kitchen areas but they also allude to the couple's contrasting tastes.

(Bottom left)
David and Koichi's kitchen features customised IKEA METOD units along with a wall mounted shelving unit from HAY.

(Right)
The contrasting floor finishes are separated by a thin brass strip.

Can you tell us about your lovely sleek kitchen units – where they're from and how you customised them?

We have a custom-built stainless steel METOD kitchen system from IKEA. Their kitchen planning team assisted us with several specific requests, including raising the height of the unit to better suit our needs, as kitchens in Japan tend to have lower counters. The standard height is around 85cm, but we had it raised to 95cm by mounting the unit on taller legs. Additionally, we opted for a gas cooktop and extraction fan, which we sourced from a different company. We have a great stainless steel shelving unit we found at HAY which hangs perfectly in a space next to the kitchen unit for the plates and cups we use every day.

You've employed some really clever zoning techniques in your renovation to elegantly divide the space. Can you share some examples?

Once the apartment walls were removed, we divided the space in half using a thin 5mm brass strip with blue tiles on one side and mortar on the other. We thought about having the entire floor covered in blue but Koichi also loved the look of a concrete floor, so we made a compromise to divide it – which visually reminds us of Koichi's love of more neutral, minimal design, and my love of colour and growing up with brighter interiors in South Africa. The use of concrete is again used in the *genkan* – the entrance way in all Japanese homes where you enter and take off your shoes. This section is the same level of the corridor outside and a step lower than the rest of the apartment. It demarcates the space between outside and inside clearly.

Where did the ideas for these interventions come from and how do they impact your enjoyment of your home?

Before we started living together, we both had different approaches to interior design. Koichi always surrounded himself with muted, natural tones – greys, browns, and loads of plants everywhere. I've always dreamed of that aesthetic but somehow gravitate towards bright colours. Also clinical institutional design really appeals to me. We joke that the apartment is a reflection of how we met halfway with literally one side being a bright blue and the other a calmer, more typical Japanese approach. Our mutual love for the colour pink shows in our bathroom which is enveloped in a cute colour called Eraser Pink we found at Benjamin Moore.

You've also done some really clever things with lighting that increases flexibility, functionality and allows you to easily adapt the mood of your spaces. Can you tell us about the lighting in your home and how it makes the design work that bit harder?

I don't think either of us wanted lighting that would light up an entire space all at once. As the sun sets, we ease into the evening with pockets of light we can control around the apartment. Without any internal walls, we carefully selected lighting that allowed specific areas to be lit up in a certain way. We have lighting attached to the perimeter walls (that can rotate), portable lighting, and then we have the flexibility to move lights along the multiple sliding rails, too. There's a lot of downlighting throughout the home which results in gentle pools of light. This definitely helps to create a sense of more space and ambiance.

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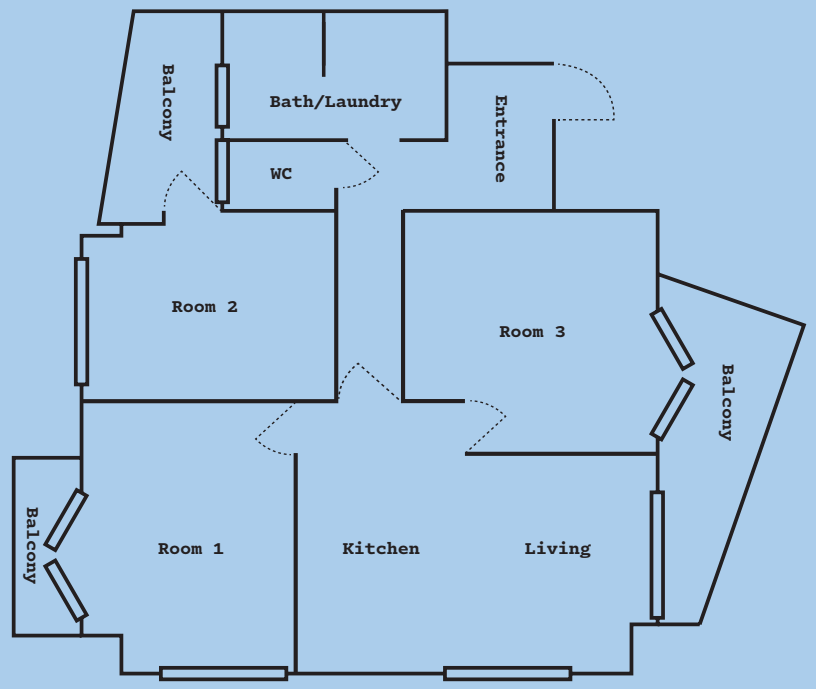

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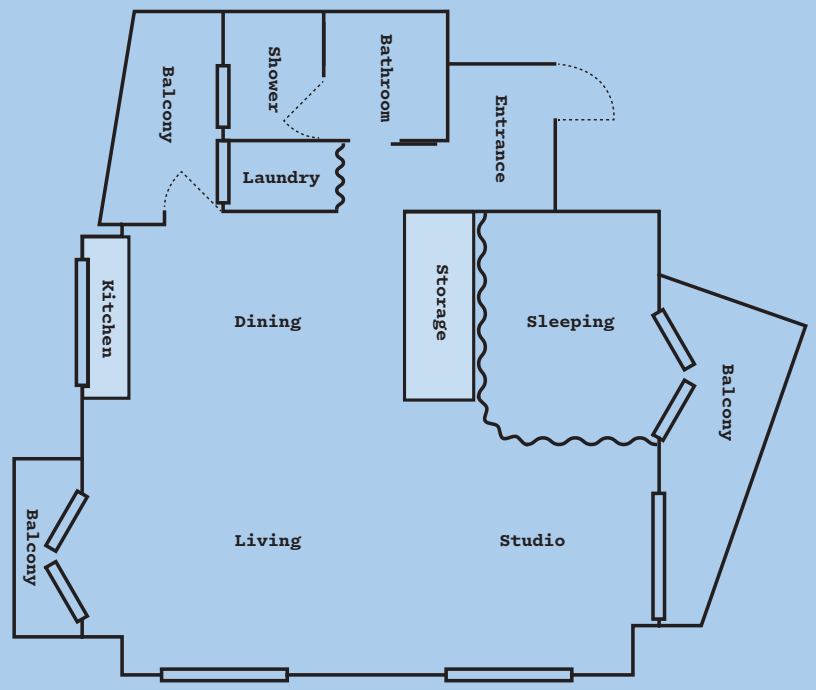


Your home is filled with such a unique mix of furniture, artwork and decorative objects. I feel like if I attempted to mix vintage pieces with lots of HAY and African art in an industrial style apartment it would go very wrong indeed. How did you work this magic?

[Laughs]. If it makes you happy, just do it! I think we've always been pretty honest about what we both like and don't like. When it comes to furniture, we spend way too much time searching for a piece that feels right for us and then choose something we like together. I've always loved the clinicalness of steel mixed with shades of blue and white. The contrast between soft and hard furnishings. Between natural materials and steel and concrete. The African art or fabrics we have – we really appreciate – there's a memory attached to a lot of the objects in our home. This mixture of styles... maybe the indoor plants tie it all together? Actually, I think the plants do bridge a gap between the industrial and modern and vintage.

You mentioned a shared studio space. Do both you and Koichi work from home? Is this full time?

Koichi works from home full-time as a freelance designer. I will work from home over weekends editing photographs and working on our small online shop.

We did spot your sewing machine... Is this related to the online shop? Tell us more...

Koichi is super amazing using a sewing machine, and I'm a mess. We started a small side business called Thokozile a couple of years ago selling bow ties and bags we made (I chose the material and Koichi did all of the sewing) using South African fabric called isiShweshwe and later fabric from other parts of Africa. It was fun having pop-up shops around Tokyo in department stores like Isetan and for a while we supplied a store in Omotesando. Now, we sell everything online and it's a mixture of things that we design and sew from home, with some African craftwork we bring back from our trips there.

Do you have a sort of routine (or dance?!) to make the space function well from a working and living point of view or does the design take care of that?

The space has become so versatile that the design mostly takes care of that.

What happens if you or Koicho get cross with one another? You can't slam a curtain!

You're right, we can't slam a curtain and the only door in the house is in the bathroom and that's made of steel which is far too heavy to slam! We actually never get angry with each other in front of our daughter Sophie.

You can find David and Koichi's shop at thokozile.theshop.jp

Project: Somo Somo House
Design: TOASt (Takato + Odaki Architectural Studio)
Size: 35sqm/377sqft
Location: Tokyo, Japan

INTERVIEW ELOÏSE LACHICORÉE
IMAGES NAM TRAN

It is a quirk of the Japanese housing market that houses and apartments rapidly lose their value after 20 to 30 years and are often demolished and replaced. But for Takeshi Odaki and Mayo Takato, a couple who run their own architectural firm TOASt, a 50-year-old apartment in the heart of Tokyo was the perfect beginning. Somo Somo House (Japanese for *to begin with*) is a complete transformation of the original 35sqm space. Internal walls were removed in favour of six furniture-like 'boxes' that gently divide the space and maximise natural light. Drawing inspiration from the Finnish architects and couple Alvar and Aino Aalto in both work and life, Mayo shares how the couple values designs "born from life" and the practice of making their home "not just a place for people, but also a place for things".

Mayo, how did you and Takeshi each find your way into architecture?

For Takeshi, since he was a child, he loved building plastic models and knew he wanted to work in a creative field. He started studying architecture because he thought the field seemed interesting. During that time, he saw a building called the Church of the Light by the famous architect Tadao Ando on TV, and was struck by the freedom of the architecture, which strongly attracted him to the world of architectural design.

When I was a child, I lived with my family of four in an apartment in Tokyo but I spent long holidays at my grandparents' house in the countryside. My grandparents' house was very different from life in Tokyo, and I was interested in how the house looked different depending on the situation. They had a 'tandem room' that was usually used as a living room, but during the New Year holidays and Obon[1], the sliding doors and other fittings were opened and it was transformed into a large hall-like space where family and local people could gather. The veranda was used in a very free way – such as sitting and talking with family, or having neighbours talk to you. Even as a child I found these changes fascinating and I became interested in architecture.

You and Takeshi are partners in life and work. How has your collaborative dynamic been reflected in the design of your home?

I think the seeds of ideas initially come from each individual, but we move forward with our considerations by sharing ideas with each other. However, as we go through this process over and over again, I think we combine each other's ideas or find other methods we hadn't thought of. When considering this house, we initially went as far as the estimate stage with completely different ideas. The projected costs turned out to be higher than expected, so we had to consider other methods, and began sharing ideas while keeping costs in mind. The idea of putting only the bare minimum of functionality in the 'box' came from the necessity of keeping costs down.

During the process, did you make all the design decisions together or did you divide them up?

We make all design decisions by checking with each other. Takeshi is interested in the big picture, and I'm interested in the finishing touches and the little details, so we mix our interests together.

What was it about the space that made you feel it had the potential for transformation?

Because this building is built on a plateau, there are no other buildings nearby and it is located in an open area. The windows face a school and kindergarten, with lots of greenery and views of the Shinjuku skyline. There are six windows that let in light from three sides, and the ceiling is 2.8m, so although the room is small, it is rich in natural light. Another advantage is that the proportions of the room are close to square. Apartments in Tokyo are often long and narrow because they are built closely together, but we thought that because the space was made close to square, it would be uniformly bright and would allow for a variety of floor plans.

Why did you choose to knock down the walls that divided up the original apartment?

The rooms separated by walls felt very narrow. In a 35sqm floor plan, if you create rooms with necessary functions such as a bath, toilet, washbasin, kitchen, and storage, the other space becomes quite small. Rather than configuring the space by a typical floor plan that divides functions with partitions, we minimised and subdivided the things that make up a house by having clear uses such as a toilet, bath, kitchen, storage and entrance, and configured them all by arranging them like furniture.

How have the six pieces of furniture or 'boxes' you used in place of walls changed the function and experience of the space?

The 'boxes' are elevated off the floor, supported by legs or placed on pedestals. By not reaching the floor or ceiling, they allow light and line of sight to pass above and below, making the small space appear larger. The boxes arranged throughout the room transform the smallness of space – which is usually a constraint – into a rich space. The spaces between the boxes also have room to be changed according to the situation. Currently, they are used as a study or work desk, but this can be changed depending on the situation.

(Top right)
The contrasting floor finishes are separated by a thin brass strip.

(Bottom right)
A pair of work spaces is divided by one of the six 'boxes'.

1 A traditional three-day Buddhist festival honouring ancestral spirits and paying respect to the dead.

How did you approach bringing light into your design and making your home feel *akaaka* (brightly lit)?

To let in more light, the glass was changed from frosted to clear. The light passing above and below the boxes also makes a difference. The box that contains the toilet, washing machine, and refrigerator has a window made out of translucent polycarbonate, allowing light from the window to reach the wash area. The interior walls are painted white. The floor is white vinyl tile with a reflective paint. In the morning, natural light flows onto the floor.

Can you tell us about your award-winning compact kitchen unit and its genius moveable 'wagon'?

In a small house, the kitchen is usually small and is a place only for cooking. But we wanted a kitchen large enough for two people to communicate while cooking, a kitchen where guests can gather, and one in harmony with the overall interior. Since we both work, we often cook together. By installing a movable cart in a compact kitchen, it is possible to use it in various ways, such as cooking face to face. By placing the cart at the centre of the kitchen, the movement line to the refrigerator and cupboards can be shortened, making it possible to cook comfortably.

I also wondered if I could make a kitchen that felt like furniture so that it would blend in with the rest of the interior. By designing it in the same way as other 'boxes', I thought it would become a kitchen-like piece of furniture, not just for cooking, but also a place where people gather. By using a ready-made countertop and designing only the part below the countertop, I was able to make it cheaper than a system kitchen.

(Top)
The kitchen's moveable and multifunctional 'wagon'.

(Bottom)
The use of transformable furniture, and an extra dining table allow Takeshi and Mayo to share and enjoy their space with family and friends.

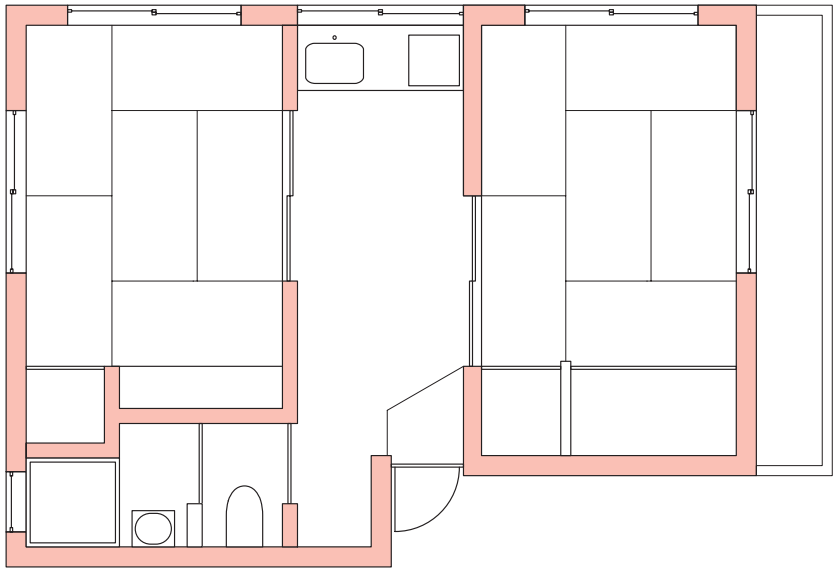
The Finnish architects, designers and couple Alvar and Aino Aalto are a major design inspiration for you both and your home. Tell us more…

We are both interested in the Aaltos' work. Many of their houses are filled with interior objects and plants. We also noticed that even the smallest details of their lives were planned. They designed their architecture with the perspective of valuing life, precisely because they were a married couple. We also want to value designs that are born from life.

> When we design, we try to leave some space. Life is not complete when the building is completed, but it is designed so that additions and changes can be made after living in the house. In our house, the space between the boxes is the space. Currently, it is a small study and a desk space for work, but the location can be changed in the course of life. There are things that you only notice after living in the house, so we value such space.

The Aalto couple were good at dividing up roles based on their respective areas of expertise. Working together as a couple to create better things. For us, that is the ideal way for an architect couple to be. Finally, I would like to quote Alvar Aalto's words about the meaning of being surrounded by designed things. "Human life is a combination of tragedy and comedy. The shapes and designs which surround us are the music accompanying this tragedy and this comedy. The furniture, the fabrics, the colour schemes and the structures can be earnestly and happily made so that they produce no contrast to the tragedy and comedy of human life."

BEFORE



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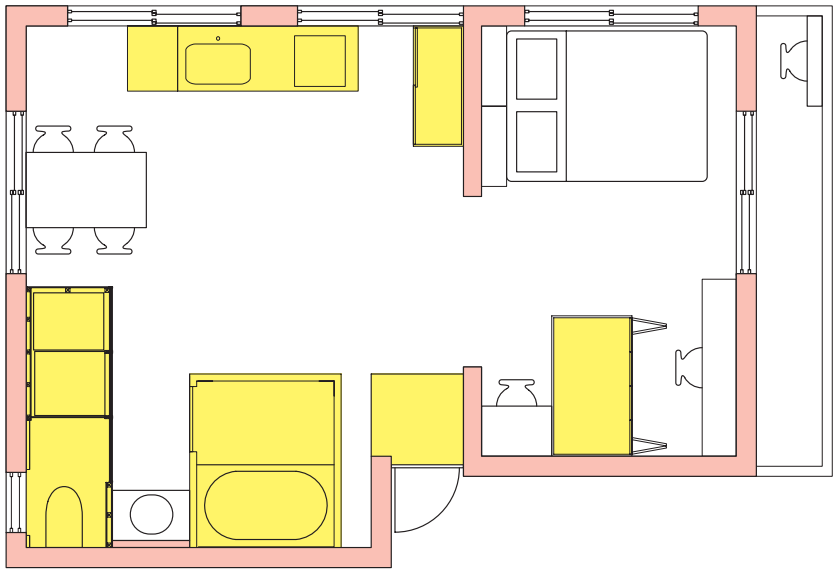


Your balcony, measuring only 3sqm, is the smallest space in your apartment. What did you change to make it more functional and how do you use this space as a result?

We hung blinds over the balcony railing to provide privacy. We laid decking on the floor and placed potted plants such as mint and other herbs on top. We designed a metal fixture to hang on the railing, placed a 20cm deep board on top, and lined up two folding outdoor chairs to create a small, relaxing spot. It's not particularly spacious, but with the chairs and table, it's a refreshing space to sit, drink tea and look at the view outside.

You mention on your YouTube channel that you choose to "live with plants". What role do plants play in your enjoyment of your home?

Before we moved into this house, we lived in a 60-year-old house. There was a large garden with many plants. It had a different look depending on the season. At that time, I had quit my previous job due to poor health. I got sick in the winter, and I was so tired that I couldn't move for several months in the winter, so I spent all day at home. As it gradually got warmer, the buds of the large magnolia flower in the garden began to bloom. Then, in the spring, the plants in the garden also budded and blossomed, and the garden became colourful. I felt like the plants were encouraging me to change and improve my own health. From there, I became interested in plants, and I started thinking about putting plants in the 35sqm house we moved into.

Plants clean the air and have a relaxing effect, but I don't think that's all they do. Plants teach us the 'flow of time'. They teach us that time accumulates. And they let us know that the seasons repeat. We see the changes in the plants as overlapping with our own selves, and they are like companions to us as we grow.

Many of the furniture pieces and other elements in your home are self-built. Why did you decide to design and build these pieces yourselves?

When there is a ready-made product with a good design, low cost, or the dimensions are suitable, we use the ready-made product. When there is a ready-made product that is just about easy to use, we combine it with handmade (DIY) work. There are some things in this house, such as shelves and carts, that we made ourselves. We feel that DIY is often cheaper and the dimensions fit the space better. It's easy to choose and buy, but we think it's also very interesting to think about how to make something with a good design at a low cost.

How has this experience of building your own furniture influenced your experience and enjoyment of your home?

I believe that a home is a place that continues to change even after you start living there. One advantage to making our own furniture is that we can create something that suits our interior design and lifestyle. But even more than that, the act of making furniture together becomes an experience of developing a home as part of *living*, and the furniture accumulates as a representation of those memories. If you think of a home as something that accumulates the actions and memories of the family over time, and thus goes from being just a *house* to being a *home*, then making furniture feels like making a home itself.

(Left)
A slim shelf and some plants allow the 3sqm/32sqft balcony to be enjoyed as a compact but pleasant outdoor space.

(Right)
The grey wood wool cement board which covers the 'box' containing the bathroom was chosen for its resistance to moisture.

You describe your home as a space you like to share and gather with family and friends. How is your home designed to make this possible (and pleasurable)?

Moveable furniture and furniture that can be used in a variety of ways create a space where family and friends can gather. A ready-made sofa bed is used for the bed. Normally, there are two beds placed side by side, but when guests come over, the two beds can be stacked together to create a sofa. The headboard is fitted with casters and designed so that it can be used as a side table when the bed is turned into a sofa. There is storage space inside where bed linens can be stored. Transformable furniture is used, including an extra dining table and a foldable low table.

What are your favourite details on your home – what little details bring you joy?

I like the windows that are evenly spaced in all directions and the window areas. Also, the installation of inner windows and double sashes make it hard to believe you're in the city, and I really like this quiet environment. While the entire space is designed as a single room, the areas that absolutely need to be separated are softly separated using curtains, which I feel gives the entire space an open and soft impression.

What have you learnt or what has surprised you about living in your design?

We've learnt that the goal of designing a house doesn't actually end when you start living in it, but that another design *life* begins once you start living in it. Compared to living in something that's already been designed, a house that you design yourself allows you to design your life as an extension of that design philosophy when coordinating the interior. By continuing to design the house through our lives since we started living in it, I think it has become a better space than when we first moved in. We also designed the house so that we could display the things we had collected, and by displaying them, we gradually began to feel that a house is not just a place for people, but also a place for *things*. Therefore, we came to think that when designing a house, we also have to consider the place for things at the same time.

Project: Bay Window Tower House
Design: Takaaki Fuji + Yuko Fuji Architecture
Size: 84sqm/904sqft
Location: Tokyo, Japan

INTERVIEW ELIZABETH PRICE
IMAGES MASAO NISHIKAWA & SHOHEI YOKOYAMA

A 44-square-metre block, and a determination to preserve the views and sunlight belonging to their neighbours, forced an unconventional outcome for the Tokyo home of architects Takaaki Fuji and his wife, Yuko. The couple had been married for 10 years before they embarked on this design as their first architectural collaboration. Clad in carbonised cork, the stacked structure is punctuated by a series of generous bay windows, which are the clever key to the success of this highly functional and flexible home for a family of four (and their two cats).

The bay window seats that extend around the perimeter of the living space easily adapt to the family's changing needs. Image: Masao Nishikawa.

The non-prescriptive character of the spaces within the home allows the children to use them freely. Image: Masao Nishikawa)

(Below right)
The home's carbonised cork exterior. Image: Shohei Yokoyama.

How did you find the experience of designing your family home together as your first collaboration?

Although it's our home, we designed it considering that we might not live here forever – it could be used by others or converted into a shop or office in the future. Therefore, we didn't approach it with any special emotional attachment just because it's our house; we treated it as one of our projects.

You live here with your two children and two cats. Can you please tell us their names and ages, and what they each enjoy most about living in this special and unusual home?

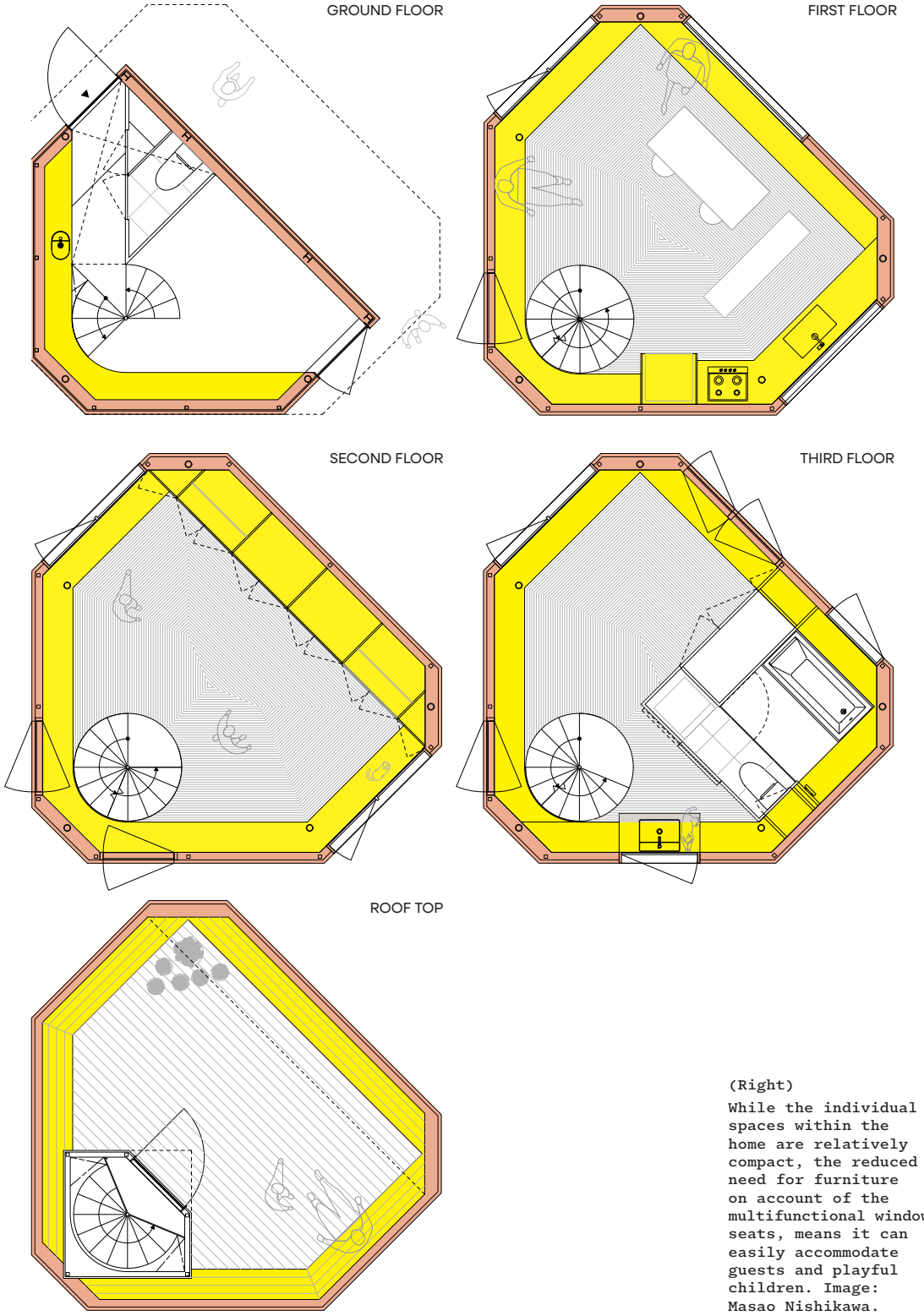
Our children are Rihito, 10 and Mako, 8. Our cats are Andrei, 13 and May, 13. The cats move around according to seasonal and daily changes in light and wind, finding comfortable spots. In summer, they prefer the lower floors where it's cooler, and in winter, they stay on the upper floors where it's warmer. The children seem to enjoy being able to do what they want in various places inside the house and use the space according to their moods: reading books on the upper floor or drawing on the lower floor, freely using the bay windows as benches and tables. Rihito particularly likes looking at the sky from the rooftop, while Mako enjoys playing the piano in the semi-basement space.

All the living in your home is done 'in the round' – in the centre of the house, across these multiple levels, like a child's fantasy tree house. When and how did this concept come into the design process?

From the beginning, we had "love our neighbours" as our design concept. Even in Tokyo's densely populated areas, we wanted to ensure that we wouldn't block the windows of neighbouring houses, allowing light and air to reach their interiors unobstructed. As we refined this approach, we arrived at an octagonal floor plan that approaches a circular shape.

What about the cork? I understand the inspiration came from a building you saw in Portugal. What was it about the material that made it so appealing?

We were searching for an exterior material that could serve both as external insulation and a design element while being environmentally friendly. Cork is harvested from the bark of cork oak trees without cutting down the trees. The bark regenerates every nine years and can be harvested again. The crushed bark is placed in moulds, heated and pressed, binding it together with its own natural resin – no chemical adhesives are used. As a result, for non-humans – for flora and fauna – this house behaves like a large cork tree. These aspects really appealed to us.



(Right)
While the individual spaces within the home are relatively compact, the reduced need for furniture on account of the multifunctional window seats, means it can easily accommodate guests and playful children. Image: Masao Nishikawa.

Longevity in built structures is not always the chief ambition in Japanese architecture, and yet this was a major consideration as part of your design – to design a building that would endure and age well long after you've moved on from it. Can you tell us more about this thinking and motivation on your part?

Since the house is located near a station, it's in an area that could serve various purposes in the future. Therefore, we avoided making it too overtly residential in design to maintain flexibility for other uses, and we selected materials that would become more attractive with age, ensuring that the Bay Window Tower House would develop a deeper connection with people over time.

I love the idea of the bay window being embraced as a site for all kinds of tasks and living... Can you tell us about how this idea fed into your design?

The Bay Window Tower House has a very compact floor plan of about 20m² per floor. If we were to place furniture like sofas in this space, it would occupy most of the area and define the space too rigidly. This design allowed us to keep the spaces undifferentiated without assigning specific functions to them. As a result, our family gained the freedom to behave as we wish without constraints like "this is how one should behave in this space".

Talk to us about your research into bay windows and the possibilities they opened up in your design?

Spaces like bay windows that partially enclose the interior can be found worldwide. In Japan, the *engawa* (veranda) in traditional wooden houses is a similar concept. Spending time in bay windows, which are the most exterior-facing interior spaces, provides spatial expansion in the compact Bay Window Tower House. One of our most significant discoveries was how it allows us to live while being strongly aware of the seasons, which are very distinct in Japan.

There are three different types of bay windows in the design. Can you please tell us about the types and why the different types were included?

Environmental analysis revealed that different locations required different types of bay windows – some for capturing light, others for catching breezes, and some for preventing heat gain. Therefore, we designed different types of bay windows for these specific roles.

I love the way your home makes so much use of its internal perimeter. It's so counterintuitive to how we tend to think about organising and utilising the spaces within our homes. We more often use these perimeters for storage and display rather than the more active parts of living. It opens up so much space in the rest of the home. How have you found the experience?

The areas around the bay windows aren't limited to specific functions, so they can accommodate various activities and, with some creativity, can be used very effectively. It's very comfortable. For instance, we've had events where many people sat in the bay windows as audience seats, making it like a mini theater for performances.

The benches or ledges that span the lengths of the walls on the first and second floors are simple and yet so clever in the range of functions they can play – from occasional seating and dining seating to bookshelves or a place for a TV or artwork… They are so versatile. Was this adaptability always forefront in your mind?

Yes, this was planned from the beginning. When having a party, we store the TV and artwork under the bay window bench, which then becomes seating. Since the spaces don't have fixed functions, we can flexibly adapt them according to the situation at hand.

What have you learned from living in your design?

Living in the highest interior spaces closest to the exterior and utilising the three types of bay windows has heightened our sensitivity to subtle climate changes and nurtured our connection with nature. This has been our most significant discovery.

For each of you, what are your favourite details or spaces within the design?

I like the simple, detail-less aspect of the cork, and how we laid the 35mm-wide flooring boards following the offset of the external shape. I particularly appreciate the subtle details of the space and the visualised centre in the design.

For Yuko, it's the iron coating and plastered walls that contain mica, which gives off a subtle glow when light hits at certain times of day. The texture also changes with age. Yuko really loves these details that show the passage of time.

The practical and flexible perimeter bench seating also appears on the family's roof terrace space. Image: Masao Nishikawa.

(Bottom left)

The bay windows are a place to wash hands as well as a place to sit. Image: Masao Nishikawa.

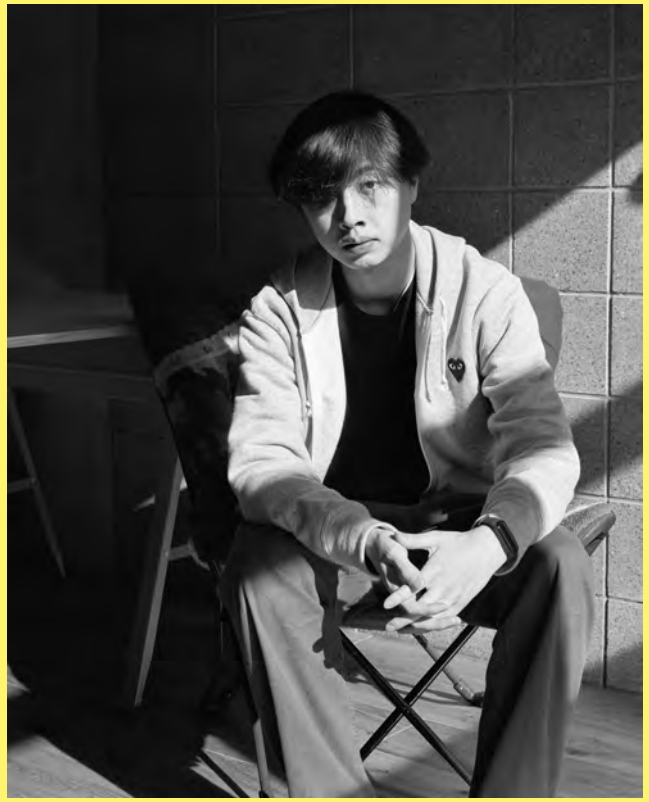
(Bottom right)

The perimeter of the house not only contains much of the 'living' but also much of its storage. Image: Masao Nishikawa.

SITTING WITH IT

INTERVIEW ELOÏSE LACHICORÉE
IMAGES KOTA KAWAI

There is more than meets the eye to Kota Kawai's eye-catching and colourful chairs. Their playful patchwork patterns represent his contribution to combating consumerism and waste in the apparel industry. The Tokyo-based artist caused quite the buzz with his first solo exhibition in 2020, featuring his *Ethical Consumption Chair*, and the awards and big brand collaborations swiftly followed. Kota tells us about the importance of "visualising" our most pressing problems and why he's so determined to find "a new story" for our forgotten fabric waste.



(Right) Human Air F3 (2021). TATRAS × Kota Kawai collaboration.

Right)
Human Air F1 (2021). TATRAS × Kota Kawai collaboration.

(below))
Alternative Chair (2022).

(Far right)
Revive arflex chair (2021). Arflex × Kota Kawai collaboration.

You started out in fashion. How did you end up here?

My change in direction from fashion to art came from a desire to reaffirm the expansion and potential of fashion. The unethical mass production and consumption of clothing can't be visualised accurately in the recycling and upcycling of clothing as more clothing. In using a chair that's 'clothed' you can start to visualise a sense of crisis in the piece and become more aware of the fact that clothes are abundant to the point where they threaten our existence.

What was it about your first exhibition that connected with people so deeply, do you think?

I think my first exhibition generated empathy among people as they were able to contemplate the issues around sustainability and the worries we all share. I also think that the nature of the apparel industry was revealed to people and how sustainable practices seem to be at the forefront of the industry, yet clothes are still produced and consumed unethically and on a mass scale.

The chairs themselves that featured in the exhibition were a clear visual representation of the wastage and surplus of clothes around the world, but instead of just acknowledging the problem, the chairs provided a different angle on the issue in actually utlising the surplus and waste.

What is it that you're looking to achieve through your work?

My work aims at broadening one's viewpoint and realising the importance of doing so. Because we live in an era of turbulent change, I think we need to learn to perceive things from various angles and find possibilities to solve things in various ways. We shouldn't limit the ways of solving this issue with eco-friendly fabrics, for example, but also find other ways to address the problem, like looking at smart consumption of overflowing things. I guess I also love giving items a new purpose when they no longer retain their value as products.

You're actively involved in collaborations with big name brands and have worked with the likes of Asics and North Face. What do you hope to achieve in working with these brands?

My art and work are meaningless if people don't see them. I believe that offering new perspectives through my work can change and create new values in the world. Collaborations with diverse brands like Asics and North Face are the best way, in my opinion, to make mass production in the apparel industry and our consumerist society visible at the same time.

You staged your first show in 2020 aged 22. You have already established such a strong profile as an artist. What's next?

I plan to develop a new public art project starting this year, in 2025. I want to find new ways of creating things with the current situations and issues we're facing. I also don't have any intention of stopping – I want to challenge myself creatively no matter how young or old I am.

Part of the Furniture

From the window of his former university dorm room in Leipzig, Germany, Japanese-born photographer Hayahisa Tomiyasu spent five years observing a ping-pong table. What began with an encounter with a fox, soon evolved into daily observations of the humble 'tischtennisplatte' throughout the seasons captured in 110 images. The series offers an unexpected window into human creativity with people utilising this simple, communal object in a multitude of ways – workout apparatus, dog grooming station, sunbed – but not once for a game of table tennis.

INTERVIEW ELOÏSE LACHICORÉE
IMAGES HAYAHISA TOMIYASU








Tell us about the fox and how all of this got started...

It all began in August 2011 with two different encounters with a fox. The first encounter took place on Sunday August 14th. I went for an afternoon walk in the city and came across a fox that was quite close to me. I don't think the fox saw me or maybe it chose to ignore me. Shortly before vanishing into the bushes it stopped and glanced in my direction. The tip of its tail was glowing white. The second encounter took place on the morning of August 30th. I had just got up and went to look out of the window. To the left of the building there was a courtyard with a ping-pong table. I spotted a fox on the athletic field in front of my building that was calmly making its way towards the table. It stopped right in front of it and lifted its head to look at it. It then went on and left the field. After that morning I found myself frequently at my window waiting for the fox, but it never appeared again. Slowly but surely, I started to observe the ping-pong table.

What was it about the ping-pong table that sparked your curiosity?

As a Japanese person, I found it very interesting that table tennis tables are in public spaces in Germany. You don't see them outside anywhere in Japan. I thought that table tennis was only an indoor sport where there's no wind or rain. There was also a high school, kindergarten, fitness studio, swimming pool and apartments for older people nearby. This meant that many people came to the courtyard and used the table in their own way and for different purposes. The many ways that people came and used the table often surprised me, which I think was one of the main reasons why I kept observing and photographing the table.

What does this piece of work reveal, do you think, about objects and the conflict or blurred lines between their intended and functional uses?

Objects exist right where they are, where we find them. They can tell us both nothing and something at the same time. Form and structure enable us to recognise and see an object for what it is, but they aren't limited to serving a single purpose. An object's infinite functions and uses can be difficult to recognise in everyday life, but when you try to shift your point of view and dare to observe them from a different perspective, you can start to discover and see things that were right in front of you from the very beginning.

If you had been the subject rather than the artist, how do you think you might have been captured using the table?

I think I might have been seen sat waiting on the table for my football teammates, kind of like the image on the cover of my book. I used to play on the football field right next to the table.

How has this project influenced your subsequent work?

My subsequent work has focused both on similar observations of objects like this project, and on more collective experiences. When I moved from my student dorm to a new flat after graduation, I immediately started observing street lighting from my new room. Also, during my 10-month residency in Rome, I observed and photographed a parrot on the roof from the window of my atelier. With regards to projects on collective experiences, I've become drawn to numbers – figures that are used as a means of communication even across different countries, languages and cultures. I'm now working on a project called 10", where I photograph numbers I encounter around different cities I visit, compiling them into countdown videos.

What do you feel this photo series communicates?

I think I really came to realise through this project just how creative we are as humans, even when we're doing the most boring, mundane things. Each of the interactions I captured over the course of the five years show that creativity can be visualised and captured more effectively through simple things.

TTP by Hayahisa Tomiyasu is published by MACK. Visit mackbooks.eu

SHOES ON / SHOES OFF.

Just be grateful we don't have to wear pattens anymore.

WORDS KIRSTEN DRYSDALE

Pattens must have been horrid to walk in. From the Middle Ages to as late as the 20th century, these were a thick-based wooden 'overshoe' – sort of like a giant clog or chunky (and very heavy) sandal. You wore pattens – as you may have deduced – *over* your actual shoes, which were soft-soled and flimsy, because it was the olden days and everything sucked. Some pattens were even raised on iron rings, designed to further protect the wearer from the filth of the ground – the rivers of mud, horse dung, and even human waste that spoiled the streets (as previously mentioned: everything sucked). Pattens were – mercifully – removed upon entry to any civilised space. Churches expressly forbade them – not only were they considered 'indecorous', being covered in shit and all, but they also made a very annoying loud sound when clacked across stone floors.

But that was way back then. These days things (generally) suck a lot less, and our shoes are (generally) robust enough to also serve as pattens, protecting our feet from the world's foulings, which are (generally) less ubiquitous. Thanks to modern sewage systems and the declining popularity of animal transport, we're no longer trudging through poo to get places. We might recoil at the thought of licking a footpath, but it would still likely be a much cleaner surface than any encountered by a medieval peasant.

So here's a hypothetical for the modern age: You arrive at someone's house. There is a welcome mat at the door. You wipe your shoes on it. Your host opens the door and invites you in – you pause at the sight of a pile of footwear at the entryway. You glance down at your host's feet – they are bare. This is, it is clear, a Shoes Off House. But must *you* take *your* shoes off?

Oh, dear Reader, you absolutely *must*[1]. Don't ask in the hope of polite acquiescence from your host – just slip them off and shuffle along inside. To wear your shoes inside a Shoes Off House is a figurative *and* literal *faux pas* (the French literally translates to 'false step'). But you cannot be blamed for hesitating – this is a question of etiquette that only needs to be asked in Western cultures, where shoe-rules are not universally understood or applied. The attitude of your host will depend entirely upon their feelings about germs, their cultural background, their own standards of domestic hygiene, and the type of flooring in their house. Within my own social circle, a strawpoll reveals wildly different expectations: some people are strictly Shoes-Off-At-The-Door, Please! Some find the thought of being exposed to visitors' bare feet even grosser than their shoes. Others will only ask you to remove shoes in carpeted rooms, while a few wouldn't be bothered if you trudged through in your work boots. One friend recounted taking their shoes off at the door of a real estate open house inspection, only to find they'd been stolen on departure! Scarred by the experience, they now carry their shoes around if ever asked to take them off. (I myself am a Shoes-On-In-Our-House-Is-Fine-If-You-Prefer person. I have very small children and therefore too much unidentified gunk on the floor in my house to brave it barefoot, and I don't expect anyone else to either.)

But our maddening cultural ambiguity is not universal. In Japan – a nation renowned for its commitment to manners – they have this all figured out: you do not, under any[2] circumstances, wear your outdoor shoes inside. Not at a house, not at a restaurant, not at a temple. You take them off at an entrance area known as a *genkan*. You place them together neatly, and turn them to point at the door. You step onto the indoor living space in your socks (please, no holes), or perhaps into a pair of inside slippers that your host has kindly provided for you. Removing your shoes inside is a sign of respect, a tradition deeply rooted in cleanliness and consideration for Japanese tatami mat flooring, which is vulnerable to moisture and can be easily damaged. It's also because so much of traditional Japanese life happens on the floor – sitting to eat, sleeping on rollout floor mats. You are frequently up close and personal with the surface you walk on, so wearing your shoes inside in Japan is like going to the toilet in someone's kitchen sink: definitely *not* okay.

The Japanese (and many other Asian cultures, for that matter) have science on their side: the evidence shows shoes are undeniably icky. One study found 95 per cent of swabbed soles had 'faecal bacteria' on them, with *E. coli* present in a third of cases. Your treads can also track in soil contaminated with heavy metals such as lead, along with petrochemicals and microplastics. These aren't present on shoes at levels so alarming we need to bring pattens back into vogue – but they're probably a reasonable justification for asking visitors to ditch them at the door.

Still, I figure there is nothing anyone could have on the bottom of their shoes that hasn't already been brought into our house by my own disgusting family. Which isn't to say I don't wish it wasn't so! If you visit me at 1pm on a Wednesday, after the cleaner has been, I will encourage you to join me in stripping down to your bareskin soles and sliding around the place in celebration. *Wooooooooosh* all over my freshly mopped wooden floors, smooth and sterile! Crumple your toes into my carpets and rugs, plush and pristine! Nary a crumb will come between your heels and the tiles – you could sit, sleep or eat right where you've stood. But this revelry is short-lived. By sundown, the kids are home from school and daycare, pockets full of sandpit and backpacks leaking yoghurt, and I'm back in my rubber slides with the RoboVac on charge.

To protect *my* indoors from the outdoors – at least in this season of our lives – I would have to insist on a full strip-down and hose-off at the door. And asking guests to only enter my home stark naked might just be a bridge too far, in any culture.

Still... probably more palatable than pattens.

1 Here's where I *don't* love obliging a shoes-off host: parties! You're telling me I have to dress up, carefully coordinate my outfit with my footwear, then walk around eating canapés shoeless? No. It's weird. I don't have pedicures often enough for this. Shoes should only come off at parties late into the evening, tossed aside to allow for dance-offs and moon walking competitions when everyone's too drunk to remember how scaly everyone's heels were. That said, I am a coward and will do exactly as you ask.

2 Okay, *almost* any circumstances: there are some indoor environments in Japan where it is not expected to remove your shoes - think museums, corporate offices or big hotels. But a good rule of thumb is that smaller or more traditional venues, especially where there is wooden or tatami flooring, will have a place for your shoes at the entrance and that is absolutely where you should leave them.

Your destiny is reversible.

In Mitaka, in the western suburbs of Tokyo, there's an apartment complex that promises something radical: to reverse the concept of death.

WORDS JAMES SHACKELL
IMAGES THE REVERSIBLE DESTINY FOUNDATION

There's a great anecdote about the deafblind author and activist Helen Keller. At just 19 months old, Keller lost both her sight and hearing to a mysterious illness (doctors today have put their money on meningitis). By six, she'd come under the guidance of 20-year-old teacher, Anne Sullivan.

Anne had taught Helen letters by signing them into her hand, but the child didn't know she was spelling words, or even that words existed. The entire concept was meaningless. Then one day, Anne took Helen to the water pump outside her house. As the cool liquid flowed over Helen's hand, Anne traced w-a-t-e-r into her palm. First slowly, then quickly.

This was Helen Keller's lightbulb moment, when letters and words suddenly took on *meaning*. The signified became linked with the signifier, and the silent world of tactile darkness now seemed bright with possibility. As Helen herself said later: "That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free!" Stooping down, the child touched the earth and asked for its name, too. By that night, she'd learned 30 words.

In 1904, Helen Keller graduated from Harvard, becoming the first deafblind person to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree.

What does this story have to do with a small apartment complex in Mitaka, on the western outskirts of Tokyo? Well, in 2005, 118 years after Helen made the link between w-a-t-e-r and water, work was finally finished on a groundbreaking new architectural project: *Reversible Destiny Lofts—Mitaka (In Memory of Helen Keller).*

It's the first residential building ever designed "to not to die" (sic).

The Reversible Destiny Lofts, as they've become known, are the work of Japanese conceptual artist and architect Shūsaku Arakawa and New York-born poet, Madeline Gins. And there is something inherently poetic about them. Constructed from multicoloured spheres, cubes and tubes, stacked on top of one another like children's blocks, they technically fall under the umbrella of 'procedural architecture'; a movement Arakawa and Gins helped pioneer.

Of all the avant-garde architectural schools, and there have been some real humdingers, procedural architecture may be the most out there.

> The fundamental idea is that properly designed environments can help people avoid (or at least seriously postpone) the inevitability of death, which is not the sort of thing you typically see on apartment brochures.

Procedural architecture flies in the face of everything we think we know about good design. It's intentionally disorientating, even uncomfortable. Its buildings are meant to keep occupants perpetually off-balance, requiring constant adjustment and engagement, squeezing your body into unorthodox spaces and forcing you to move (and even think) in unexpected ways. With the modern world becoming increasingly frictionless, Arakawa and Gins decided they wanted as much friction as possible. Friction creates sparks.

But let's rewind slightly.

Gins met Arakawa in 1963, while studying painting at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. It was the beginning of an unlikely personal and artistic relationship that lasted more than 40 years. The two started collaborating on various projects, one of which was *The Mechanism of Meaning*: a conceptual art piece spanning several decades, which culminated in *an* exhibition at the Guggenheim titled *Arakawa/Gins – Reversible Destiny/We Have Decided Not to Die*[1]. Catchy title.

The Mechanism of Meaning explored the way human beings perceived, understood and interacted with the world, and it got Gins and Arakawa thinking: what would it look like to actually *build* a home inspired by these principles? Could they somehow cheat death through *checks notes* good design?

1 It might be worth noting at this point that both Arakawa and Gins are deceased.

Portrait of Arakawa and Madeline Gins in the studio at 124 W Houston Street, New York. Photo courtesy of the Reversible Destiny Archives.

Image: Ken Kato. © 2005 Reversible Destiny Foundation. Reproduced with permission of the Reversible Destiny Foundation.

The Reversible Destiny Lofts consist of nine apartments over three towers. Seven of these are permanently occupied, while two are used for short-term stays or rentals. There are exactly 14 colours used in each loft – primary hues that punch you right in the retina, plus neon pinks, greens and oranges to further heighten the sensory overload. From any angle, you can always spot at least six different shades.

Walking through the front door, the first thing you'll notice is the floor, which rejects the whole notion of 'floorness' and instead rises and falls in random, wave-like humps. Larger curves fit the arch of an adult foot; the small ones, a child's feet. These minute incline shifts keep residents on their toes – literally.

Poles, ladders and other vertical elements punctuate the living space, seemingly at random. In the centre of each apartment, like the console on a spaceship, is the kitchen – built without walls and offering an uninterrupted 360-degree view. Kind of like a panopticon[2]. Some rooms are closed off by paper shoji screens. Others are left open – including the toilet.

Into the bathroom now, and you'll notice the floor is deliberately slanted, forcing hand-washers to lean towards the sink, gently stretching the gastrocnemius muscles. One room is a butter-yellow sphere, like the inside of a balloon, which causes some wicked acoustic distortion. Some light switches are placed at a convenient human height; others seem designed for three year-olds. The overall effect is unsettling, like living in a carnival funhouse. Or a Lewis Carrol novel.

All these multi-sensory tricks and optical illusions aren't there just to fuck with you (although fucking with people is actually kind of the point). They're meant to make you actively participate in the space. Every step you take. Every meal you make. Every time you wash your hands. In the same way music wouldn't make sense without a listener, procedural architecture doesn't make sense without an inhabitant. Your body is actually the main feature of the space. It's the thing from which everything else generates meaning.

2 The Panopticon was the brainchild of 18th-century philosopher Jeremy Bentham (also the guy that defined moral good as "the greatest happiness of the greatest number"). It involved a giant circular prison with a tower in the middle, giving one guard a 360-degree view of every single cell. Good for staffing budgets, bad for paranoia, since the prisoners could never tell if they were being watched. A few panopticons were built, but the concept of being 'observed' 24/7 was eventually considered cruel and unusual. See: Amazon warehouse workers.

(Top left)
Staircase and landing leading to the lofts full of "primary hues that punch you right in the retina".

(Bottom left)
The kitchen space in the centre of each of the nine apartments resembling "the console on a spaceship".

(Right)
The floors of the Destiny Lofts that reject the whole notion of 'floorness' with their "wave-like humps".

While most modern design actively encourages mindlessness – either through intuitive interaction or carefully constructed minimalism, or both – Reversible Destiny's design features exist to tug you (on in some cases slap you) back into the present moment. To force you to focus and use your body in unexpected ways. To live more mindfully and, in theory, even extend your life.

The project's website puts it this way:

> Our bodies, which are different from each other, change constantly. By inhabiting a space that does not allow you to think of it as something that is self-evident, you can realize that you can do things that at one point you thought were impossible. That is the essence of the idea of "reversible destiny," which the building embodies.

For ARAKAWA+GINS, Helen Keller was a role-model and a source of inspiration, someone who was able to practice "reversible destiny" in her own lifetime.

(Left)
Exterior shot of The Reversible Destiny Lofts showing the variety of colours and shapes that make up its facade. Image: Masataka Nakano. © 2005 Reversible Destiny Foundation. Reproduced with permission of Reversible Destiny Foundation.

Reversible Destiny Lofts—Mitaka show us how each of us can become Helen Keller. This is what we mean when we say that the Reversible Destiny Lofts—Mitaka are "a house to not to die."

The Reversible Destiny Lofts are polarising in the best possible way: visitors will either appreciate the philosophy behind them, or hate the deliberate impracticalities of the space. Either way, they're making you think. As Gins used to say, "Living is a form of ongoing inquiry." If you're not questioning things, you're not really alive. All pulse and no purpose.

For Gins and Arakawa, the whole immortality-through-architecture thing was (apparently) 100 percent sincere. 'Reversible Destiny' was more than a metaphor – they took "we have decided not to die" quite literally. Their philosophy was rooted in a profound desire to reimagine human potential and push the boundaries of physical and mental endurance. They even referred to their own work as an attempt to "rescue mankind from itself".

Ultimately, of course, it didn't work; Arakawa passed away in May 2010, after several weeks of hospitalisation. Gins refused to release the cause of death, saying only, "this mortality thing is bad news." Gins herself died of cancer just four years later. She was 72.

On the one hand, it's easy to dismiss this whole kooky immortality quest as whacked-out philosophy (with maybe more than a dash of hubris). But looked at another way, Gins and Arakawa did achieve their goal. Kind of. Their creations and their ideas will live forever, and even if *they* took immortality at face value, 'Reversible Destiny' has taken on a different (some would say higher) meaning. It's not necessarily about cheating death, but embracing life. Fighting the inevitable, every step of the way. Living every day fully present and engaged, unbowed by the knowledge that there's a sand timer out there with your name on it. Your destiny is *not* set in stone, or even concrete, and your body is capable of a lot more than you might think. See: Helen Keller.

Can a building really do all that? Who knows. You'd have to ask the long-term residents of Reversible Destiny Lofts. But Gins and Arakawa believed it was possible. And those are the kinds of questions good art should provoke.

As they said once, "to not to die is an extremely difficult design project." But that doesn't mean we should stop designing.

Image: ErenMotion / Shutterstock.

Beyond the Golden Turd.

Japan's inventory of smile-inducing buildings.

WORDS KIRSTEN DRYSDALE

There is a building in Tokyo known affectionately as the “Golden Turd” because it has, upon its roof, what very much appears to be a large golden turd. Inside the building is the Asahi Beer Hall, which is part of the Asahi Breweries headquarters. Right beside it stands Asahi’s office tower which rather more clearly resembles a mug of beer, tall and amber with a layer of white froth at the top. But the golden turd on top of the Beer Hall is a somewhat more abstract ornamentation. It’s actually meant to be a flame – it was designed by French architect Philippe Starck, after a “strange meeting” he had with the Asahi beer company president, who asked him to create a “very demonstrative building” that would be “the talk of the town”:

“At the time, I was interested in so-called symbolic architecture, I endeavoured to imagine buildings that expressed symbols directly. So I came up with, between fantasy, reasoning, intuition and obligations, a strange little building where the luminous base, the kind of crystal staircase, is the energy. The kind of black object, like an urn, is the mystery. And that the golden flame, above, is the passion." – Philippe Starck

Maybe in another country, the turd would have been interpreted as the “Flamme d’Or” he imagined it to be. Or a tadpole. Or a squiggly squeeze of toothpaste. But in Japan, where a very similar looking coiled golden poo (kin no unko) is a popular good luck charm, the building immediately became known as the ‘poo building’ (unko-biru). Mission accomplished, then, in terms of creating a building that is the ‘talk of the town’-- and a popular tourist attraction to boot.

The Asahi Beer Hall is far from the only whacky piece of architecture the country has embraced. Similarly ambitious and surprising expressions of imagination have been built all over Japan, if you know where to look. Some are cartoonish. Some are stern. Some are playful. Some are chaotic. Some are frankly baffling. All are unique, joyous manifestations of big visions brought to life – of creations that exist simply because someone had the thought ‘Wouldn’t it be cool if...’ and followed it all the way through.

Here are a handful of our favourites – a mix of celebrity homes, corporate novelties and quirky odes to nature.

1.

FACE HOUSE

Kyoto
Kazusama Yamashita
1974

–

If you look up ‘Face House – Kyoto’ on Google Maps street view, and zoom out a little, you will find you are being stared at. Nestled within an otherwise ordinary cityscape is a building that looks like it wants to be your friend. The façade of this home is quite literally a face – there is no doubt about it. It has big round ‘eyes’ for windows, that blink with the opening and closing of shutters; a ‘mouth’ agape – the front entrance, teeth outlined by its door frames; a cylindrical ‘nose’ letting shafts of light through to the children’s bedrooms on the upper level; all arranged on a big block shaped head, with a breeze blowing through the balcony ‘ears’ at the sides.

This anthropomorphic home and design studio sits on an otherwise nondescript street in Kyoto, surrounded by very ordinary buildings. It was built in 1974 as a residence and studio for a graphic designer, who lived and worked there for decades. The two upper floors – accessed by an external staircase – are the domestic quarters, while the ground level – with direct access from the street – was where his creative work was done and displayed. The building has since been home to an artist’s studio, shop and exhibition space dedicated to ‘handmade and DIY items’. The first business to move into the space was very particular about what it sold and made, and had a mission that perfectly matched the spirit of the house: “With so much mass production, we are always looking for originality. Something one-of-a-kind.”

Image: The Asahi Shimbun via Getty Images.

2.

ARK NOVA
No fixed location
Arata Isozaki & Anish Kapoor
2013

–

Is it a giant blueberry? An extraterrestrial orb? The world's biggest bubblegum bubble? No: it's an inflatable 500-seat mobile concert hall! Well, obviously. This bonkers ball of art-meets-engineering was created by Japanese architect Arata Isozaki and British-Indian sculptor Anish Kapoor in 2013. Two years earlier, the northeast of Japan had been hit by a devastating earthquake and tsunami. Together, the designers had conceived of an ark to "travel packed with music and various arts, from the perspective of long-term rebuilding of culture and spirit".

They named the project 'Ark Nova', meaning 'new ark', "with the hope that it will become a symbol of recovery immediately after the great earthquake disaster". Part of that symbolism involved using the wood of ancient cedar trees – which had been uprooted in the disaster – to construct the auditorium's seating.

Deflated and disassembled, the Ark Nova fits on the back of a truck. Upon arrival in a new location, the stretchy plastic membrane is blown up to a magnificent 9000 cubic metres of donut-shaped space – technically called a 'toroid'. The void inside is interrupted only by the donut's internal tube, which also helps control the acoustics. Seemingly opaque purple from the outside, the material is in fact slightly translucent, giving the interior a red glow that organically changes in step with the natural light levels from outside. A flexible multistage format can be configured to suit a range of performance types, from orchestral and chamber music to jazz and traditional Japanese dance theatre.

3.

AOYAMA TECHNICAL COLLEGE
Tokyo
Makoto Sei Watanabe
1990

–

In 1990, a giant Transformer toy rampaged through Tokyo, stopping only when it collided with a helicopter and was brought down in a heap of metal tangled up with power lines. Okay, not really – but you can see how that would surely be a plausible origin story for the Aoyama Technical College in the city's downtown Shibuya district.

This metallic mangle of machine parts is chaotic in appearance but fully functional in design: the giant silver egg is a water tank; the two long orange appendages are lightning rods. The architect, Makoto Sei Watanabe, said he was seeking to "restore the fundamental strength that buildings ought to have", noting that "ancient structures, from the pyramids to the great cathedrals, possessed the awesome power of large spaces".

Watanabe believed architecture should be "capable of moving people's hearts", and "giving them a thrill in a way possible in no other art". He saw the 'computer as an extension of the brain', and used mathematical algorithms to inform his deliberately disorderly designs, the aim being an aesthetic mess that somehow made structural sense. Watanabe said he hoped the Aoyama Technical College would encourage people "to stop and think about the way they want their cities to be", but also that "anyone who might see it experiences, both mentally and physically, a definitive feeling of excitement."

Image: mauritius images GmbH / Alamy Stock Photo.

Image: Thomas Kyhn / Alamy Stock Photo.

4.

OFFICE SAKAYA
Tokyo
Yokogawa Architects
2007

–

You will often see passers-by stopped in their tracks, staring up at this bizarre, cartoon-submarine-looking building in Tokyo's Shinjuku city and trying to work out what on earth it is. It is marked on Google Maps as "Office Sakaya" – but it's not just an office: it's also a home. And it's not just any home: This is a celebrity power couple home. Ryuta Mine and his wife, Midori – both well-known Japanese actors – built a three-storey house on the 400-square-metre site (big, by Tokyo standards) in 2007. The pair was intimately involved with its design, working with Yokogawa Architects & Engineers to incorporate a grass roof for their dogs, a swimming pool running through the middle level of the structure, a mirrored studio for aerobics sessions, and five-car garage (their luxury vehicle collection included a Bentley and a Porsche) that wraps around the ground floor entrance. As you do.

The couple was delighted with the result. Three years after it was finished, Midori said in an interview that the home was such a joy it had replaced the need for overseas holidays: "I feel like I am in a resort every day... I haven't travelled abroad since my home is like Monaco — and Greece." Although, that break from travel may have been more to do with the project's rumoured USD$5 million price tag, which the couple admitted wasn't a bad guess... but not quite high enough.

5.

ORGANIC BUILDING
Osaka
Gaetano Pesce
1993

–

Nine storeys of steel frame, with playful protrusions of pipe and scupper-shaped planters across a gridded facade of terracotta-toned panels. This is the headquarters of the Oguraya Yamamoto Company – a seaweed-based snacks producer with a corporate vision of "nature and health". But from the outside, it's like a wall of orange toilet bowls is slowly being taken over by a jungle, right in the middle of the city. Inside, a commemorative plaque explains what the structure is trying to say:

"In all living creatures each individual cell is organically joined and rationally interrelated to each other to stimulate growth and maturity. It is the Organic Building that symbolises the complete structure and system of a living creature."

The building was completed in 1993 during a time of great collaboration between Italian and Japanese designers. Italian architect Gaetano Pesce's concept was inspired by bamboo, for its "distinctive verticality, undulating surface, and tendency to grow into a network of interlocking but nonetheless unique spaces", and Osaka horticulturalists helped select more than 50 types of indigenous plants and trees, which are all kept alive by a sophisticated irrigation system built into the walls. While a "vertical garden" was seen at the time as a quirky modern novelty, the project was actually a nod to the ancient past, when this practice was "one of the seven great architectural styles in the era of Mesopotamian civilisation".


Image: Karen E. Young.

6.

ST. MARY'S CATHEDRAL
Tokyo
Kenzo Tange
1964

–

You may be forgiven for thinking you've stumbled onto the set of a Stanley Kubrick film but this is a different kind of hallowed ground. The Tokyo church that originally stood here was a wooden, Gothic style structure built in 1899, destroyed by air raids during the Second World War. (Catholicism isn't something generally associated with Japan, but the country has almost half a million adherents and nearly a thousand churches across the country.)

Rebuilt in its place in 1964 is the ultramodern and iconic St Mary's Cathedral – a cavernous, stone-tiled worship space of curved concrete walls laid out in the form of a cross, the glazed ceiling forming a "crucifix skylight, a window onto Heaven". The cathedral is equally imposing from the outside, clad in glimmering stainless steel and towering 40 metres high at its tallest. It was designed by renowned Japanese architect Kenzo Tange, who specialised in combining traditional Japanese styles with modernist aesthetics and took on a number of the country's post-war redevelopment projects. Acoustic and structural engineers helped him create an extraordinary sonic environment inside the cathedral, which now houses Japan's largest (and custom-made for the space) pipe organ.

Image: World Discovery / Alamy Stock Photo.

Image: Trevor Mogg / Alamy Stock Photo.

7.

MAISHIMA INCINERATION PLANT
Osaka
Friedensreich Hundertwasser
2001

–

It is Willy Wonka's mansion? Is it a toy factory? Is it a licorice allsorts warehouse? No – it's ... a waste management centre. Probably the only one in the world with its own TripAdvisor page and that attracts thousands of tourists every year. (Sure, some of them may be trying to find the nearby Universal Studios theme park.)

The Maishima Incineration Plant in Osaka opened in 2001. It is the work of Viennese designer and artist Friedensreich Hundertwasser, famous for infusing his architectural projects with a deep sense of fun and freedom. (You probably won't be surprised to hear the man who thought a waste sludge plant should be joyous, also once gave a lecture titled "Speech in Nude for the Right to a Third Skin".)

A pamphlet for visitors to the facility explains his intentions to symbolise the harmony of technology, ecology and art: "Since straight lines and identical objects do not exist in nature, Hundertwasser incorporated curved lines into each shape and encompassed the buildings in green as a symbol of harmony with nature." Part of the purpose of the plant's attention-grabbing design is to underscore how inseparable waste management is from our lives – within those wacky walls, 900 tonnes of rubbish is burnt each day, fuelling a steam turbine generator to produce electricity for the city.

WORDS AYUMI TAGUCHI

Image: Nam Tran.

The Space Between.

How Artists Are Redefining Tokyo's Urban Landscape.

"Beneath the surface of our capitalist society, countless small, fascinating spaces are emerging, fostering a diverse and inclusive village-like community that accepts everyone."

These are the words of Ryuta Ushiro, a member of Chim↑Pom from Smappa!Group, one of Japan's most prominent artist collectives. In Tokyo, where urban development progresses at a staggering pace, the cityscape seems to transform overnight. Shibuya, with its relentless redevelopment, always feels like it's mid-construction. As shiny new commercial facilities spring up, we walk past them and struggle to recall what used to stand there. Yet, according to Ushiro, in the spaces between all this imposing, impersonal and big-scale impermanence you will find a growing number of public art spaces in Tokyo that are as diverse as the communities they welcome.

In 2006 an artist collective roamed the streets of Shibuya with butterfly nets purchased from Don Quijote[1] chasing an infestation of rats. That was Chim↑Pom from Smappa!Group (hereafter referred to as Chim↑Pom) – a Tokyo-based artist collective founded in 2005, consisting of six members: Ryuta Ushiro, Yasutaka Hayashi, Ellie, Masataka Okada, Motomu Inaoka, and Toshinori Mizuno.

The rat story? That's *Super Rat* (2006), one of the group's earlier works. But it's far from their only bold project. In *Level 7 feat. Myth of Tomorrow* (2011), they added a haunting, nuclear disaster-inspired image to the bottom right corner of the empty space in Taro Okamoto's iconic mural *Myth of Tomorrow* in Shibuya Station – painted in a style so reminiscent of Okamoto himself that it almost looked part of the original image. Then there's *LOVE IS OVER* (2014), a raucous midnight wedding reception for member Ellie that evolved into a noisy demonstration on the streets of Shinjuku, held under police surveillance the next morning.

Chim↑Pom's creative activities are never confined to the walls of galleries. Their work happens spontaneously, guerrilla-style, in the middle of urban spaces. For them, the city itself is the canvas, transcending the traditional boundaries of public and private space. We meet Ryuta Ushiro at the WHITE HOUSE, a gallery in Shinjuku that he runs and our conversation quickly moves to the powerful influence of art on the culture and public realm of a city.

NTS: This is such a unique building. Could you tell us a bit about it?

Ushiro: Yes, this space has quite a history. It was built in 1960 by the architect Arata Isozaki. Back then, it was a hub for an avant-garde art group called the *Neo-Dadaism Organisers*. These were artists known for their radical and experimental approach to art.

At the time, it wasn't just architects – artists of all kinds were free to explore and express their ideas about the city in any way they liked. This house, like many others, became a gathering spot where they'd meet, collaborate, and throw wild parties every weekend.

1 "Don Quijote" is a popular Japanese discount store chain known for its eclectic assortment of products, ranging from daily essentials to unique, novelty items.

It was an era when these extreme individuals – artists, in this case – could come together and create something that reached the wider public. You could even say that post-war democratic society, which now seems somewhat outdated, had the capacity to embrace such extreme individuality and was open to expanding the concept of "public."

NTS: What would you say has changed since then?

Ushiro: The 1960s was an exciting time for Japanese art, a time when architects and artists could freely explore and develop urban theories. Compared to then, it has become much more difficult today. In modern Tokyo, where urban development is driven by capitalism, it's incredibly hard for individuals to create something for the city based purely on their own vision or ego. That being said, we're in an era where artists are reinterpreting what already exists. This kind of "reinterpretation" has led to a rise in artist-run spaces. There are quite a few in Tokyo, and if you visit them one by one, you'll find they each have their own unique personality, which makes them fascinating. This trend has significantly grown over the past five years or so.

NTS: The idea of "reinterpretation" is interesting: shifting focus from the exterior of buildings to emphasising their contents and how to edit them. Adaptive reuse and meanwhile use are concepts being explored creatively in many cities around the world, but where in Tokyo do you see this kind of reinterpretation happening?

Ushiro: Sumida Ward in Tokyo is an excellent example of where artists are creating their own unique ecosystems. The area is famous for the Tokyo Skytree, so its potential for redevelopment is high due to that. However, it remains a neighbourhood rich in nature, surrounded by the Sumida and Arakawa rivers, and strongly retains its traditional downtown atmosphere. Anticipating redevelopment, an artists' movement to share rented spaces has started. Additionally, it is characterised by the many old *nagaya* (row houses), which have survived largely unscathed by past wars. Since 2020, the area has hosted an art festival called the "Sumida Mukojima EXPO," which has given rise to many fascinating spaces that make use of the district's unique character. Artists, installers, chefs and other creative individuals are subletting these old houses and turning them into modern, vibrant spaces.

One such space is called "Kyojima Station," run by 'installer' Hirose Gai. It's an old house with a nostalgic, retro vibe, yet inside, you'll find all kinds of surprises: a giant hole in the building, chickens being raised, a pond with koi fish, a curry restaurant, and displays of the artist's work. It's packed with intriguing details and creative twists.

NTS: In cities like Seoul and Singapore, we see efforts to create cultural hubs by hosting international art fairs or inviting major galleries. What kind of place, then, fosters art that arises more organically?

Ushiro: I think it's related to the magnetic field of the place. Take Shinjuku's Kabukicho, for example. The area was originally intended to host *kabuki* theatre but failed, leaving only the name behind. Now it's a nightlife district, where the entertainment industry thrives. One of our members, Ellie's husband, Maki Tezuka, is the chairman of the Smappa! Group, which runs clubs and restaurants in Kabukicho. He once said, "Kabukicho is a city of losers." It's a place where people who've failed – whether students or professionals – gather. They become hosts, run bars or simply wander around the streets.

> Kabukicho is a place that embraces the idea of being a perpetual loser. It also has a history as an LGBTQ+ neighbourhood. In other words, it's a place where people seeking a sense of belonging have found their way. It's a place where services and bodies are exchanged, so everything that happens there is intangible. It's a performative, momentarily shining kind of place.

(Above)
Super Rat (2006) adopted the nickname Tokyo pest controllers gave to an emerging breed of poison-resistant rats proliferating in urban areas. The work involved exhibitions of taxidermied rats painted and styled to resemble Pokémon's Pikachu. Image: courtesy of Chim↑Pom.

(Right)
The gathering space and hub for creatives Kyojima Station in the Sumida ward. Image: courtesy Hirose Gai and Chim↑Pom.

(Right)
Chim↑Pom Street photo by Kenji Morita (girl in a drain - Eli). Image: courtesy of Chim↑Pom.

(Below right)
Scenes from BENTEN – a three-day art night event held in Shinjuku's Kabukicho in November 2024. Image: Shun Uehara courtesy of Chim↑Pom.

(Left)
The WHITE HOUSE gallery in Shinjuku run by Chim↑Pom member Ryuta Ushiro was once white perhaps. Image: courtesy of Chim↑Pom.

(Above)
One of the various *Super Rat* (2006) installations in Tokyo. Image: courtesy of Chim↑Pom.

(Right)
LOVE IS OVER (2014) was part demonstration, part wedding reception for Chim↑Pom member Ellie. Image: courtesy of Chim↑Pom.

The art history of this area is also similar, with several legendary guerilla happenings recorded.

> Even if the scenery changes, the accidental art happenings that have occurred in Kabukicho will be remembered, etched into art history. These moments are stronger than anything that remains as buildings or physical objects. When trying to create new art here, it becomes part of the reinterpretation of the space. This is the kind of magnetic force the area has.

NTS: I recently visited your "BENTEN[2]" event in Kabukicho. The art in Kabukicho felt incredibly raw and visceral – it really got under my skin.

Ushiro: The former chairman of the Shinjuku Kabukicho Shopping Street Association once said, “Kabukicho is safe, but you don’t need to feel secure.” And that’s exactly it. I’ve had a long relationship with Kabukicho, and I think that part makes the place suitable for art. It was a clear turning point for contemporary art during the [Covid] pandemic. The WHITEHOUSE, where we’re sitting now, was created during that time, as well as the art space Decameron and even a Noh theatre[3] for traditional Japanese performances. While all the museums in Tokyo closed, art activities continued in Kabukicho. I mentioned that it’s a district associated with the adult entertainment industry, and was once mocked by the media as the “nightlife district”, almost as if it were a source of the COVID-19 virus. However, artists are, in a way, part of the same system. They are able to remain fluid and detached from societal norms, and during the pandemic, they kept moving to ensure that art wouldn’t be defeated. Before we knew it, small art spaces were popping up everywhere, and I started to feel like this place was becoming an arts district, almost like an art ecosystem.

NTS: The public spaces crafted by artists – the work of individuals – seem to hold a lot of potential for Tokyo’s future. What do you think the defining characteristic of Tokyo’s future will be?

Ushiro: I guess it would be diversity. Just like how Sumida and Kabukicho are completely different, there are various characters within Tokyo itself, such as Akihabara, Ueno, and Koenji. Each area has its own influential figures and associations, and there are rules unique to each place. It's almost like various artist-run spaces are operated in a village-like manner, and that, to me, is diversity. The "magnetic field" of a neighborhood doesn't get affected even with redevelopment; it's like the DNA of the area that’s always been there. Tokyo today is a city where artists are creating small public spaces in various ways. Beneath the surface of our capitalist society, countless small, fascinating spaces are popping up, fostering a kind of diverse, inclusive village community. Even though the scale is small, countless public practices are happening across Tokyo. There are so many different shades, so you should just go to the place where you feel most comfortable.

2 “BENTEN” was a three-day art night event held in Shinjuku's Kabukicho in early November 2024. The event involved a deep exploration of small art spaces scattered throughout Kabukicho, with Chim↑Pom serving as the artistic directors.

3 “Noh theatre”, originally known as the “Nakajima Shinjuku Noh Theatre” established in Kabukicho in 1941, was purchased by Smap!Group in 2022 and renamed the “Shinjuku Kabukicho Noh Theatre”. The space serves as a platform for promoting Japanese culture both domestically and internationally.

The cult-like cool of Japanese magazines

WORDS JAMES SHACKELL
IMAGES NAM TRAN

Growing international interest in Japanese titles like *Popeye*, *Brutus* and *Casa Brutus* is putting western magazines on notice. So what makes Japanese mags so freaking cool?

I keep every magazine I've ever been published in. It's my inner hoarder trying to get out.

The only problem is that I'm running out of storage, and my office-slash-bedroom, which I'm currently sharing with my 10-month-old son, is now starting to resemble some kind of creepy magazine shrine. There are dog-eared copies of *Rolling Stone* and *frankie* and the (now-defunct) *Smith Journal* littered everywhere, along with other titles. Magazine racks are overloaded and visibly buckling under the strain. A four-inch stack keeps my computer monitor at an ergonomic eye level.

But this is really just a long-winded way of establishing my print credentials right up-front. I have a *thing* for magazines. I've been reading them and writing for them and collecting them for nearly 20 years.

I think the enduring appeal of the magazine has something to do with the very specific feeling you get on a warm Sunday morning, when you sit down at the breakfast table, coffee in hand, faced with a whole day of blissful nothingness, and open a fresh newspaper. I don't know what you call that feeling, but someone needs to bottle it. Nothing online comes close. And just because the industry has struggled to *monetise* magazines over the last 20 years doesn't mean people have stopped loving them, or even reading them. Kind of the opposite. We still read magazines for the same reason the Metaverse hasn't taken off: some things you just gotta touch.

But for all my years of fandom, I have an embarrassing cultural blind spot: Japanese magazines. It's a field of zine-dom that I've never really explored. Partly because I don't speak Japanese, and partly because magazines are (by nature) rather expensive. Both to buy and to make. And so shelling out 15-or-so bucks on something I can't even read seems frivolous and hard to justify, even for a chronic mag hoarder like me.

But it turns out Japanese magazines are having what you might call a *moment*. And not just in Japan. This subculture's cool factor is so objective and universal that it seems to transcend language barriers. Speciality mag shops are stocking Japanese titles in Melbourne, Paris, New York, LA and London. And people are actually *buying* them. People who don't speak a lick of Japanese and think *kanji* is a type of pear.

"Interest in these Japanese titles is rising, let me tell you," says Fernando Pacheco, Senior Correspondent for *Monocle* and host of their weekly magazine podcast, The Stack. "Now in London, where I'm based, in all the cool magazine shops you see those titles on the shelves. People are obsessed with them."

Fernando consumes more magazines, and a greater variety of magazines, than perhaps anyone else on the planet. It's literally his job. So I ask him what's so special about Japanese titles. Why would people buy these things if they can't even read them?

"The language thing isn't really a barrier," he says. "I don't speak Japanese, so when I read a Japanese magazine I just use Google Translate. But really they have such a strong visual component that it doesn't even matter.

(Left)
Monocle's Fernando Pacheco indulging in his passion for Japanese magazines during a trip to Tokyo in July 2024.

"I think Japanese magazines bring something that western mags have forgotten about. Japanese titles, especially the fashion ones, work a bit like a catalogue. On one page you might see 20 tee-shirts, for example, but laid out in a very exciting way. Everything is very in-depth, very specific. It's capitalistic, maybe, but beautifully done."

When you pick up your first Japanese magazine, this is the thing you notice straight away (apart from the fact that it opens leftwise, with the spine running down the righthand side). The average page layout is crammed with so much detail – so many products and images and scribbly illustrations and reviews and tips and shopping ideas – that your brain doesn't know where to start.

Most western magazines pride themselves on carefully curated aspirational minimalism – the whole less-is-more-and-you-can't-afford-it-anyway vibe. They almost make you feel guilty for handling them, lest you smudge the pages. But Japanese titles seems to say, "If less is more, just imagine how much more *more* will be." If nothing else, they're experiments in maximalism. "Kind of like a catalogue, but sexier," Fernando says.

Chris Schalkx from the *Financial Times* puts it another way, "Like analogue pin boards created by someone with enviably good taste."

And this, I think, is the secret ingredient.

> Japanese magazines feel curated in the best possible way: the content isn't selected to please advertisers, at least not overtly, and it certainly doesn't follow the crowd. It kind of feels like someone very cool and interesting has made a scrapbook of all their favourite cool and interesting stuff, then lent you a copy.

I'm flicking through arguably Japan's most famous publishing export, *Popeye*, the self-styled "magazine for city boys", which has been going strong since 1976 and covers a broad mix of style, fashion and general urban coolness. This issue (#929) is all about thrift shops and second-hand vintage 'come ups' (I think I'm using that term correctly). And the layouts, at least to my brain, which has been conditioned on traditional grid-based spreads, seem almost manic. Total sensory overload.

Snapshts of people at markets are scattered haphazardly over the page. A small note tells you what each person is wearing. Contributors (every one with their own hand-drawn illustrated avatar) give recommendations for stamps, broaches, distressed denim, figurines, watches, 80s-style bum bags, soft toys and fishing reels. Page after page after page. There's an entire spread on American vintage lamps. Four pages in the centrefold are canary yellow, titled 'Yellow Pages of Secondhand', and list the major flea markets and vintage stores in Tokyo (neatly organised by product category).

The general threshold for whether something gets published or not seems to be 'interestingness'. There's even a recipe section at the back ("A cooking guide for city boys") with ingredients and step-by-step instructions for making Japanese curry. The whole thing feels completionist. Like between these two covers is the only Tokyo-based vintage shopping guide any human could ever possibly need.

You can trace the roots of this freewheeling aesthetic back to a New York bookstore in 1969, when Japanese editor Jirō Ishikawa and illustrator Yasuhiko Kobayashi stumbled on copies of Stewart Brand's famous 1960s counterculture rag, *Whole Earth Catalogue*.

In 1975, Ishikawa and Kobayashi channelled this encyclopaedic visual style into *Made in USA*, a "scrapbook of America", which became a runaway success back in Japan, introducing a new generation to American-style workwear. The next year, in 1976, the duo teamed up with editor Yoshihisa Kinameri to launch *Popeye*. And Japanese publishing never looked back.

"Japanese magazines are incredibly detailed and specific," Fernando says. "One I love is called *Transit* magazine. It's a quarterly travel title, and every issue they go to a different county or region.

"I first came upon them when they did an issue on Brazil, where I'm from, and oh my god it was like the best travel guide you can imagine. They went so in-depth. Like these are the Brazilian TV hosts you should know. Here are some smaller towns you might not have heard of, and how to get to them. Or a little illustrated guide to the animals of Brazil. The level of detail was incredible. I was like, 'How do they know all this!?'"

Along with popular titles like *Popeye*, *Brutus*[1] and *Casa Brutus*[2], *Transit* is a great example of Japanese hyper-specificity. It's a destination-based travel magazine, which is nothing unusual, but it tends to dive much deeper than your average Top-10-Things-To-Do wanderlust quarterly. It also features some interesting and incredibly niche themed editions, including a recent one on Breads of the World. That's an entire print magazine devoted to bread and bread-related products.

"They even had one on zoos," Fernando says. "And it was so detailed. Like this is the panda enclosure of a small zoo in Belgium kind of detailed. Really specific. Not everyone agrees with zoos, but it's an interesting idea nevertheless, and something most western magazines wouldn't even think of."

Journalist Michael Charboneau has noted this peculiar phenomenon in *Huckberry*.

"Japanese men's titles focus on hyper-specific style tribes," he writes, "high-end suits and business attire, for example, or vintage Americana like denim jackets and boots." And it's true. While western magazines have sectors or verticals – design, food, travel, what-have-you – they're mostly made to appeal to as many people within that vertical as possible. Because money, right.

Japanese magazines, on the other hand, aren't afraid to target super-niche subcultures. Examples include *Hail Mary* (vintage stuff), *Grind* (avant-garde streetwear) and *Men's FUDGE* (fashion for hip 20-somethings). A new title, *Cult**, launched in 2024 with a first issue dedicated to fighting 'aloneness' – a chronic social problem in Japan. It features everything from a photo essay on Japanese-Black women, to an underground dive into Department H, Tokyo's longest-running fetish night. Compared to your average western publication, the whole scene feels experimental and kind of refreshing. Less mag and more zine.

1 A sister publication to *Popeye*, which began in 1980. *Brutus* covers the kind of fashion that makes you seriously question the contents of your wardrobe.

2 Think *Brutus* for interior design nerds.

"I think there's this ingrained love of print in Japan," Fernando says. "Like almost any store you go into, they'll have a little print catalogue with things you can buy, and it's all editorialised.

"There's a neighbourhood in Tokyo called Jinbocho, where they sell all kinds of vintage books, and there are specific shops *just* for vintage magazines. It's a dream. When I was there recently, I even discovered a dedicated fishing bookstore. Like all these Japanese magazines focussed entirely on fishing. It's brilliant."

There's a Japanese word, *ikigai*. Loose translation: 'passion that gives value and joy to life'. And that's the fundamental thing that leaps off the page of Japanese publications: passion. While a western travel magazine, for example, might focus on armchair adventure and leave specific recommendations to guidebooks, Japanese travel mags are literally designed to be carried with you and referenced and used as cool idea generation machines. It's kind of the difference between a sculpture and a tool. Both can be beautiful, but one is very clearly meant to be *used*.

Japanese magazines somehow manage to be prescriptive but not superior.

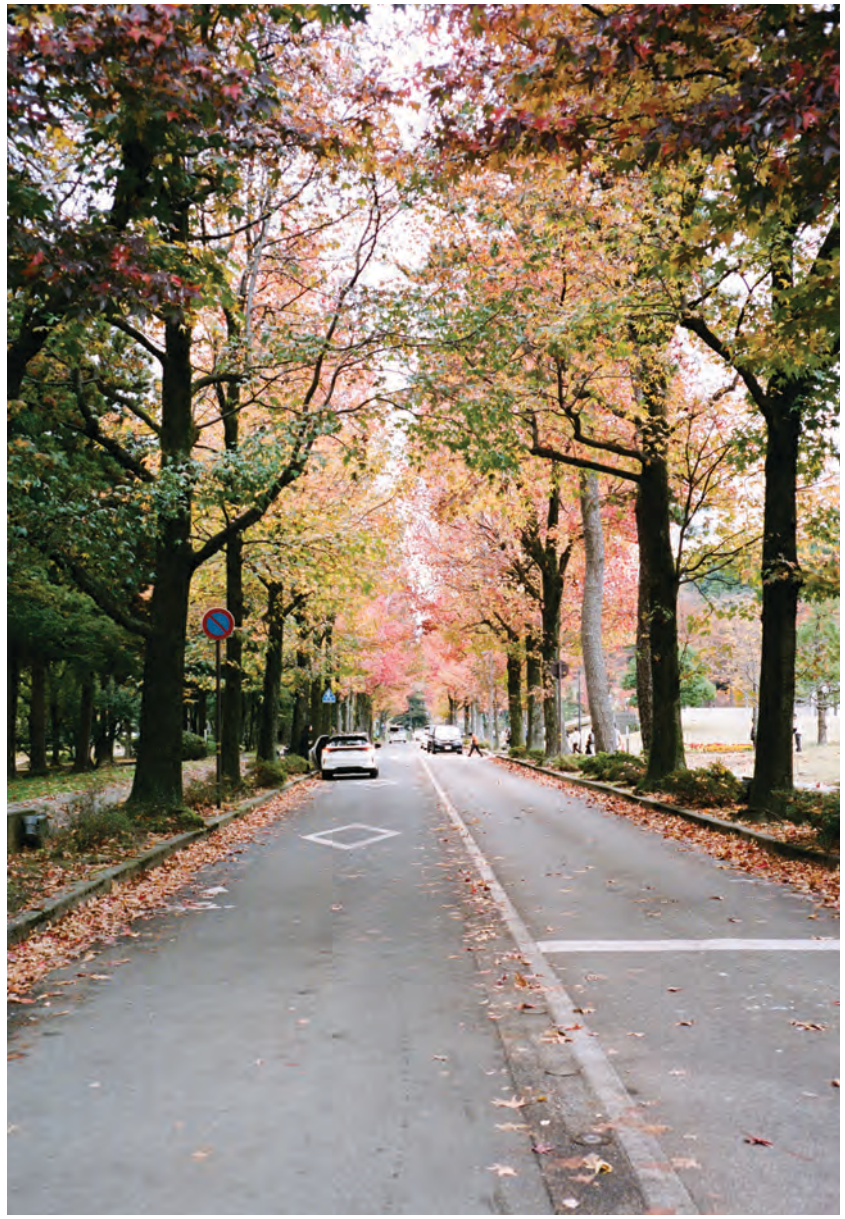
They tell you what to buy, what to wear, how to decorate your apartment, but they do it from a place of love and passion and encyclopaedic, nerd-like knowledge in the subject matter. Which is the inherent joy of all good magazines: they're made by people who like something and want others to like it to.

"It's funny," Fernando says, "I think people, at least here in the UK, they see change and they move too fast. Everything is online? Let's close book shops. Streaming exists? Let's stop making CDs.

"But they forget there are huge groups of people out there who still value practical objects. They still want that physicality. People are really coming back to beautiful things."

Slices of Time

Kyoto and **Kanazawa** are two of Japan's most photogenic cities. They're also the two cities that Never Too Small's **Nam Tran** often splits his time between when he's in Japan. As a parent of a preschooler, wandering the streets of pretty cities taking pictures is more of a rarity than a regular pastime, but once in a while, slices of time open up between work and life. What follows is the product of some of those slices: Nam making the most of some quality time with his **Nikon 35Ti** loaded up with some Portra 400 and just following his nose around two very photogenic cities.




カレー
の店


寿司
会席
光月
100円


文祥堂書店
Tel 221-1491 Fax 211-1032

I object.

WORDS JEREMY WILLAMS

Countering consumerism with beautiful things.

I'm in a brightly lit department store on a crisp winter day, contemplating small bowls.

I know what I'm looking for in the general sense only: something to hold snacks. For years I've put a handful of nuts or chips in the little plastic bowls we used to feed our babies. They're the perfect size for it, but I'm a grown-up and I want grown-up things. Even the kids are grown up, come to think of it. I've been using primary coloured plastic baby bowls for my evening TV snacks for a decade.

Does a snack taste better from a good bowl? Probably not, though I'm pretty sure coffee tastes different from a plastic cup. I can say with confidence that both are more satisfying from a good receptacle. Good quality objects satisfy in different dimensions. They can be aesthetically pleasing – nice to look at. They can be ergonomically satisfying, the way a great kitchen knife feels right in the hand. Good objects aren't just functional. They have character and beauty, and we all need more beauty in our lives.

In fact, that everyday beauty might be the most important kind. Sōetsu Yanagi, the Japanese art historian and philosopher, argued that the beauty of everyday objects was more important than the fine arts, because we encountered them every day. "There is no greater opportunity for appreciating beauty than through its use in our daily lives," he wrote.

It's a philosophy that he dedicated his life to demonstrating, by collecting and curating crafted household objects. His Folk Crafts Museum opened in 1936 and still welcomes visitors in Tokyo today.

During his travels to collect objects, Yanagi came to some conclusions about what it was that he was drawn to. For a start, he scrupulously ignored the identity of the maker. He expressed his frustration at those who looked for the name first to judge the value of something. This was irrelevant to an object's quality and a distraction. Besides, signing an object makes it self-conscious somehow, as if it is "making an unwarranted claim on your attention." Anonymous objects can be appreciated entirely for what they are, not the reputation of their maker. They have no agenda, and so "the general feeling is one of freedom."

Yanagi was also drawn to items that were handcrafted. This felt particularly important at a time when Japan was industrialising rapidly. Mass-produced industrial objects had a glamour to them. They felt like progress, like the future. Yanagi wanted to draw people's attention to the unique character that comes from hand crafting in an era where those skills were being devalued.

Not that these handcrafted objects should be unique or bespoke – they were produced in quantity and available to everyone at an affordable price. The humble beauty of folk crafts, by definition, is open to everybody. Besides, unique and bespoke items are often made for display, to be set on a shelf and looked at, occasionally dusted. The seeker of everyday beauty can discount that sort of thing, looking instead for objects that are "wholesomely and honestly made for practical use".

Like my snack bowl, which I intend to use on a regular basis. Get the kids off to bed, shut down the laptop. Pour a drink. A symbolic moment of transition from evening to night, and the closing of responsibilities for the day. This is sacred time. It might not always feel like it, as we stick on the next episode of whatever miniseries we're watching, or sit at either ends of the sofa, reading or playing video games. But it is. It's often the only time that we get with just the two of us. It's time that matters, with a person who matters. As mundane as it might be, why shouldn't this time have its own sacred objects?

I have this vaguely in mind as I browse the tableware department. Beyond that perfect palm-size, I don't have a set idea in mind. I figure I'll know the right thing when I see it. It won't be plastic. I want something stable. That rules out the elegant little miso soup bowls, that look likely to tip over and scatter popcorn everywhere if I bump the table. I want something with the right weight, which rules out the stoneware or these double-walled stainless steel bowls that are otherwise a nice size.

It's here somewhere.

"There is no greater opportunity for appreciating beauty than through its use in our daily lives."

SOETSU YANAGI

I'm not committed to all the tenets of *Yanagi's philosophy*. I don't necessarily aspire to fill my house with handcrafted things, but I am nonetheless drawn to the idea of everyday beauty. And here in a department store, surrounded by abundance, what I find myself thinking about is how *this* challenges the values of a consumer society.

Disregarding the maker's mark is the very antithesis of branding. Take a Louis Vuitton bag. Yanagi would not be impressed at how desperately such a bag wants our attention, and how it speaks of privilege and wealth. "Society cannot be proud when a product is available to only a select few," he wrote. "Equating the expensive with the beautiful cannot be a point of pride."

Anonymity doesn't mean soulless objects, and that's the value of the handmade. Even if they are mass produced, there's still something distinctive and unique, a human touch that gives them character. My favourite mug isn't unique at first glance – I have a set of four that all look the same. But as they are hand painted, there are subtle differences. Thicknesses of paint, the streaks left by a paintbrush along the handle. I don't think about these things 99 per cent of the time when drinking from it, but I like the connection that's possible here. There was a maker, a real person, and I can see the evidence of their care and attention to detail. The distance between maker, object and user feels shorter, and there is a warmth and humanity to this mug. I would be sad to lose it, which is why I have four of them.

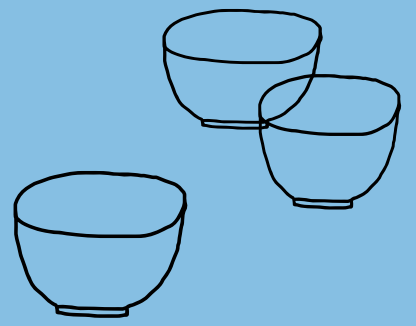
In an age of disposable convenience, choosing household objects more purposefully also prompts us to think about durability. This isn't just important because it reduces waste. There's a companionship that comes with well-loved and well-used objects. Having broken a couple of glass cafetieres, a friend gave me a steel one for my birthday. It was a thoughtful present, and only much later did they reveal that they had stolen it for me from a hotel room service trolley. This fact notwithstanding, I have used it every day for 20 years and it brings a simple joy to my morning coffee. Disposable objects have no such stories.

I am not a 'consumer' of these household objects. They do not need to be upgraded like a piece of technology. They won't go out of date like a fashion item. I will not lose interest in them because they were never all that interesting to begin with – part of what makes them easy to live with is that they are not attention seeking. These are humble, honest objects and I hope to enjoy them for a long time.

This is bad news for the marketing departments of consumer capitalism, which require things to be used up and replaced as often as possible. But we're paying a high price for that way of life, and I rather like the irony of undermining consumerism by paying more attention to what we own. To keep the wheels turning, consumerism needs us to value quantity and treat our possessions with disdain. Care and appreciation for quality is an act of resistance. As Yanagi wrote in 1943, "quality is how the heart and soul of a civilization should be measured".

This might sound like a lot of philosophy to bring to a shopping decision, but it isn't in practice. I choose a set of three little bowls, hand-turned from bamboo. Brightly lacquered on the outside, spiralling woodgrain on the inside. They are good quality. I like them. They will be well used.

They're from Thailand, not Japan – apologies to Mr Yanagi. I will make up for it by filling them with seaweed crackers and wasabi peas.



A Renovation Revolution.

WITH A SHRINKING POPULATION AND AN AVERSION TO RENOVATING, JAPAN IS NOW FULL OF DETERIORATING HOUSES THAT LIE ABANDONED, ESPECIALLY IN RURAL AREAS. BUT A NEW GENERATION HAS A PLAN.

Apartment in Kamakura designed by Roovice as part of its Kariage side business that specialises in renovating and subleasing difficult akiyas. Image: Akira Nakamura.

WORDS JANA PERKOVIĆ

A few years ago, my whole office became obsessed with watching the Japanese home renovation show *Before & After*. To us young designers, it was far more relatable than its aspirational Western counterparts. Instead of mansions, gutted to become even more mansion-y mansions, the houses in *Before & After* were mid-sized family homes in ordinary suburbs. The renovations were intended to solve practical difficulties of multi-generational living in often cramped quarters: lack of elderly-friendly features, unusable in-between spaces, poor insulation. Rot and mould were common, as were single-glazed windows. One episode, we watched an entire section of a house get demolished into a heap of plywood and aluminium. One of my Australian colleagues thoughtfully spoke out: "This is built worse than an Australian home." Then he added: "But outside *their* house is 20cm of snow."

What we learnt from the show, in summary, was that renovation in Japan wasn't a rich man's hobby.

Architects are fascinated with the endlessly inventive Japanese residential architecture (known as *jutaku*). Nowhere else in the world are modestly-sized private homes, often commissioned by ordinary middle-class families, so willing to bravely stretch the very concept of a 'home'. Take Takeshi Hosaka's 18 sqm house for two with a cathedral ceiling and a dramatic skylight, inspired by medieval living; Atelier Tekuto's Lucky Drops house, built on such a thin strip of land that the house is about 20m long, but only 1–2m wide; or Ryue Nishizawa's Garden & House, which seems to have no walls, only plants. And let's not forget Share Yaraicho, where the external wall is replaced with a zip-up translucent tarp.

It is easy to fall in love with these radically playful homes – but they owe their bold existence to the fact that a home in Japan is largely seen as a depreciating consumer good. While most European cultures attach a special permanence to houses and land – reflected in the language of 'real' estate, 'fixed' or 'immovable' property – in Japan, the average house has a lifespan of only about 30 years. Its market value decreases accordingly, like in a car, so that towards the end of the 30-year-period it will approach zero. A 2012 survey found that a full third of the Japanese were "psychologically averse" to living in a pre-owned home.

The reasons for this are complex, some modern and some traditional. Fire was historically such a hazard to Japanese homes that rebuilding was frequent. In fact, traditional Japanese architecture developed as a catalogue of standardised parts, so tatami mats and fusuma sliding panel doors could be easily replaced after damage. A house could even be completely disassembled when a fire threatened – leaving only the roof and the frame – and reassembled after.

After the introduction of concrete and other modern building materials, in the 20th century it was the earthquake regulations that continued to mandate obsolescence. Continuously revised building codes meant that a home quickly became code-incompliant. Demolishing was preferable to costly, finicky retrofitting. And anyway, Buddhism values impermanence, as shown in the ritual demolition and rebuilding of the Ise Shrine, traditionally and cheerfully done every 20 years since 690 AD.

The result of all this is that half of all Japanese homes are demolished before they are 38 years old. For perspective, says Jiro Yoshida, researcher at Penn University, the equivalent half-life of homes in the USA is about 100 years. That is a big difference, and it goes some way to explain the idiosyncratic houses of Japan. With no consideration of resale value, each owner is free to make their home into their castle. Not surprisingly, says Yoshida, today Japan has more architects per capita than any country – 3.8 times more than the US.

But what happens when the land of the world's youngest homes also has its oldest people? The current median age in Japan is 46.5 – double the age of the average house. The low birth rate and migration rates are also shrinking the country, from the 2008 peak of 128 million people, to projected 87 million by 2070. As the population shrinks and ages, it is also concentrating in metropolitan areas, leaving millions of regional homes vacant. Should they really all be demolished?

Economist Richard Koo doesn't think so. In an academic paper, he has argued that routinely demolishing houses instead of caring for them is so wasteful that it has prevented Japan from recovering from its long economic slump: "[It's] no way to build an affluent society," he writes.

Neither does the Japanese government, which in 2020 made it a priority to revitalise the countryside by reactivating many of its 8 million empty homes, known as *akiya*. Regional towns have been supported to offer *akiyas* for sale at a low price or even for free, spiking international interest. But buying an *akiya* can be quite complicated,

even for a well-meaning Japanophile willing to put in DIY work: from uncommunicative real estate agents to hidden conditions (such as having to farm the attached land, or live permanently in the house). An akiya can be had for as low as USD$10,000; the required renovations may cost two or three times more.

It seems like a vicious circle. But the problem has inspired a wave of radically creative solutions. Pioneers such as Masako Toyota are leading the way. Toyota, a tour guide inspired by beautifully preserved European cities, returned to her seaside hometown Onomichi, made famous by Yasujiro Ozu's film *Tokyo Story*, and found a shrinking city with hundreds of beautiful houses left to ruin. With two newborn twins in tow, she scoured the property market to find her own *akiya*, and restored it with her carpenter husband. They called their home 'Gaudi House'. Toyota then opened it up for artist residences.

(Top and bottom)
Master carpenters Toda Komuten have long worked to preserve the traditional kominka houses of their Okumikawa region. Today, through their Kominka Collective project, Toda Komuten carefully takes these homes apart so they can reassembled in new locations.

(Right)
A reconstructed kominka. Image: Sean Powell.

"It took six years to find my first house," Toyota later said. "I thought, if we could provide a matching service, more *akiya* could be saved." Toyota now runs a non-profit (known locally as Aki-P) that matches abandoned houses with interested buyers. To date, Aki-P has helped renovate over 150 houses, leaving behind a trail of delightful new ventures: an international guesthouse, a school house-style café, a creative shopping mall with an independent record store and an old book store. It has even renovated an abandoned banquet hall, formerly used to host weddings. The project has brought creatives, new residents, and tourists back to town. Toyota, used to entering abandoned *akiyas* and finding 20-year-old eggs in the fridge, takes pleasure in this transformation: "Travellers' positive comments help people here take pride in Onomichi."

The issue with *akiyas* is often their location – sometimes far from roads and shops, let alone well-paying jobs. Moving into one can be such a logistical feat that a specialist company now offers to move one to you instead. Master carpenters Toda Komuten have long worked to preserve the traditional *kominka* houses of their Okumikawa region. Accidentally, they discovered that disassembling and reassembling a *kominka* was an excellent way to train apprentices in traditional carpentry. Today, through their Kominka Collective project, Toda Komuten offers to deliver a traditional Japanese house to you anywhere in the world. The house is carefully taken apart, each beam and post numbered, then polished and repaired in the workshop, and finally packed into crates and shipped. The houses are even refitted to have state-of-the-art energy efficiency when rebuilt. While Toda Komuten admit that relocating traditional houses may not help the depopulating towns of regional Japan, they do add: "[I]f an old house – filled with the skills and thoughts of the carpenters of the past – is simply left to decay, then it may be an option to have someone who understands its value take it over. To us, this seems like a good idea."

But even big Japanese cities are aflush with empty homes in need of a refresh. These are less likely to be charming timber cottages than prefabricated mass housing – the sort of hope-deflating homes one sees on *Before & After*. And here is where the most remarkable transformation is taking place – fuelled by the changing values of the younger Japanese.

Unlike their post-war baby boomer parents, Japan's so-called "enlightened generation," raised in an economic crisis, values community, sharing and clever reuse over flashy brand new goods. Take Hirohiko Urata. "I didn't particularly want to live in a newly built house," Urata told Quartz in 2015. "I feel that when you move into a brand new place, it can only deteriorate from there."

In fact, Urata moved into a refurbished 1950s apartment, developed in a remarkable new partnership between MUJI and Japan's public housing agency. Faced with a shrinking clientele and 760,000 dilapidating apartments in its portfolio, the agency rebranded itself as the Urban Renaissance (UR) Agency in 2004 and refocused from building to renovating. MUJI came on board, ripping out interior walls and dividers, joining small rooms into bright open-plan spaces, installing durable

During the renovation of Apartment in Kamakura designed by Roovice as part of its Kariage project, all existing wall, ceiling and floor finishes were stripped away, revealing the apartment's raw structure and the remnants of its past.

fixtures but leaving many of the original mid-century features in place, and in the process creating minimalist, functional apartments that rented at below-market rates.

Once seen as unsafe and poorly designed, these public housing units have become a hit. Urata's south-facing modernist block, generously set back and with views of communal gardens, gets ample sunlight and cross-ventilation – a luxury rarely found in Tokyo's cramped commercial developments. "Many of my friends come over because it's easier to relax here," Urata told Quartz.

As the collaboration continues, MUJI is moving beyond single apartments to redesign entire public housing estates. The first iteration aimed to bring young people back into public housing, says Teruhito Toyoda, senior architect at MUJI House. Now, he says, MUJI wants to help "those young residents form a community with existing elderly residents." To see to that, MUJI is redesigning public plazas, revitalising shopping streets, planting gardens and installing benches, and building events' spaces and shared kitchens.

Indeed, in a society where more than 50 percent of households comprise a single person, shared and community-oriented living has become a new trend – and a welcome corrective to the mass of depressing single-room apartments in major cities. A market niche has developed for imaginative designer-developers, such as architect Ryuji Fujimura or company ReBITA, who sensitively renovate older homes, apartment buildings, and even offices, for a variety of new lifestyles. Fujimura has turned a four-bedder in suburban Tokyo into a shared home for four individuals, and an elementary school into accommodation with a restaurant. ReBITA's offer ranges from co-living for younger people, to community-centred buildings where small apartments are complemented with ample communal gardens, to straightforward apartments for sale – all in sensitively refurbished buildings.

The most interesting start-up to emerge may be Kariage, the side business of renovation specialist architecture studio Roovice. Founded by Nobuyuki Fukui in the global financial crisis, Kariage specialises in renovating and subleasing difficult akiyas – hard to upgrade, maintain, or sell – renovating them at its own expense, and then renting them out for seven or eight years before returning them to the owner. When Kariage started in 2015, it took a while to convince the owners. "A lot of people thought that after I renovated the space, I would just end up taking their whole house away from them," Fukui told Tokyo Weekender in 2023. But today, Kariage renovates 10-20 spaces a year across an eclectic portfolio.

What all these projects have in common is that buildings that until recently would have been demolished without a second thought are now lovingly restored and updated for the 21st-century needs – and at a fraction of the price of building new. It points to a profound generational change in values.

> They may lack the pizzazz of a brand new home, but Japan's young generation is discovering there is a lot to like in older buildings: from their often generous size and well-designed layouts, to the layered patina of another era. "Our 'old' is their 'new'," says Fukui. "There is newness in nostalgia."

The radically inventive jutaku houses are a brilliant response to a set of limitations: tiny and awkwardly-shaped plots in large cities, caused by inheritance division, paired with very loose building regulations and no concern for resale value. But they are an individualistic response: a cocoon for a single family, or even a single individual. Something else is being achieved with Japan's renovation revolution: a renewed sense of connection to the past, to the neighbourhood, and to community.

"I felt guilty about tearing down something new just because I didn't like the design, and it's not good for the environment," says one of the ReBITA residents, who ended up moving into a 37sqm apartment, but with a 37sqm garden and access to plenty of community facilities. Like for many, his initial scepticism has turned into an appreciation of thoughtful, practical design, and the more connected lifestyle his new home encourages. "It's reassuring to know that there are many people in the neighborhood who I can have a casual conversation with. It feels like my world has expanded."

THE MEANING OF

MADE IN JAPAN

WHAT DO TEAPOTS, COUCHES, CUPS AND TEXTILES HAVE IN COMMON? THEY'RE ALL EXAMPLES OF SIMPLE, HANDCRAFTED, SUBTLY ELEGANT JAPANESE DESIGN. **AND THE WORLD CAN'T GET ENOUGH**.

WORDS JAMES SHACKELL

When I was travelling through Japan in 2014, I stayed for a few nights at a *shukubo* in Koyasan, a little Shingon Buddhist temple town, tucked away in the mist-covered mountains south of Osaka.

On the first night, the monks invited us to join them for a meal in the communal dining hall. Rain was pounding the forest outside, slashing through the night in great sheets of water, and our group sat awkwardly on the floor, unsure where to put our legs, as a saffron-clad figure placed a small table in front of us. On the table was a teapot, a cup, a pair of chopsticks and a delicate selection of vegetarian *shojin ryori* (monk food). Nothing fancy, spartan even, but all done with the care and the attention to detail I'd come to characterise as typically 'Japanese'. Whatever that meant.

I remember looking closely at the teapot. It was a simple, handmade thing. You could tell by the slight asymmetry, and the way the clay bulged like a wonky pear. But it was warm in my hand, and it felt good, and in a weird way these imperfections somehow enhanced its beauty, and I definitely spent more time looking at that teapot and simply enjoying it as a *thing* than I'd done during any of my previous encounters with teapots. Read into this what you will.

> "That's the thing about Japanese design," says American architect and author Naomi Pollock, "whether it's furniture or architecture or industrial design, you have to look closely, because there are layers of beauty there."

Naomi Pollock wrote the book on Japanese design. Literally. It's called *Japanese Design Since 1945: A Complete Sourcebook*, and it's one of 11 books Pollock has penned on the subject. If you want to know what connects the concrete architecture of Tadao Ando with the textiles of Sudō Reiko and a kettle designed by Sori Yanagi, Naomi is the person you call. Especially if you want to answer the fundamental question that seems to float around all Japanese design, which is: why are we so obsessed with it?

"You have to remember," Naomi tells me from Chicago, "that after the War, and certainly into the 1970s, Japanese products were (rightly or wrongly) viewed as cheap. The words 'Made in Japan' weren't a good thing. And then at some point, somewhere around the 1980s, there was this flip, where 'Made in Japan' became associated with high quality."

To understand how brands like MUJI, Uniqlo and Comme de Garçons have taken over the Western design world, and the principles that link them together, you have to rewind the tape slightly. All the way back to 2 September 1945, when Japan formally surrendered to the Allies and marked the end of World War II.

The concept of 'good' design wasn't alien to Japan in 1945. In fact, there was even some crossover with the Bauhaus school in the early 1940s, when legendary French architect Charlotte Perriand worked for the Japanese government as a design consultant. What we think of as 'Japanese style' can really be traced all the way back to the Edo Period (1603–1868), or even the Azuchi-Momoyama Period before that (1573–1603). But the end of the War is still a good place to draw a line: old Japan and new Japan, Meiji monarchy vs. US-backed constitution, agricultural economy turned manufacturing powerhouse.

"After the war, Japan was poor. Really poor," Naomi says. "And they figured that exports would be a good way to boost the economy, so a lot of goods made in Japan, at that time, were made for the overseas market. Of varying quality, I might add. But the bigger issue was Japanese companies basically copying designs from Scandinavia and America, which didn't land too well."

These were the two original sins of post-war Japanese design: cheap quality and derivative ideas. To remedy the situation, the Japanese government established the Good Design Awards in 1957. These awards are still around today, where they're known by their symbol, the G Mark, which has become synonymous with design excellence. The idea was to reward Japanese designers for their originality and somehow cultivate a design language that felt wholly and authentically *Japanese*. Something the country could own, and therefore sell. Artisans and companies got to work, and factories began popping up all over the country.

One of these was a little furniture brand called Tendo Mokko.

Established as a craft guild in 1940, Tendo Mokko became one of Japan's 20th century commercial success stories. And the company still exists. They make the kind of furniture you see in the waiting rooms of high-end architectural firms. And the brand did become known for its collaborations with famous Japanese architects. If Kenzō Tange[1] was designing a prefectural government hall in the 1980s, Tendo Mokko were probably the ones doing the fit out.

"I visited their factory once," Naomi says, "and I was there right after they brought in the new hires. Kids who had just come out of high school. And these guys are going to spend their entire career at this factory making furniture, and you see them learning the most basic skills. Like how to sand. What does wood feel like. And this is all under the supervision of a sensei, basically."

Tendo Mokko is a great example of something that came to characterise Japanese design during the late 20th century, which was this weird combo of mass production and traditional skill. While Ford-style production lines were churning out cheap consumer goods in the US and Europe had become synonymous with high-end luxury, no country had worked out how to combine the two. At least in a way that was economical. But Japan had a head start: its long and fabled history of craft.

Rooted in centuries of technique, Japanese craft (also known as *kogei*) is all about respect for nature, meticulous attention to detail, and the seamless blend of function and aesthetics. In other words, it's not just about how an object looks, but how it feels when you pick it up. Every object is a conversation across space and time.

> "One of the key things to keep in mind about Japanese design – and this spans everything from furniture to mass-produced items – is that it's designed as much with the hand as with the eye," Naomi says.

What she means is that Japan somehow found a way to unify the power of the production line with the hand-made artistry of traditional craft. And that was the secret sauce that turned the country into a global design juggernaut, all the way from the 1980s to the present day.

There are examples everywhere, if you know where to look. Take Naoto Fukasawa, arguably Japan's most influential product designer. In his studio there's a workshop, where designers will literally sculpt full-size sofas out of styrofoam[2]. And this isn't unusual. Many Japanese designers still rely heavily on physical models. In some cases, only when something has been shaped and crafted by hand will it be 3D scanned and uploaded, so the CAD data can be sent to the manufacturer..

"As a Japanese person, I am influenced by the things that have developed in this environment," Fukasawa tells us from Tokyo. "However, my design philosophy doesn't come from being specifically Japanese. Rather, I focus on the relationship between humans, the body, and the surrounding environment.

> "It is true that my work is influenced by various cultures from different countries, but I strongly design with the awareness that humans are part of nature."

Then there's design legend Sudō Reiko, who heads up NUNO, one of Japan's most important textile companies. She's famous for her use of tactile materials, like delicate paper woven into fabric. "She's even used techniques from the automotive industry to create shimmery surfaces," Naomi says. "But she's making these fabrics by *hand* – she doesn't do the manufacturing, they're made in huge weaving factories – but the design, the feel of the product, that's all done by hand."

Or how about Hakusan's famous 'rock cup', designed by Masahiro Mori in 1978? A simple white ceramic up, without handle or adornment, able to be churned out by the zillion. But curling around one side is a shallow recess that allows the cup to slot neatly into the user's hand. "You put your thumb in this indent, and it fits perfectly, and you know that that's *his* thumb, Mori's," Naomi says. "It's this very direct connection between artist and user through the medium of mass-produced ceramics."

• • •

If you asked a layperson to sum up Japanese design in one word, that word would probably be 'minimalist'. But that's not quite accurate. Minimalism in the West isn't the same as minimalism in Japan. Japanese artists don't describe their work as 'minimalist'", and there's definitely no cultural link between 'simple' and 'boring'. Instead, there's the concept of 'No More, No Less', which really means reducing objects to their most fundamental essence. Ornament doesn't come from any man-made flourishes, but from the object itself.

If you're making a chair, for example, your obligation as a designer is, first, to make a comfy chair, and second, to show off what's already there: the grain and shape of the wood. The idea is to ditch anything that distracts from that *inner* beauty. It's kind of like the famous Michelangelo quote: How do you carve a statue from a block of marble? You just remove everything that isn't a statue.

Fukasawa understands this better than anyone. There's often this paradox between effort and result, he says, where the longer you work on something, the worse it gets. "The things that crystallise instantly are simple, and if I think too long, I get surrounded by complex elements, which become unnecessary to the original idea."

Naoto Fukasawa pictured with the Za stool, which he designed for Emeco. The stools are made of 80 percent recycled aluminum and are 100 percent recyclable with a lifetime guarantee. Image courtesy of Emeco.

1 The guy behind the world-famous Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park. In the second half of the 20th century, Tange became one of the world's most influential architects and urban planners. His ideas about flexible cities and high-density living inspired the design of places like Hong Kong and Singapore.

2 Spare a thought for the poor cleaners.

Juice Skin, designed by Naoto Fukasawa for the HAPTIC exhibition as part of the 2004 Takeo Paper Show, are fruit juice packages that have the same appearance and feel of the fruit they contain. Image: Masayoshi Hichiwa.

The Bunna Chair, designed by Naoto Fukasawa for Zanat. Bunna meaning rebellion in Bosnian captures the chair's bold design with its singular backrest and armrest form. Image: Almin Zrno.

1.

3.

2.

1.

The Mushroom Stool designed by Yamanaka Group for Tendo Mokko in 1961. Image: TENDO CO. LTD.

2.

INFOBAR xv, designed by Naoto Fukasawa for au Design project (KDDI) was designed in 2018 to celebrate the 15th anniversary of INFOBAR. Image courtesy of KDDI CORPORATION.

3.

Pao Portable. Designed by Naoto Fukasawa for HAY. Image courtesy of HAY.

4.

The iconic Butterfly Stool designed by Sori Yanagi for Tendo Mokko in 1956. Image: TENDO CO. LTD.

4.

The Wall Mounted CD Player, designed by Naoto Fukasawa for MUJI takes inspiration from the humble Japanese kitchen extractor fan. Image: Hidetoyo Sasaki.

Shelf X, designed by Naoto Fukasawa for B&B Italia and made from homogeneous white Corian®, this is one concept that came to Fukasawa “in a flash”. Image courtesy of B&B Italia.

The Roundish Arm Chair designed by Naoto Fukasawa for Maruni gently wraps around the body for maximum comfort. Image: Yoneo Kawabe.

The team-demi eight-piece stationery set designed by Naoto Fukasawa for PLUS was the winner of the 2020 Good Design Award. Image courtesy of PLUS CORPORATION.

The Tako ARMCHAIR (*tako* meaning octopus in Japanese) designed by Naoto Fukasawa for Maruni was named for its flowing arms or tentacles. Image: Yoneo Kawabe.

MEET LEGENDARY PRODUCT DESIGNER, AND LONG-TIME MUJI COLLABORATOR, THE ONE AND ONLY **NAOTO FUKASAWA.**

How do you approach finding the 'essence' of an object? The moment I receive a request from a client, an idea, shape, or even an image of the object and its place in life crystallises in my mind. This is probably due to my experience working with brands around the world. My senses are likely reacting to the surrounding environment, which may feel monotonous, and these impressions are recorded in my brain and senses.

Japanese design often balances tradition with innovation. How do you navigate this balance in your own work? For Japanese people, harmony is very important. Design refers to the relationship between people, objects, and the environment. When all elements work together in balance, it aligns with the idea of minimalism and simplicity in design.

Are there any Western design influences you've incorporated into your own work? The concept of design was introduced to Japan from the West. Japan has its own culture of beauty, art, crafts and folk crafts, but I believe the Japanese learned the concept of design from the West. Therefore, I can talk about the best designs in the world. These are truly authentic. It's clear that I aim for something authentic and genuine in my work.

How does good design impact society? I believe design is a parameter of society. It's like the small switch or dial used to slowly change the direction of a large tanker. I believe that one good design can change society, and that's how I approach my work.

Of all your designs and projects, which do you consider the most meaningful? I think projects like 'Juice Skin', the 'MUJI Wall-Mounted CD Player', and 'B&B Italia's Shelf X' are great examples. These ideas came to me in a flash. They were unprecedented, and yet, when people see them, they're amazed by the value of the idea and the flawless details. It's a mysterious kind of shared understanding – feeling moved by something we've never seen before, almost as though it had always existed. This is one of the strange joys of being human.

"People look at the work of Tadao Ando and go, 'Oooh, minimalist concrete houses'," Naomi says, "which is true, but he's basically treating concrete the way other people would treat wood. Gently bringing out its beauty. It's so soft, so smooth, you really have to touch it to appreciate it. Even though concrete is a traditionally industrial material, he's approaching it with the eye of a craftsman."

> In Japanese design, perhaps more than other school of design, "more than meets the eye" is taken literally. Visual inspection isn't enough. You have to hold these things, run your hands over them, feel them between your fingers. Just as the designer intended.

• • •

The name that looms large over the whole 'Japanese minimalism' aesthetic is MUJI, the famously "brandless" brand, which has grown from a private supermarket label to one of Japan's biggest and most successful manufacturers. 1364 locations around the world. Annual turnover: approximately 661 billion yen.

Established in 1980, MUJI's original mission was to offer great-quality, affordable products to the modern consumer, and do this by eliminating wasteful processes, excessive packaging and, yeah, brand logos[3]. They were the original Japanese white label company. Early product lines featured just 40 items, including household goods, food and clothing, but in the late '90s, MUJI decided to expand its range. *A lot*. About as far as a range can go, in fact. There followed MUJI travel accessories. MUJI shampoo. MUJI pens. MUJI electronics. MUJI skincare products. Even prefab MUJI houses.

3 The name "MUJI" is short for MUJIrushi Ryohin, which means "no-brand quality goods".

Over the years, the brand worked with famous designers like Fukasawa and Kenya Hara to create a cohesive MUJI *look*. And thanks to international expansion in the 1990s, that look became synonymous in the West with paired-back, Japanese minimalism. MUJI and Japan, Japan and MUJI. The two were one and the same.

"We sometimes talk about if MUJI created the new hotel, what kind of hotel would MUJI create?" Hara told Dezeen in 2017. "And not just a cheap one. MUJI is kind of a counter to both the cheapest hotel and the highest hotel. And if MUJI landed a baseball team, what kind would we get? And if MUJI was an airline, what kind of service would we provide? If MUJI was a tourism company, what kind of service could we create?"

What Hara's trying to articulate here is what we might call the 'spirit' of MUJI, and by extension the spirit of Japanese design, which is something that's tough to put into words, but (to borrow Justice Potter Stewart's famous 1964 description of pornography) we know it when we see it. Walk into any Japanese design store, like Melbourne's CIBI retail space, and even though every shelf is stocked with different brands, artists and manufacturers, there's a cohesive *vibe* that links the whole thing together. And MUJI realised long ago that you could aggressively market and sell this vibe, whether the object in question was bed sheets or backpacks.

"I'm not interested in the popularity of the products," Hara said. "What's unique about MUJI is people don't go there with a specific item in their mind. I don't think that there are many other brands like that."

MUJI is a brand that effectively combines half a dozen classical Japanese design principles: *kaizen* (continuously improving all aspects of production), *monozukuri* (a commitment to craftsmanship), *shibui* (subtle, understated elegance), and *mottainai* (using every resource and object to the full).

"Nothing goes to waste," says Naomi, "and that's something that's becoming increasingly prevalent. You see it in Japanese cuisine. When you sit down at a Japanese restaurant, you only taste the final product, but behind the scenes they're using everything. Nothing gets thrown out until every conceivable drop of flavour has been sucked out of it."

Sustainable design is pretty ubiquitous these days, but Japan got there centuries ago. It's easy to forget that Japan in the 19th century was a very poor, feudal, isolationist country. Nothing like the neon industrial giant we know today. The ruling class had a lot of money, but once you got a couple of rungs down the social ladder, poverty was widespread. Waste was a foreign concept because people literally had nothing to waste. And that thrift mentality has kind of seeped into Japanese design over the centuries: shirts tend to get mended rather than dumped, broken plates get fixed (sometimes with powdered gold or silver; a process known as *kintsugi*), old products get upcycled and reused.

> For Japanese designers, the inevitable ageing of things isn't inherently bad. In fact, when seen from another perspective, the older and more worn something becomes, the more beautiful it is. Not age before beauty, but beauty *from* age. Maybe that's why Japanese design has a timeless quality; it embraces and celebrates the passage of time.

"It's known as *wabi sabi*, which is actually a pretty complicated concept," Naomi says. "I'm not even sure I can define it accurately. But it's partly that there's beauty in the decaying of things. And I think that ties into a general belief in Japan that nothing is forever. Everything will wear out eventually. There's beauty in the wooden tray that's been used for 80 years precisely because it's worn down, because it's chipped and scuffed.

"But Japanese design, while it looks beautiful, that's not really the point. The real mission for every designer is to make their product appealing to the user. It's not stated anywhere. It's just implicit. Like my MUJI blender, it just works. It works so *well*."

Clothes from chaos.

Image: Takashi Homma.

WORDS JAMES SHACKELL

He's won some of the biggest awards in fashion. He studied in Europe and worked under the legendary John Galliano. Now he's turning Japanese fashion education upside down. Meet the weird and wonderful Yoshikazu Yamagata.

"Since my childhood, people around me said I'm not normal."

Japanese fashion designer Yoshikazu Yamagata is the living embodiment of that scene in The Devil Wears Prada, where Stanly Tucci's character, Nigel, explains the pain of growing up different in a small town and clinging to fashion as a "shining beacon". A way out. A way to understand a world that maybe didn't understand him – yet.

"As a child, I was clumsy and really struggled with academics," Yamagata tells us from Tokyo. "So for that reason, I gradually convinced myself that I stood no chance in a world where everyone followed the same set of rules."

Yoshikazu Yamagata was born in Tottori Prefecture in 1980, a million miles from the neon glitz of Tokyo's runway scene (actual distance: 660km). Tottori is one of Japan's most sparsely populated prefectures, sitting on the shores of the Sea of Japan in a storm-wracked area known as San'in, the "Shadow of the Mountains". Tottori attracts some of the heaviest snowfalls in Japan, and residents tend to stay indoors a lot of the time. It's mostly famous for two things: sand dunes and bad weather.

When Yamagata was still young, the family moved to his father's hometown of Nagasaki. His parents weren't wealthy, and his mother worked a lot. It's fair to say that haute couture wasn't a big part of everyday life. "I come from a household with no trace of creativity," Yamagata admits. "But my parents never forced a career path on me. They allowed me to choose my own direction."

That 'direction' turned out to be fashion, and becoming one of the most talented young designers Japan has produced in the last 50 years.

After graduating high school, Yamagata studied fashion design in Osaka, but it wasn't long before he began looking for opportunities outside Japan. Quite unusual in the early 2000s. Armed with a good eye, limited English and ambition to burn, he packed his bags and enrolled in London's prestigious Central Saint Martins arts and design college. It was here that he came to the attention of the legendary John Galliano, founder of the eponymous fashion label and former creative director of Givenchy and Dior.

In high fashion circles, where clothes have taken on the status of wearable art, Galliano is regarded as one of the most influential designers of the late 20th century. He's known for his theatrical and story-driven shows (as well as some unfortunate antisemitic remarks that ended his stint at Dior). Galliano's design approach really resonated with the young Yamagata, and after a short internship, he returned to Japan in 2007 to start his own label: Writtenafterwards.

By this stage of his career, Yamagata was the product of two completely different artistic schools: the fine-tuned and technical Japanese style, and Europe's more open, collaborative, free-wheeling approach. It made him a unique threat in the world of high fashion, and Writtenafterwards soon became a staple among the Spring/Summer Tokyo Collections.

In 2014, Yamagata won the Tokyo Fashion Award and special prize for the Mainichi Fashion Award. The next year, he was nominated for the LVMH Prize[1] – the first Japanese designer ever to receive such an honour. In 2019, he earned a spot on the Business of Fashion (BOF) 500 list, the definitive index of people shaping global style .

> "My philosophy is clothes from chaos," Yamagata says. "My creations involve trial and error, embracing even the smallest possibilities within clothing, which makes them unique. "Simply put, it's about creating something emotional."

If we're trying to pin Yamagata down to a particular mood – which admittedly is kind of hard to do – his capsules have always leant heavily on the concept of story. There's a narrative thread, so to speak, that drives the design forward. It's all about spectacle and theatre and baiting that emotional hook – a few tricks he picked up from Galliano.

1 Established by luxury conglomerate LVMH (Louis Vuitton and Moët Hennessy) in 2013, this is more or less the Oscars for emerging fashion designers. First prize is 300,000 euro, a year's mentorship, plus eternal bragging rights.

Yoshikazu Yamagata as captured by Todd Selby for his book *The Fashionable Selby* back in 2014.

Yamagata's graduate collection was inspired by the 1837 Hans Christian Andersen fable, The Emperor's New Clothes. This was followed by Graduate Fashion Show – 0 Points, which featured rubbish and recycled materials razzle-dazzled into couture. In The Fashion Show of the Gods, Yamagata asked himself a question: what would fast fashion look like if designed by immortal beings? The result was 50-metre bolts of cloth, wound tightly around the models immediately before the show.

But high-fashion runways are really just part of Yamagata's story. In 2008, before all the acclaim and international hype, and just one year after starting his own label, he also founded Coconogacco, a Tokyo-based school dedicated to "sharing the wonders of dressing up." It would flip Japan's conventional approach to fashion education upside down.

"I founded Coconogacco when I was 28 years old, starting with just 25 students," Yamagata says. "As my grandfather was an elementary school teacher, the idea of being a teacher was familiar to me from a young age."

Coconogacco translates loosely as "the school of individuality", and Yamagata was partly inspired by Japan's famous private art college, Setsu Mode Seminar, which was founded in 1947 by painter Setsu Nagasawa.

Based in Tokyo, Setsu Mode Seminar was a space for students to experiment and explore the limits of artistic expression, without any of the baggage or boundaries associated with academia. The curriculum was all about individuality, and it became one of the world's most influential fashion schools, turning out rockstar graduates like Rei Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto .

This nonconformist philosophy really jived with Yamagata, who found that, among students, there was a lot of curiosity about how fashion was taught outside Japan. In the mid-2000s, young Japanese designers were less interested in tradition and more interested in experimentation and expression. They wanted to find their own style, not preserve someone else's, and they certainly didn't want to be limited by what the Japanese establishment considered 'good'.

"Upon returning to Japan, I encountered many students facing struggles similar to those I experienced as a student," Yamagata says. "I felt an urge to support them, and had a growing desire to create a space where people wouldn't be confined to a single set of values."

An image from Yamagata's 2024 exhibition 'It's Alright To Be Here' under his writtenafterwards label. Image: Shinya Kigure.

Another piece from Yamagata's 2024 exhibition 'It's Alright To Be Here' under his writtenafterwards label. Image: Shinya Kigure.

One of Yamagata's spectacular creations as photographed by Todd Selby for the front cover of his book *The Fashionable Selby* back in 2014.

Another of Todd Selby's images captured for his photographic feature on Yamagata for *The Fashionable Selby*.

The spectacular student work from Coconogacco – the fashion school Yamagata founded when he was 28 years old. Images: Kohei Omachi.

Coconogacco is designed to help students juggle work and other commitments, with many courses taking place at night, or on the weekends. Since its foundation in 2008, more than 800 students have passed through Yamagata's unusual school, with many going on to international acclaim. In 2010, Coconogacco graduate Takashi Nishiyama became the first Japanese winner of the International Talent Support Prize, and in 2016 two students, Yuko Koike and Soshi Otsuki, were both shortlisted for the LVMH Prize. The alumni newsletter reads like a Who's Who of Japan's hottest young designers.

In finding his own style, Yamagata gradually found purpose, and from there a sense of community. With Coconogacco, he came full circle, and dedicated his life to helping other lost souls do the same.

"The most important lesson for young fashion designers is to respect yourself and others. Try and understand your roots," he says. "I think the environment for enjoying fashion on an individual level offers a wide variety of options, each thriving in its own way, which is truly wonderful."

There's a famous line from George Bernard Shaw's 1905 stage play, 'Man and Superman', which goes: "Those who can, do; those who can't do, teach." That's usually taken as a dig against educators, but people forget the context of Shaw's words. He wasn't talking about teachers at all, but about revolutionaries. And 'revolutionary' is a label that suits Yamagata very well. Part student, part mentor, part rebel. He's a designer who always considers what the average person would do, then consciously sets out to do the opposite.

Maybe, when it comes to Yamagata, Aristotle's quote is a better fit: "Those who know, do. Those that understand, teach."

• • •

What do you think of modern Japanese fashion?

I think, with the rise of social media and the increasing tendency toward a surveillance society, there is growing social pressure to conform. In a public situation, the environment has become much more conservative, and unique, individualistic fashion is seen less often on the streets than before. I'm concerned that this may be creating a world where those who feel like minorities find it increasingly difficult to express themselves publicly.

Did you always want to be a designer?

I grew up in the countryside and was terrible with studies. I first became interested in fashion around the time when I was in middle school. By high school, I was intrigued by "fashion designer" as a profession, but couldn't imagine myself becoming one. The turning point came around when I studied abroad in London. That experience made me realise that fashion design was what I truly wanted to do.

What was it like studying at Central Saint Martins?

I developed a habit of constantly questioning myself, "What is something no one else would think to do?" And looking back, I think that mindset made Central Saint Martins a perfect fit for me. It was an incredibly competitive environment, but the more unique and unconventional my expressions were, the more they were appreciated and celebrated. That atmosphere helped me gradually learn how to communicate with others.

How did Coconogacco come about?

I became curious about the educational systems of other countries while studying in Europe. I visited schools across Europe and researched their approaches whenever I had the opportunity, and over time, I began to understand the relationship between design, culture, and history that was deeply rooted in Europe. From there, I gradually started to see the distinct tendencies of each school.

When expressing fashion in Japan, it's essential to understand the history and context of global fashion. However, rather than merely imitating or idolising Western ideals, it's crucial to draw out concepts and sensibilities rooted in our own heritage – things that don't exist in the West. I wanted to create a space where we could apprehend Western concepts, and also simultaneously explore the ideas and traditions born in Asia, particularly Japan.

What did you learn from working with Galliano?

Back then, I was purely focused on exploring the essence of fashion, and was particularly interested in the work of John Galliano and his team when he was the creative director at Christian Dior. I was deeply inspired by his creativity which transcended human limits, but was also struck with fear and awe at the delicate balance that seemed like it could collapse any moment. Working under him and observing his studio, I witnessed how he could turn even something seemingly worthless into couture, presenting endless possibilities for everything in the world.

JAPANESE STYLE CHEAT SHEET.

WE'VE PICKED APART THE CLEVER AND COMPELLING DETAILS AND DECISIONS IN SOME OF OUR FAVOURITE JAPANESE SMALL APARTMENTS SO YOU CAN STEAL SOME JAPANESE STYLE.

WORDS ELIZABETH PRICE

1. VERY SPECIFIC STORAGE

Everything has its place and that place doesn't need to be inside a cupboard or drawer. Highly efficient and hyperspecific storage solutions that keep belongings - or the baskets, boxes and vessels they're housed in - on show is what we see a lot of. And yes, MUJI is a regular feature.

At *Flagpole House* in Tokyo, designed by Motoki Yasuhara, stairs double as storage and double-sided open shelving allows easy, clutter-free access to everyday items with the help of some small baskets and boxes. Image: Never Too Small.

(LEFT) The Tokyo rental of Aya and Sho (AKA HIGE and ME of YouTube fame) maximises every inch of their simple customised storage shelves in their bedroom, again, with some MUJI magic. Image: Tsubottle for Roomie.jp.

The stainless steel 'Indian Plate Rack' by HAY is the ideal storage solution in David and Koichi's stainless-steel heavy kitchen designed by Kei Makoto of Roovice, (see page 72). Image: Akira Nakamura.

(ABOVE) In designing this home for herself and her partner and cat, architect Kumiko Ouchi of Small Design Studio, had the freedom to design clever storage nooks tailored to the dimensions of her record collection, record player, amp and speakers. She also designed a nook for her handbag collection. Image: Never Too Small.

In Takeshi and Megumi Hosaka's home in Tokyo (Love2 House designed by Takeshi, see p24), infrequently used items are tucked in the back of a deep set of shelves with more everyday items and Takeshi's beloved record collection front and centre. Takeshi designed these shelves specifically to store his records. Note: the shelves have no brackets or pins but are satisfyingly supported by gentle ledges that were precast into the concrete. Image: Nacasa & Partners Inc.

(BELOW) Belongings, kitchenware and life's essentials don't need to be hidden away to make for a tidy and attractive kitchen. *Flagpole House in Nakameguro*, designed by Motoki Yasuhara of SALHAUS, once again utilises a mixture of baskets and boxes, along with an abundance of hooks and strategically spaced shelving. Image: Never Too Small.

(ABOVE RIGHT) David and Koichi's contemporary take on a *genkan* – the entryway in Japanese homes that acts as the interface between the outside and inside domains – where shoes are removed and replaced with house shoes or slippers. David and Koichi's version is enhanced by space efficient and colourful shoe storage and a violet wash of light. Note, David and Koichi store shoe boxes containing more irregularly worn pairs of shoes in a high shelf above. Image: Never Too Small.

At *House in Heguri* in Kyoto, designed by Yousaku Tsutsumi of Arbol Design, functionality and organisation is prioritised in the kitchen without sacrificing character and charm. Handmade pottery and a woven basket house regularly used utensils and practical hooks organise other items within easy reach. Image: Never Too Small.

2. PLANTS AS PETS

Carefully curated and closely cared-for plant collections are a hallmark of the contemporary Japanese small homes we visit. Variations in form and foliage add visual interest, pops of green and bring nature inside. And houseplants aren't just for furnishing floorspace and shelves. Get creative with hanging and draping to brighten up dull walls and corners.

A staghorn fern in Aya and Sho's former rental. Image: Tsubottle for Roomie.jp.

(ABOVE) More plants in Aya and Sho's apartment. Image: Tsubottle for Roomie.jp.

(BELOW) Masato Igarashi keeps his collection of house plants on a platform with castors to allow him to easily relocate them to where the conditions are most favourable (see page 38).

Back in Aya and Sho's rental, an eclectic variety of vessels adds extra interest to their thriving collection of plants. A mixture of hanging plants, petite potted plants, dried flowers and foliage also turns their staircase into a focal point almost akin to an artwork. Image: Tsubottle for Roomie.jp.

Happy plants in Somo Somo House designed by Takeshi Odaki and Mayo Takato of TOASt (Takato + Odaki Architectural Studio) (see page 84). Image: Nam Tran.

3.

COLLECTIONS VS. CLUTTER

While many people might think of sleek, calm minimalist spaces as being typical of Japanese homes, the homes we're most familiar with in Japan often feature vast collections of books, characterful collectibles and gradually acquired keepsakes. As the theory goes: the things we love go together and it's these thoughtful or naturally evolving curations that make these homes so charming.

Aya and Sho's home is the gift that keeps on giving. More of their collections of precious curiosities. Images: Tsubottle for Roomie.jp.

(ABOVE) The kitchen and dining area in Aya and Sho's Tokyo apartment is probably borderline for some but the clusters and connections between objects keep things feeling curated rather than cluttered. Image: Tsubottle for Roomie.jp.

More of Aya and Sho's intriguing collections. Images: Tsubottle for Roomie.jp.

Open Sky House, the home of Nobufumi Takahashi – or Zajirogh as he goes by – and his family of five, was designed in collaboration with architect Yoshitaka Suzuki. Having the walls lined with the family's belongings and vintage furniture finds makes it so inviting and rich in character that it would be a delight to spend time in as a visitor. The 'open sky' section of the ceiling is also capitalised upon with a collection of hanging plants. Image: Never Too Small.

Illustration: Grace Lee

NEVER TOO SMALL

TOKYO CITY GUIDE

FIRST UP

1. Get a rechargeable Pasmo or Suica Card as soon as you arrive to use on trains, buses and even in convenience stores and vending machines.

2. Luggage transfers are very common, very convenient and very reliable in Japan. It can be a great way to get heavy bags from A to B if you're relying on trains to get around. Asking your hotel for advice is a great place to start.

3. The Tokyo subway can be a bewildering beast for first timers. Familiarise yourself before you go and, if in doubt, follow Google Maps directions for detailed instructions down to which carriage and exit to use for your destination.

4. Plan and book ahead. In case you haven't noticed, visiting Japan is an excellent idea, but not an original one.

5. Get cashed up. Many restaurants will only accept real-life Yen.

6. Hot tip: don't tip. Unless you want to make things awkward. It's not customary to tip in restaurants, taxis and hotels in Japan.

7. Mind your manners. Keep to the left on escalators or in heavy foot traffic. Don't eat or smoke while walking about. Don't eat on inner-city trains (save your Bento for the bullet train). Don't blow your nose in public. Follow shoes-off etiquette closely when entering homes, historical buildings, shrines and even change rooms.

8. BYO bag and reuseable cup otherwise you might find you end up with a lot of plastic after a day out and about, and possibly struggling to find a bin.

9. Save space in your suitcase for all your goodies. You will want to come home with goodies.

FIND YOUR NEIGHBOURHOOD FLAVOUR

You've probably heard of Shibuya, renowned for its iconic scramble crossing, Ginza, for its high-end shopping, and Akihabara, famed for its manga and electronics. Perhaps you've read about Tokyo's 'book town' Jinbōchō too. While we're also a fan of the classics, here you'll find a ready-made list of lesser-known characterful neighbourhoods ideal for wandering and exploring.

Yanaka

Traditional shitamachi architecture, winding backstreets dotted with hidden temples, and lots of cats: real cats, fake cats, cat cafes... cat souvenirs. But there's much more to Yanaka than cats. This wonderfully walkable neighbourhood is a charming area to wander, explore and discover contemporary Japanese art, traditional crafts and ceramics, and to sample the delights of a characterful kissaten or beer hall. It's also home to many temples, shrines and Yanaka Cemetery – notable for its resident cats and as the resting place of many-a Tokugawa shōgun.

Sangenjaya

Just a few stops away from the bustle of Shibuya, Sangenjaya's maze of quaint streets is a meanderer's dream. Visit Carrot Tower's free observation deck for dramatic vistas, or ride the petite Setagaya Tram – one of two surviving tram lines in Tokyo – through to Shimo-takaido for more street-level action. Otherwise, the area is known for its cafes, unfussy bars and also the giant gorilla of unknown origin that peers down at you from a fairly nondescript 1970s pink commercial building housing a gym and a convenience store.

Kuramae

Craftsmanship and history take centre stage in Kuramae. The popular neighbourhood is still home to many artisan and family-run shops, including several that offer "DIY" experiences, as well as artisan coffee and chocolate. It's a short walk north to get to Asakusa (home to Sensōji Temple); alternatively the path along the Sumida River that borders Kuramae offers great views of east Tokyo and The Skytree.

Kichijōji

Kichijōji is anchored by the immense Inokashira Park, which is famous for its grove of pink-petaled sakura in spring and pushcarts hawking yaki-imo (roasted sweet potatoes) in winter. It's also consistently voted the neighbourhood that Tokyo locals would most love to live in. Once you get past the main shopping district, the streets narrow and you can take your time exploring and people-watching.

Nishi-Ogikubo

Just one stop away from the arguably more well-known Kichijōji, 'Nishiogi' (for short) is Tokyo's largest antiques district. But these aren't your grandparents' stuffy collectibles – the shops scattered throughout are all impeccably curated, and often feature upcycled offerings. There are plenty of cafés to sustain you while shopping too.

Gōtokuji

This is a quiet and somewhat out-of-the-way residential area in Setagaya-ku. The manekineko temple Gōtokuji is the main draw here – with thousands of lucky cat figurines arranged beneath trees that put on a spectacular show in autumn. In mid-December and mid-January the 400-plus-year-old Boroichi flea market takes over the whole neighbourhood for two days at a time. Sip some hot amazake while exploring more than 700 stalls.

Yoyogi-Hachiman

Bordering the back of the immense acreage of Yoyogi Park and the electric vibe of Shimokitazawa, Yoyogi-Hachiman is a more tranquil area of quaint shops, cafes and restaurants boasting fewer than 10 seats. Quite a few buildings date back to the Shōwa era too. Grabbing a coffee or lunch and then taking a stroll in the park is not a bad way to while away a sunny afternoon.

Kiyosumi-Shirakawa

This is Tokyo's specialty coffee hub and home to the city's contemporary art museum. But that's not all this east Tokyo area has to offer; its quiet and charming residential side streets slowly unveil small temples and pocket parks and the Fukagawa Shiryōkan-dōri thoroughfare supposedly has more than 100 mom-and-pop shops in 800 metres. Fukagawa Fudō-dō temple is a highlight with its daily fire ceremonies.

Ryōgoku

Japan's home of sumo, if you can get tickets to a sumo match at the massive Ryōgoku Kokugikan stadium, that should be your first port of call. But the riverside neighbourhood is also home to a surprising number of museums, including the Edo-Tokyo Museum, Sumida Hokusai Museum – where Hokusai's most famous woodblock prints are always on display – and the Japanese Sword Museum, for samurai fans.

Kagurazaka

Tokyo's "little Paris," Kagurazaka has a quaint French-ish aura – literally, speakers on the main street broadcast tinkling Francophone music as you stroll. A former Edo Period entertainment district, the winding cobbled Kakurenbo Yokochō (Hide-and-Seek Alley) is barely wider than your shoulders and conceals petite bars and restaurants. Don't miss Kengo Kuma's redesigned Akagi Shrine for a vision of modern Shinto.

Higashi-Nagasaki

Small makers and longstanding family-run shops are still the norm in this underrated residential area just outside of the buzz that is Ikebukuro. Higashi-Nakasaki is where nostalgia meets modernity. It's a charming warren of pedestrian-friendly streets where you'll find 1950s diners and fourth-generation specialty shops sitting next to contemporary galleries. An ideal area for wandering.

Shimokitazawa

Well-known for its vintage clothing stores, vinyl and quirky cafes, Shimokita (as it's often called) is a thrifter's paradise if you're willing to put some time into the hunt. Its narrow streets teem with quirky stores and often pop-up markets too. Those wanting to catch a bit of the latest in Japanese music should hit up one of Shimokita's underground "live house" venues – bring cash for the cover charge.

Shinbashi

Although it hugs the edge of glitz-and-glam Ginza, Shinbashi is much more downmarket (in a good way). It's a 'salaryman' haven with side streets teeming with izakaya pubs and gyōza joints. Perfect for a cheap-and-cheerful, fuss-free meal after dark. Walk along the recently restored train tracks between Shinbashi and Yūrakuchō stations and you'll find a semi-hidden warren of hole-in-the-wall eateries and boutiques underneath.

Kappabashi

Once you spot the giant head of a mustachioed, white-hatted chef, you know you've made it to Kappabashi – Tokyo's Kitchen Town. Here, there's a specialty store for any and all domestic or wholesale culinary needs. Engraved knives? Check. Plastic food models? Indeed. Crockery? Embroidered aprons? Cooking classes? Yep, yep and yep. Save space in your suitcase.

HOT TOP TIPS

Parks & places

1. Todoroki Valley (1 Chome-22-26 Todoroki, Setagaya City) – a lush green oasis set below street level.

2. Inokashira Koen (1 Chome-18-31 Gotenyama, Musashino) – large and beautiful parklands.

3. Tama River (access via Rokugodate or Tamagawa Station) – a tranquil walking and riding trail.

4. Aoyama Technical College (7-9 Uguisudanichō, Shibuya) – futuristic Transformer-like building.

5. St. Mary's Cathedral (3-chōme-16-15 Sekiguchi, Bunkyo City) – Playstation meets church.

6. Office Sakaya (1-14 Nijikkimachi, Shinjuku City) – a beached submarine-like building in central Tokyo.

7. Reversible Destiny Lofts (2-chōme-2-8 Ōsawa, Mitaka) – a colourful collective housing project.

8. Asahi Head Office/Super Dry Hall AKA The Golden Turd (1-chōme-23-1 Azumabashi, Sumida City) – Asahi's HQ.

Eating

9. Yakumo Saryo, Meguro City (yakumosaryo.jp) – A special place to experience traditional Japanese tea culture. Go with the "Asacha" – the traditional Japanese breakfast set.

10. Matterhorn, Takaban, Meguro City (matterhorn-tokyo.com) – excellent cookies and cakes wrapped in wrapping paper featuring illustrations by Shintaro Suzuki.

11. Sunday Vegan, Musashino (mothersgroup.jp) – coffee and doughnuts.

12. Rose Bakery, Ginza (ginza.doverstreetmarket.com) – excellent carrot cake.

13. Eifuku Shokudo, Suginami City (instagram.com/eifukush-okudo) – a delicious dinner.

14. Butagumi, Nishiazabu, Minato City (yoyaku.toreta.in) – have the Tonkatsu.

15. Alaska Zwei, Meguro City (instagram.com/alaska_zwei) – great vegan food.

16. Itasoba Kaoriya, Ebisu (foodgate.net) – soba noodles and tempura.

17. Ikuta-an, Taito City – small ramen bar with counter seating.

18. Yakitori Alley,Yurakucho – packed with izakayas offering tasty skewers and beer.

19. Sushizanmai, Shinjuku (kiyomura.co.jp) – A great value option for lunchtime sushi.

20. Komeda's Coffee, a ubiquitous chain in Tokyo (komeda.co.jp/) and a great option for a cheap and cheerful breakfast offering free toast with drink orders. Try the Ebi Katsu Pan!

COLIN SAYS

Don't miss Isomaru Suisan (Akihabara) for my favourite meal in Tokyo. You're going there for the food and not the service though. Eat the Crab Miso Koura-yaki (koura-yaki refers to grilling ingredients in the crab shell, often including crab miso, which is the rich paste found in crab), the Sea Grape Salad (edible seaweed with a bead-like appearance and salty taste) and the Grilled Hokke Set Meal – Salt-grilled hokke (fish) with a weekly-changing side dish, Japanese potato salad and pickles.

Komeraku (Shinjuku) was another favourite during my visit. A specialty ochazuke (rice with broth) restaurant. You can customise your bowl with a variety of toppings as part of a set. I went for the eel.

KONBINI

Convenience stores take on a new meaning in Japan. The big three: 7-Eleven, FamilyMart and Lawson are ubiquitous and can service you with anything from a cheap and delicious meal or snack (the bento are particularly reliable), to a large takeaway can of Asahi Super Dry or a shōchū highball. FamilyMart is famous for its Famichiki fried chicken, 7-Eleven for its Tamago Sando (egg sandwich) and Lawson is the exclusive bricks and mortar retailer of tickets for the Ghibli Museum. Other notable delicacies include the melonpan (melon bread) and onigiri.

Drinking

21. Vinmari, Shibuya (facebook.com/vinmari1106) – cocktails and fried chicken.

22. Tokyo Family Restaurant, Shibuya (familyrestaurant.jp) – for an extensive selection of gins.

23. Ginza Lion, Shibuya (ginzalion.jp) – a beautiful 1934 German beer hall.

24. Motsuyaki Ban, Meguro City – the birthplace of Japan's (in)famous lemon sour

25. LUG, Hatagaya, Shibuya (instagram.com/lug_hatagaya) – 150+ different rums and a rotation of natural wines.

26. Jazz Bar Samurai, Shinjuku (hotpepper.jp) – small jazz bar with great cocktails and an eclectic interior.

27. Open Book, Shinjuku (openbook.tokyo) – tiny standing sake bar. Quite hard to find, hidden behind an old wooden sliding door.

Museums & galleries

28. Japan Folk Crafts Museum, Meguro City (mingeikan.or.jp) – a must-see.

29. SCAI The Bathhouse, Yanaka (scaithebathhouse.com) – modern art gallery set in a 200-year-old onsen.

30. Ghibli Museum, Mitaka (ghibli-museum.jp) – don't forget to book ahead!

31. Gallery Koyangi, Ginza (gallerykoyanagi.com)- gallery showcasing the best of Japanese and international art since 1995.

32. 21_21 Design Sight, Akasaka (2121designsight.jp) – a design museum created by Tadao Ando and Issey Miyake.

33. Curator's Cube, Minato City (curatorscube.com) – international and Japanese artisans with a focus on traditional crafts.

34. Mizusai Gallery, Taito City (mizusai.jp) – showcases some of Japan's best up-and-coming artists.

35. Yayoi Kusama museum, Shinjuku (yayoikusamamuseum.jp) – contemporary art museum.

36. Edo-Tokyo Open Air Architectural Museum, Sakurachō (tatemonoen.jp) – from old Japanese structures to early modern buildings including homes and traditional Japanese public baths. The Kodakara-yu and the House of Kunio Maekawa baths are highlights.

SENTO & ONSEN

Public bathing is a major part of Japanese culture, but it's not all about the onsen. There are two types of bathhouses you'll find in Japan: onsen and sento. Onsen are tranquil spa-like and sometimes resort-like hot springs bathhouses based on mineral rich water. Sento on the other hand, are public community bathing facilities found in local neighbourhoods. As Japanese cities became more densely populated and houses got smaller, many families began bathing at their local sento. If you do decide to indulge in an onsen or sento session, be sure to familiarise yourself with the bathhouse etiquette and bathing procedures. NB. If you have tattoos, it's worth checking beforehand whether the onsen or sento of your choice accepts

Shopping

37. Daikanyama Tsutaya Bookstore, Shibuya (store.tsite.jp/daikanyama) – it's easy to lose hours in this award-winning space and iconic bookstore.

38. Yanaka Matsunoya, Nishinippori (yanakamatsunoya.jp) – a small shop overflowing with beautifully made everyday items.

39. Idaten, Yanaka – a beautiful curation of ceramics.

40. Utsuwa Marukaku, Shibuya (marukaku.jp) – a huge range of Japanese tableware.

41. CIBI Tokyo, Bunkyo City (cibi.jp) – the Tokyo outpost of one of our favourite cafes mixing Melbourne coffee with the best in Japanese design.

42. Dover Street Market, Ginza (ginza.doverstreetmarket.com) – half fashion store, half exhibition space.

43. Cibone, Shibuya (cibone.com) – well-crafted design pieces and homewares.

44. D&DEPARTMENT, Setagaya City (ddepartment.com) – Japanese fashion, furniture and tableware.

45. The Conran Shop in Daikanyama, Shibuya (conranshop.jp) – beautiful homewares from Asia's best designers.

46. Sokkyou, Koenji (sokkyou.net) – Koenji is Tokyo's mecca for vintage clothing. Sokkyou specialises in American vintage.

47. N id, Shibuya (store.nid-tokyo.com) – menswear with a modern Japanese twist.

48. Mottainai Flea Market, Chiyoda City (mottainai.info) – a roaming flea market focussed on waste reduction.

49. Spiral market, Minato City (spiral.co.jp) – part gallery, part shop, stocking slippers, tableware and artwork in an impressive spiral shaped building.

Illustration by **sebby-t.com**

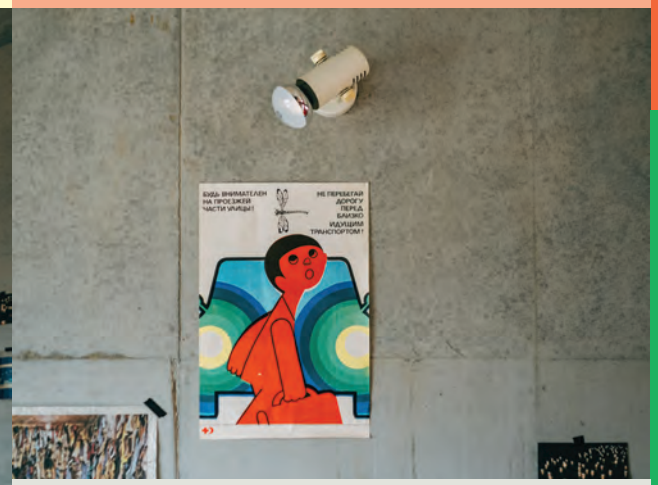
4.

REVERENCE FOR THE EVERYDAY

Many of the homeowners we speak to in Japan express a desire to be surrounded by the things they love and hold a sense of story for them. In turn, humble yet precious belongings often take precedence over fancy and flashy art. Or perhaps there is a mix of the two. A photo or flea market print, taped to a wall or a handmade basket or gifted piece of pottery – these unassuming treasures are not self consciously placed but lovingly displayed.

(ABOVE) Quaint collections of tiny houses appear on high shelves and window sills in Somo Somo House (see page 84) Image: Nam Tran.

Designed by Yousaku Tsutsumi of Arbol Design, House in Heguri in Nara was a home designed largely around the cherished possessions and furniture collection belonging to this family of five. Raw and hand-carved wood, woven baskets and hand-dyed fabrics adorn the home throughout and act as its chief decorations. Images: Never Too Small.



While living in a rented apartment prevents Aya and Sho from hanging artwork more formally in their home, their casual collection of prints, photos and postcards taped to their concrete walls are no less charming. Images: Tsubottle for Roomie.jp.

The neutral and natural material palette of F-house in Osaka, designed by Kazuteru Matumura of Coil was designed to accommodate and emphasise enjoyment of the family's existing furniture. Books, and soft furnishings offer gentle suggestions of colour. Image: Keishiro Yamada.

5. UNFINISHED BUSINESS

Concrete-rich interiors and a fresh take on what we might have once described as ‘industrial chic’ are recurring themes in the Japanese apartments we visit. In many cases, internal walls are removed to gain space and more flexible floorplans, and designers are actively working to celebrate the rawness of what they find. From there, both the designers and homeowners are finding exciting complements for this edgy and industrial look in the form of unexpected materials and décor.

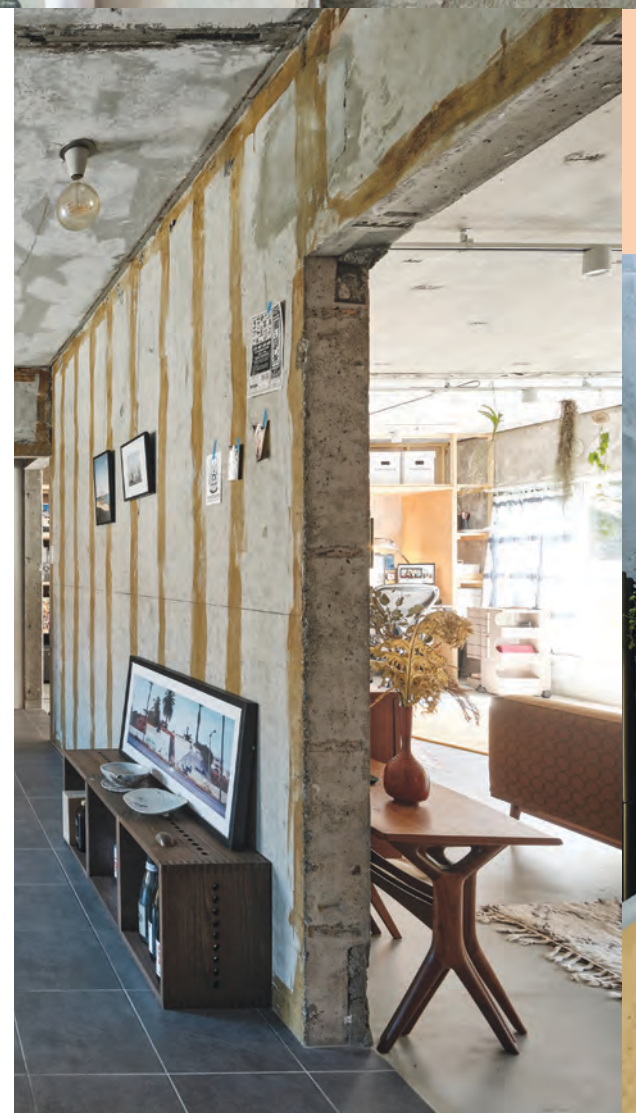
(BELOW) The working structure of a building is part of its story for David and Koichi, the residents of Tokyo Blue, and when they removed all internal walls in their apartment, they delighted in peeling back the layers and finding interesting ways to highlight the character they found. Rough unfinished edges are contrasted here with soft pink painted surfaces. Image: Akira Nakamura and design Kei Makito for Roovice.

David and Koichi prefer to celebrate these imperfections rather than attempting to hide them away.

(LEFT) Exposed concrete meets buffed steel, plywood and translucent curtains in the Tokyo home of architect Yutarou Ohta - C/ steel Apartment. Image: Masaki Hamada.

More of the character that was discovered and retained when the ‘layers were peeled back’ during the renovation of Tokyo Blue. Image: Never Too Small.

At Apartment in Kamakura the resulting colours and patterns exposed after removing wall coverings were retained to add a distinctive character to the home's design.



(BELOW) While concrete can often be thought of as a ‘cold’ material, in the home Takeshi Hosaka designed for he and his wife, Megumi, it is anything but cold. Light illuminates its bumps and joins, and it acts as the canvas for the things that bring the couple joy. Image: Nacasa & Partners Inc.

LOST IN TOKYO

WORDS ELOÏSE LACHICORÉE
IMAGES MINAMI KIISHI

The wistful and ethereal sound of Macaroom's music has played soundtrack to several Never Too Small film production moments. And given the Japanese electro-pop group declares itself as operating "on the forefront of copyright law" with its full catalogue of music available for third party use without charge or permissions, we've never had reason to cross paths. Until now. After attending Macaroom's live streamed *Tiny Room Concert* on YouTube back in July 2024, we thought it was high time we met vocalist emaru to talk tiny rooms and Tokyo life.

Where does the inspiration for your music come from? How does the city inspire you?

We've tried various ways to make music, but most often, I receive demo tracks from Asahi, then let my imagination flow with the songs. Asahi's lyrics frequently include words related to the city, so I feel that the city's landscape has a significant impact on our music. In contrast, I'm more interested in nature than in the city. I often take long walks around my neighbourhood. On these walks, I sometimes see a pair of bulbul birds nibbling on radish sprouts, or notice green kochia plants turning red and awkwardly standing side by side. I also enjoy watching grasshoppers leap out from the tall grass onto the sidewalk. I love to walk. I expand my musical world as I walk, encountering various things along the way.

Would it be accurate to think of your music as a soundtrack for your experience of living in Tokyo?

Yes, I think it would be. But I still don't understand the city of Tokyo. Many people have an image of Tokyo as a vibrant and bright city, but there are many lost people in the city. I mean, not a literal lost person, but a metaphorical one. I prefer to think of them. They are socially vulnerable and they are lonely people. The idea of a person lost in Tokyo is especially expressed in our songs like *tombi, shiori*, and *machino uta*.

How would you describe your sound? In what way does it reflect your home city?

That's a difficult question. The renowned Japanese novelist Genichiro Takahashi described Macaroom's sound as a “memory of the future.” Additionally, the illustrator Yusuke Nakamura referred to it as “organic electronica”. From a mental perspective, I think that it’s a soundtrack for a person lost in this city. Additionally, it can also be said that it’s music for me. Living far away from my home town may have influenced the music. The town where I was born and raised was a desolate rural town, completely different from Tokyo.

What is life like for a musician like you, living and creating in Tokyo?

It’s such a tough thing. I think many other artists from the countryside feel the same way. I was born in Shimonoseki City, Yamaguchi Prefecture, at the westernmost tip of Honshu. There are many people from the provinces in Tokyo, but I’m often amazed by native Tokyoites. That’s because when I talk to them, I realise that I am an immigrant. It makes me aware that I don't have most of what they have. On the other hand, I’m also excited to meet wonderful musicians that I would never have encountered in my hometown. I dye my hair blue, wear blue clothes, wake up whenever I like, and go to bed whenever I like. In my hometown, I'm considered a weirdo, but in Tokyo, I'm just an ordinary person. This is a wonderful thing.

Tell us about the unique creative collaboration and inputs for Macaroom…

Asahi is responsible for music production. I am the vocalist. Basically, Macaroom consists of the two of us, but we are supported by Akiyama “Bob” Daichi and Minami Kiishi for live performances. Bob creates soundscapes using algorithmic composition and acoustic signal processing, which adds depth to Macaroom’s songs. Kiishi Minami performs kung-fu during concerts and handles most of Macaroom's photography and video production.

Kung-fu?

Yes, Macaroom’s concerts usually end with a final song performed alongside kung-fu. In some of our music videos, his kung-fu also appears.

Tell us about the live streamed Tiny Room Concert you held in July, 2024. Was this something you had done before?

We’ve been performing a lot of live concerts, but recently we decided on the concept of ‘a tiny tiny room concert’.

Clearly we like tiny spaces too, but what is it that appeals to you about the idea of a Tiny Room Concert?

We have been interested in the concept of tiny space, room, home and so on since we first started the band. The words "room" and "home" are often used in the titles of our albums. I think it is because I hate places with a lot of people around.

What do you enjoy doing in Tokyo when you’re not making or performing music?

I love biology, especially fish ecology, wildlife observation, and so on. I usually read books about fish and go for a walk at the riverside or in the forest. And I love sleeping. I recently realised that I can't feel satisfied unless I sleep for at least 10 hours a day. Otherwise, I can't perform at my best during the day.

Wow. That’s a lot of sleep. Which song in your opinion best describes Tokyo as a city?

machino uta (it was Christmas eve) is the best. The theme of this song is the dark side of Tokyo, making a pilgrimage from the underground layers of Shinjuku. It’s a dark ballad, but there is a bit of hope. And it is a song for a person lost in the city.

• • •

EMARU’S TOKYO

Eat at: Italian chain Saizeriya and conveyor belt sushi chain, Hamasushi, are everywhere and offer low priced and tasty food.

Drink at: Both Vampaiya and Omoide-Yokocho (Shinjuku) are very senbero. Senbero means a ‘10 dollars drunk’. If you go there with 10 dollars (or 1,000 yen), you can get drunk perfectly.

Shop at: Sakana books (Yotsuya 3-chome, Shinjuku). This is a bookstore that specialises in fish.

Visit: Tokyo Sea Life Park (Rinkai-cho, Edogawa) for its tuna aquarium.

Experience: Bird-watching at Inokashira Park (Kichijoji). Here I can watch the nest of the Great Cormorant, observe Kingfishers that are not afraid of people, and see foreign species like the Ring-necked Parakeet.

The age of intergenerational care.

In our earliest family-based social formations, multiple generations lived and cared for each other, together. But modern life has segregated the care of young and old – even though the social, health and economic benefits of the intergenerational model are considerable. Nicky Lobo follows its rise across the globe – and asks why it's taken so long to catch on.

WORDS NICKY LOBO
ILLUSTRATION GRACE LEE

During a reconstruction in 1987, an established aged care facility in Edogawa, east of Tokyo, decided to become a *yoro shisetsu*, combining aged and childcare on its premises. Widely recognised as the first co-located intergenerational care model, Kotoen has been witnessing the positive effects on the lives of residents, children, staff and their families for almost 40 years. The sweet interactions between 'surrogate' grandparents and grandchildren – exercising, dancing, game-playing, reading – have captured the hearts of many. Anecdotes reveal older people experiencing more connection, meaning, value and purpose; while younger ones learn patience, acceptance and respect.

This isn't just a heartwarming story though. A growing network of organisations and 'pracademics'1 are experimenting and documenting the outcomes of best-practice co-located intergenerational care facilities around the world. The shared belief? Intergenerational care is not just 'nice' – it's essential. And together, they're gathering evidence to prove just how critical it is.

Weaving relational webs

Unlike Kotoen, Apples and Honey Nightingale in London, initially made its intergenerational connection from a distance. It started as an intermittent program in the early 1990s, between an early childcare centre, Apples and Honey, run by Judith Ish-Horowicz, and Nightingale House, a nearby aged care facility. "I decided that if we were going to provide children with a holistic education, you should really be mixing with all age groups," says Judith. "Otherwise, you're not really giving them a full life experience". Annual Hannukah concerts grew into more regular visits, and the impacts were immediately positive. "You had relationships not just between children and their 'grandfriends', but also with the parents. We started to get these kinds of almost extended families. A lot of our children were from international families, or families who had relocated for work and didn't have grandparents nearby. So they would go and visit, even outside the school trips."

Witnessing these deepening relationships, Judith thought, why not formalise the connection between the organisations? She first approached Nightingale's CEO with the idea of co-locating in 2009, though it took until 2017 to develop a social enterprise structure, source seed funding and open the site.

Normalising the state of age

The impact of intergenerational care on young people is remarkable. Bayview in Seattle started offering co-located childcare in 1995 during an expansion, like Kotoen. Bayview's CEO Nancy Weinbeck believes,

"Too many families today raise children without proximity to grandparents or great grandparents, and so 'old people' become something foreign and even scary. An intergenerational program makes it comfortable and natural for young children to be around elders, their walkers, wheelchairs and hearing aids."

Marcie Jones, CEO and Co-Founder of Gentog (Generations Together) in Tigard, Oregon, agrees. "Children raised in our program learn to see disabilities differently," she shares. "One of my grandsons attended church with me one Sunday, where there was a young boy in an electric wheelchair who appeared to have cerebral palsy. When my grandson said 'Look, Mimi!' and pointed at the child, I held my breath for what was to come next. But he just said, 'He has a shirt and boots just like me!'. He only saw what they had in common, not what made the other child different. Walkers and wheelchairs were a regular part of his life, so he didn't notice that at all."

1 Someone whose career spans the boundaries of academia and practice. In the case of intergenerational care, the term may include childcare, aged care, social work, health and education professionals.

A space mission

One of several intergenerational care projects in Australia is The Herd, in Mornington, Victoria, a purpose-designed 'shared roof' model linking childcare with residential aged care. Finding a site was a major challenge, recalls Director and Co-Founder Anna Glumac, who opened the centre with her sister in memory of their grandmother. "With long waitlists in many residential aged care centres, it was hard to carve out the required space for childcare – and some that had the space didn't have the demographics and demand for it. It took us two years to find a suitable site."

Purpose-built intergenerational centres also need to be designed carefully. In 2013 LEVS architecten completed De Bouwmeester in Utrecht in The Netherlands, a "project that unites generations and fosters interaction between young and old," describes one of the practice's partners, Adriaan Mout. A shared central garden with winding paths and blooming flowerbeds is the primary space for generations to interact. Terraces, glazing and galleries also connect young and old visually; and at the same time, dedicated zones provide a safe, protected environment for care-dependent residents.

The scope of data

When it comes to research, there are "several arms of the octopus," as Director of the Australian Institute for Intergenerational Practice (AIIP), Anneke Fitzgerald, describes. Along with obvious outcomes like reducing social isolation and preventing ageism, intergenerational research is being planned and conducted on improved behavioural aspects of children on the spectrum, reduction of childhood delinquency, breaking cycles of poverty and domestic violence, the economic impacts of being able to "age in place" longer, reduction of frailty, optimised environmental designs, and the possibility of prescribing socialising in intergenerational programs as alternatives to antidepressants.

"[Intergenerational] practice is not new, but the theory is developmental," Anneke says. "And without analysis and reporting, the practice is not widely known about or spread." This is exactly why the AIIP was set up (in 2021), along with several collaborating bodies across Europe, the UK, US and Asia.

Intergenerational care centres are an ode to the possibilities of thinking creatively, combining resources and dissolving boundaries. Solving several problems – loneliness, ageism, care, health, housing and learning – at once, it appears to be a win-win scenario.

Challenges

Another organisation participating in this activity is United for All Ages (UfAA), a 'think-do' tank founded in 2010 to create a 'Britain for all ages'. Co-Founder and Director Stephen Burke says co-located intergenerational care organisations face economic, physical, planning and cultural challenges.

"Firstly, developing nurseries on care home sites or building new sites can be expensive and require significant economic investment," he says, and often require grants and philanthropic contributions. In addition, "There aren't many care home sites that are suitable with space in existing buildings, or [able] to build new provision". Thirdly, "Care providers find it hard to get planning permission for new co-located developments," he adds.

Anna experienced some of these challenges when opening The Herd. "Trying to 'sell' the concept when intergenerational care was in its infancy [was challenging]," she shares. "For some, it would have seemed so abstract and difficult to imagine." Similarly, Marcie says the biggest barriers for Gentog were "Finding a landlord willing to take a chance on an unknown business type; getting building permits, as inspectors did not know exactly how our business fit within the rules; and liability insurance."

"They just didn't understand [the intergenerational concept]," Judith agrees. "They were saying, 'Okay, you can get the insurance so long as they don't touch each other. And you're not allowed to leave the children in the care of the older people, or leave the children in charge of the older people.' I mean, come on. There just was a total lack of understanding."

Then, just as the co-located intergenerational model was taking off, Covid struck. "It took a toll on leadership and staffing, and also with enrolment shortages," recalls Nancy. "As well, keeping residents and children safe from the transmission of infections across populations added to the challenges." Research[2] shows that overwhelmingly, transmission concerns can be adequately managed through safety protocols, and that benefits far outweigh the risks. This is the on-the-ground approach at Apples and Honey Nightingale, says Judith. "If there is an outbreak in the care home, then we stop our intergenerational programs until that outbreak has stopped and vice versa. It's all manageable and should not prevent [intergenerational programs or facilities]."

Shifting culture: a long game

Intergenerational care centres are an ode to the possibilities of thinking creatively, combining resources and dissolving boundaries. Solving several problems – loneliness, ageism, care, health, housing and learning – at once, it appears to be a win-win scenario.

So much so, that it's puzzling that it hasn't caught on sooner.

Kotoen aside, legislative and economic hurdles could have been enough to stymie the rise of intergenerational care models elsewhere in the world. However, it's possible that cultural attitudes also play a part. Many of us live in societies where 'care' (and ageing in general) is considered embarrassing, shameful and effectively banished to the margins (spatial and mental). While childhood is seen as hopeful, joyful and full of potential – old age is often seen as bleak, depressing and full of fear.

"There is still not complete acceptance of the idea of children and older people sharing the same site, facilities and services, or understanding of the potential business savings from running childcare and eldercare on the same site," says Stephen. There can also be internal cultural challenges. "Not everyone moves to a retirement community to be around children," points out Nancy, "Nor does everyone see the value that an intergenerational experience can bring."

The apparent contradiction between young and old, growth and decline, strength and frailty, may be a mental block to intergenerational care. As it turns out though, we are well-equipped to dance with paradox. Elderly and infirm people can find joy, and in doing so, reduce their loneliness and increase quality of life. Young children can witness and interact with those ageing, and their associated deterioration, without being fearful. In fact, they will normalise it, cultivating more open and resilient characters. And the ripple effects of these outcomes is a more cohesive and connected world for us all.

2 Brokered by AIIP with many collaborating universities around Australia

WORDS ELIZABETH PRICE
IMAGE RORY GARDINER

CONFLICTED ON CONCRETE

It's beastly to our environment and yet, as Japanese architects show us again and again, in the right hands, it's breathtakingly beautiful. It also has the potential to last millennia. Concrete: it's a complex conundrum.

It's everywhere in Japan. In all the usual places: public and private buildings, bridges, roads; and tsunami-shielding sea walls. It's synonymous with Japan's most iconic architects and its architectural power moves (take a look at photos from Japan's 1964 Olympics when you have a spare minute). It's a century-long romance born from disaster: namely the Great Kanto earthquake of 1923. Some 447,000 wooden houses were destroyed in fires and an estimated 140,000 people perished. It's little surprise then that a nation ravaged and traumatised by natural disaster, sought and embraced the stability and assuredness of concrete at that particular point in its history. And then: World War II happened. "After that, concrete played a big role in the city's rebuilding," writes architect and author, Naomi Pollock. "Economical, efficient and durable, it was also an international and modern material that symbolically paved the way for Japan's rebirth."

In addition to writing a number of books on Japanese design and architecture, Naomi has curated Tokyo's finest examples of concrete architecture into the *Tokyo Concrete Map*[1]. It's a beautifully designed physical map that captures many of the outputs of this rebirth in the 1950s and 1960s: iconic buildings designed by both international and local architects such as Le Corbusier, Toyo Ito and Kenzo Tange. And Ando, of course there's plenty Tadao Ando – for most of us, the personification of Japanese concrete architecture.

In 2023 it was announced that my home town of Melbourne would be gifted its own little piece of Tadao Ando magic. Melburnians were delighted. Not only would it be Australia's only example of Ando's architecture, but it would be the only example in the southern hemisphere. Japan's Pritzker Prize winning architect would be making his mark on Melbourne in the form of an open air community arts space we learned. So here was my opportunity to experience the transcendental qualities[2] of Ando's architecture in my own backyard, but I felt conflicted. A temporary arts structure made from concrete felt a little…tone deaf. Here we were, in a climate of post-pandemic 'green recovery'[3], welcoming and celebrating concrete. As Ando's commissioner, the Naomi Milgrom Foundation proudly extolled, Ando is "known for his striking geometric interventions in nature and his precise, assured use of concrete."

The resulting design is a magnificent space and one that will be permanently relocated in coming years, which is excellent news, but my niggle of conflict has stayed put. When it comes to concrete in Japanese architecture, I am seeing more of it, not less of it. Encouragingly, in many cases it is existing concrete that's being exposed (there are several examples within these pages) – freed from its plasterboard mask, rather than new concrete being poured. But there are many new apartments we see being constructed from concrete too. Their architects and designers adore the freedom of form it offers them, its thermal mass properties, its longevity and its aesthetic charms. The aesthetics point is subjective, of course, but it's hard to argue with the others (the Pantheon and Colosseum in Rome being fairly solid case studies on the endurance point especially). Reducing the need for energy-hungry heating and cooling in a country that is known to become both extremely hot and extremely cold is surely at least a nod in the direction of being more sustainable. And a building that will be long lasting – particularly if that structure has been designed in such a way to be adaptable to a variety of use cases beyond being a home (as the home of Masato Igarashi is on p38). Is this the more nuanced interpretation of sustainability and being *green*?

As far as the ugly facts are concerned, concrete remains the most widely used substance on the planet next to water[4]. Producing more and more of the stuff is inescapably bad and while demolished and no-longer-useful concrete can take on a logical and practical second life as an aggregate in new building materials, this second life is too rarely honoured.

> There seems to be a general acceptance that as a civilisation, we're dependent on the stuff and we're unlikely to quit using it any time soon (given its been more than 4000 years since we started), but there is hope.

Carbon negative concrete and self repairing concrete are both being produced in Japan and in other parts of the world alongside a rapidly growing number of greener alternatives. So perhaps one day, as Ando and other pioneering Japanese architects have innovated with concrete as their muse; they will innovate in this direction also. And I will be able to have my cake and eat it too – experience and enjoy being transported by Ando's architecture without a niggle of conflict.

1 Edited by Naomi Pollock, with photography by Jimmy Cohrssen, the bilingual (Japanese and English) *Concrete Tokyo Map* published by Blue Crow Media is a wonderful guide to Tokyo's unique concrete architecture.

2 Several of my friends have related near spiritual experiences and awakenings while visiting Ando's Naoshima Contemporary Art Museum in Japan.

3 The notable fall in greenhouse gas emissions on account of reduced travel and economic productivity the COVID-19 pandemic prompted calls for a 'green recovery': economic growth that capitalised on this progress and supported accelerated climate action.

4 According to the *Guardian's* global environment editor, Jonathan Watts in a 2019 article called 'Concrete: The most destructive material on earth'.

WORDS ELIZABETH PRICE
IMAGES KENJI KAWAKAMI

The Cat Mop

(ALMOST) USELESS

The Noodle Guard

Kenji Kawakami wearing his Eyedrop Funnel Glasses and Hayfever Headset.

“The planets formed. The Earth cooled. Creatures emerged and one of them started playing with rocks and sticks. That creature made spears, he crafted shovels, he turned pelts into cloth. Then, he got fancy. He built the solar-powered flashlight and the combination table napkin/necktie. Not exactly useful, but somehow not altogether useless. He created inventions that didn’t quite work… but were nonetheless fun. Chindogu was born.”

These are the words that greet you on the homepage of Chindogu.com – the internet home of the International Chindogu Society. Said to boast some 10,000 practitioners around the globe (including British celebrity chef and TV personality, Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall), it’s a community centred on the creation and celebration of (almost) useless gadgets, or officially: *Chindogu*.

It all sounds terribly serious. But also not. As Chindogu’s founding father Kenji Kawakami puts it: “If people laugh, that’s fine. We need more of it. I believe in rejecting society by laughing at it.”

It was Kawakami’s Eyedrop Funnel Glasses that started it all. The trained aerospace engineer turned inventor popped an image of them on a page that needed filling in a popular Japanese mail order catalogue he was editing in the early 1990s. Though they were not for sale, he filled other empty pages with more “invention dropouts” (such as a solar powered flashlight that could only be used if there was enough light to power it) and his readers were hooked. Kawakami called them Chindogu, (*Chin* meaning ‘weird’ and *Dogu* meaning ‘tool’) and since then has contributed more than 600 gadgets to the artform.

Dan Papia , was a writer for the English language magazine *Tokyo Journal* at the time and after featuring Kawakami’s Chindogu in that publication’s pages soon experienced its cult appeal himself. It was an endless stream of Chindogu related fan mail that inspired his idea of transforming Chindogu from a ‘spectator sport’ into an active global community of inventors of “un-useless” things or *Chindogoists*. Thus, the International Chindogu Society was born with Papia as co-founder and he remains president to this day. Books followed too, first authored by Kawakami and later by both Kawakami and Papia: *101 Unuseless Japanese Inventions, 99 More Unuseless Japanese Inventions, Bumper Book of Unuseless Japanese Inventions* and *The Big Bento Box of Unuseless Japanese Inventions*.

But just as Kawakami has never filed a patent or earned a single yen for one of his creations, revenue from the books is apparently passed on to his favourite causes. “I despise materialism and the fact that everything is transformed into a marketable object,” he once told *The Japan Times*. Indeed, Kawakami and his fellow Chindoguists around the world thumb their noses at capitalism and instead, submit themselves to a higher code and calling. The noble pursuit of conceiving and making human-made objects that have shed the chains of usefulness (to paraphrase the third tenet of Chindogu), or as Kawakami himself defines them: “strangely practical and utterly eccentric inventions designed to solve all the nagging problems of domestic life.”

The Subway Sleeper

The Swiss Army Gloves

The Noodle Cooler

The Butter Stick

The 360-Degree Camera Hat

The Umbrella Shoes

The Toothbrush Finger

The Hayfever Headset

The Umbrella Tie

The Baby Mop

The Lipstick Guide

The Ten Tenets of Chindogu

I.
A Chindogu cannot be for real use: It is fundamental to the spirit of Chindogu that inventions claiming Chindogu status must be, from a practical point of view, (almost) completely useless. If you invent something that turns out to be so handy that you use it all the time, then you have failed to make a Chindogu.

II.
A Chindogu must exist: You're not allowed to use a Chindogu, but it must be made. You have to be able to hold it in your hand and think "I can actually imagine someone using this. Almost." In order to be useless, it must first be.

III.
There must be the spirit of anarchy: Chindogu are man-made objects that have broken free from the chains of usefulness. They represent freedom of thought and action: The freedom to challenge the suffocating historical dominance of conservative utility; The freedom to be (almost) useless.

IV.
Chindogu are tools for everyday life: Chindogu are a form of nonverbal communication understandable to everyone. Everywhere. Specialised or technical inventions, like a three-handled sprocket loosener for drainpipes centered between two under-the-sink cabinet doors (the uselessness of which will only be appreciated by plumbers), do not count.

V.
Chindogu are not for sale: Chindogu are not tradable commodities. If you accept money for one, you surrender your purity. They must not even be sold. Even as a joke.

VI.
Humour must not be the sole reason for creating Chindogu: The creation of Chindogu is fundamentally a problem-solving activity. Humour is simply the by-product of finding an elaborate or unconventional solution to a problem.

VII.
Chindogu is not propaganda: Chindogu are innocent. They are made to be used, even though they cannot be used. They should not be created as a perverse or ironic comment on the sorry state of mankind.

VIII.
Chindogu are never taboo: The International Chindogu Society has established certain standards of social decency. Cheap sexual innuendo, humour of a vulgar nature, and sick or cruel jokes that debase the sanctity of living things are not allowed.

IX.
Chindogu cannot be patented: Chindogu are offerings to the rest of the world. They are not therefore ideas to be copyrighted, patented, collected and owned.

X.
Chindogu are without prejudice: Chindogu must never favour one race or religion over another. Young and old, male and female, rich and poor – All should have a free and equal chance to enjoy each and every Chindogu.

Do as the locals do.
We asked the most stylish and creative Tokyo locals we know to share their idea of a perfect Tokyo day.

WORDS LUKE RYAN

Kumiko

Kumiko Ouchi // Tokyo Architect

We first met Kumiko when we featured the 'House for Two' apartment she designed for herself, her partner and her cat (see p 195). Allow this stylish designer of calming and elegant spaces and Tokyo native be your guide for a day.

Start your day the right way with a traditional **Japanese breakfast set at Yakumo Saryo** in Setagaya City. It's one of my favourite places in Tokyo and offers a modern interpretation of Japan's legendary tea culture. Once you're done with breakfast, **take a stroll through nearby Todoroki Valley**. A lush green oasis set below street level, it feels a world away from the hustle and bustle of Tokyo proper.

Next stop is **Matterhorn patisserie in Meguro for a coffee and cookie**. They've been operating since 1952, so they know what they're doing (and also stock adorable wrapping paper by illustrator Shintaro Suzuki). From there take the Metro north to the **Japan Folk Crafts Museum**, a collection of traditional Asian ceramics, textiles and woodwork and a constant source of inspiration for my design work.

Grab lunch to go from your nearest **OZEKI supermarket**. They're all over Tokyo and have great produce, as well as a huge range of pre-made sushi and bento options. Spend the afternoon exploring some of Tokyo's more traditional areas. One of my favourite places to wander around is the **Kappabashi Dougu-Gai**, an old-fashioned kitchenware district where countless wholesalers hawk everything you could ever need. Treat yourself to a sweet from **the local Toraya confectioners** if you need a pick-me-up.

Right next door are the **Yanaka, Nezu and Sendagi districts**, a postcard from old Tokyo, filled with temples and shrines and traditional *shitamachi* architecture. Make sure to pay a visit to the **SCAI Bathhouse, an exceptional modern art gallery** set in a 200-year-old onsen.

As night falls, it's time for one of Japan's most singular experiences: **exiting Shinjuku station**. It's a tourist cliché, but the sensory experience is like nothing else on earth. Even after all these years it feels like something out of *Blade Runner*, a place of heaving activity and mysterious emptiness. Wander around until you can't absorb any more neon and then head to **Vinmari near Yoyogi station for a cocktail and some fried chicken**. It's a cosy and unpretentious joint run by a woman named Anri and she makes it easy to while the night away.

• • •

David and Koichi // Tokyo Creatives

David and Koichi are the lucky residents of one of our favourite Tokyo pads (see p72). This clever and creative pair co-designed their home and artfully mingle their passion for African art, designer objects and vintage finds within it. Wander through David and Koichi's favourite Tokyo haunts.

In the morning we love to get moving with a **coffee and doughnuts from Sunday Vegan** before taking **a walk though Inokashira Koen**, a beautiful and massive park out in Musashino. There's a lot to explore – highlights include a sizeable zoo and the tranquil Benzaiten Shrine – but it's the beautifully appointed **Ghibli Museum** that really draws people in. Pro tip: you need to buy your tickets a day in advance or they won't let you in.

Once you're done head back to Kichijoji Station, taking time to explore the winding labyrinth of **small cafes, antique stores and secondhand bookshops**. Our favourite is a section called **Harmonica Alley** that's lit by red lanterns and filled with **cosy izakaya and bars** – you could really spend all day and night there.

In the afternoon, **take in some of the galleries in Ginza and Roppongi**. We always make time for the **Gallery Koyanagi**, which has been showcasing the best of Japanese

David + Koichi

and international art since 1995, as well as the **21_21 Design Sight**, a stunning design museum created by Tadao Ando and Issey Miyake (who is still one of the museum's directors). Visit the **Dover Street Market** in Ginza – half high-end fashion store, half exhibition space – and then drop by the 7th floor **Rose Bakery** to try their incredible carrot cake.

Dinner beckons and one of our favourite haunts is **Eifuku Shokudo** in Eifukucho. Delicious food and delicious wine in a cosy setting, but once again make sure you book the day before. After you're done head into Shibuya and try some of the **many, many gins at Tokyo Family Restaurant**. If you're still feeling energetic, have **a pint at the Ginza Lion**, the oldest German beer hall in Japan and still one of the best.

• • •

Aya and Sho // Tokyo Vloggers

Aya and Sho are the picture perfect YouTubers behind HIGE and ME. You might remember their charming rental (p 195) and the innovative upcycling that made it so special when we featured it in our NTS Renters series. Explore the city in style with Aya and Sho.

We're not big breakfast eaters, so we'll usually just **grab something from the corner store and get going** with our day!

Shops and galleries (and even cafes) don't open until 11 or later, so spend the morning taking **a stroll along the banks of the Tama River** – it's our favourite place in Tokyo. Not that far from the city centre, but walking along the river banks you feel like you're in deep nature.

Once the hour has become more civilised, it's time to shop. For well-crafted design pieces and homewares it's hard to go past **Cibone in Omotesando**, while **D&department** offers an exceptional collection of Japanese fashion, furniture and tableware. It's also worth paying a visit to **the Conran Shop in Daikanyama** – it stocks a beautiful collection of homewares from Asia's best designers and has a lovely tea shop next door.

No trip to Tokyo is complete without an hour or two spent exploring **Koenji, Tokyo's mecca for vintage clothing**. Our pick of the bunch is **Sokkyou**, which specialises in American pieces from as far back as the early 1900s. **N id** in Shibuya also does unique menswear with a modern Japanese twist.

We think one of Tokyo's best features are the small galleries that seem to be tucked around every corner. Check out **Curator's Cube** for a rotating line-up of international and Japanese artisans with a focus on traditional crafts, while **Mizusai gallery** in Asakusabashi showcases some of Japan's best up-and-coming artists.

Grab **a late lunch at Oborozuki** in Ginza, a **six-seat ramen joint** specialising in rich thick broth *tsukemen*. The queues can be intimidating, but you can usually get a seat if you arrive just before lunch finishes at 4pm.

Ease your way into the night with a trip to **Motsuyaki Ban**, the birthplace of Japan's (in)famous lemon sour – a little soda, a little syrup, some lemon juice and generous slurp of *shōchū*. You get to mix your own ingredients right there at the table, so you can make it as potent as you like.

Once you've worked up an appetite, enjoy some superlative **tonkatsu at Butagumi** in Nishi-Azabu. Fried pork is pretty much all they do, so know what you're getting yourself in for. If that doesn't sound like your idea of a good time, then **Alaska Zwei does great vegan food**. Whichever you choose, finish things off with a drink at **Lug in Hatagaya** – they offer more than 150 different rums as well as a rotating selection of natural wines that you can enjoy all the way until 3am.

Aya + Sho

MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE: PORTABLES

WORDS ELIZABETH PRICE

"Once considered little more than a children's plaything or a grade school accessory, the portable record player has gained newfound respect in recent years."

So says the back cover of photographer Eilon Paz's recently published book: Portables: A Visual & Historical Exploration of 222 Vintage Portable Turntables in collaboration with friend and writer Dan Epstein. This 'newfound respect' also translates into broad appeal. Far from being the fetish of record collectors, these adorable little contraptions hold major nostalgic appeal and design cred too. "They show you the evolution of time and the evolution of industrial design," says Eilon. As for the Japanese examples, they're the ones that really bring the fun according to Eilon. Columbia's 1980s Singing Panda being the quintessential example, which "is as fun as it is ridiculously cute". Along with Singing Panda, we've gathered our favourite Japanese-designed portable turntables as featured in Portables.

Portables: A Visual & Historical Exploration of 222 Vintage Portable Turntables is available via dustandgrooves.com

Eilon Paz: photographer, founder of the popular vinyl-collecting website Dust and Grooves and author of *Portables: A Visual & Historical Exploration of 222 Vintage Portable Turntables*

(Above)

The SO-123N designed by Panasonic for its National brand in the late 1970s.

(Below)

The AT727 Sound Burger designed by Audio-Technica in 1983.

(Above)

The Portable Phonograph 2M-1000 designed by Asahi Radio Manufacturing Co. in the 1970s.

(Left)

The SE-7M Singing Panda designed by Columbia in the 1980s.

(Top right)

The Portable Phonograph designed by Nivico for JVC in the 1960s.

(Middle right)

The SG-502N built by Panasonic for its Japan-only National brand in 1979.

(Bottom right)

The Solid State Radio-Phonograph designed by Solar in the late 1960s.

OUR JAPANESE DESIGN DIRECTORY

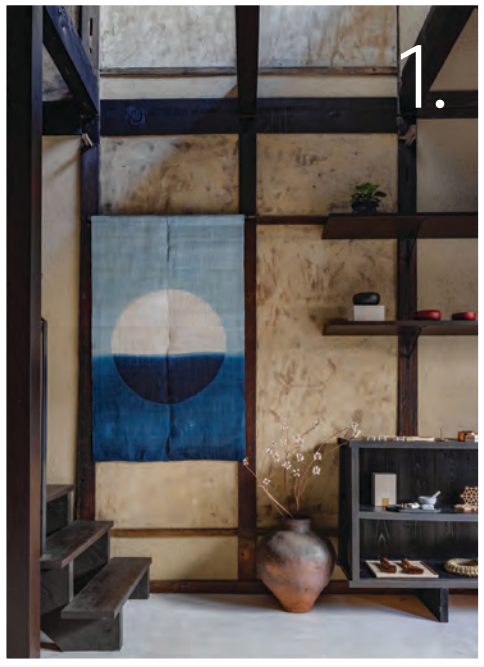
The delights of Japanese retail and design can be experienced in many places outside of Japan. We've curated a list of our favourite stores, boutiques and retailers so you can have access to covetable Japanese design, art, craft, literature, fashion and food wherever you are.

Words Eloïse Lachicorée

1. POJ Studio
(Online & Kyoto, Japan)

Founded in 2020 in Kyoto, ("the cultural heart of Japan"), POJ Studio is a team of experts in traditional Japanese craftsmanship who have come together to promote and celebrate the work of Japanese artisans via its online store and studio. One of its most popular products is its Kintsugi Kits. Kintsugi is the Japanese art of repairing broken ceramics by piecing together the broken fragments with urushi lacquer and dusting with powdered gold. As well as kits, POJ Studio in Kyoto also offers Kintsugi and brush-making workshops, making for perfect experience gifts.

pojstudio.com



2. Wagumi
(London, UK)

Opening in 2011 and located in London's famous OXO Tower, Wagumi is a wonderful place to find and experience authentic Japanese craft and design. Stocking the work of regional producers, individual artists and design collaborations, it offers everything from homewares, and Kasama pottery, to wellington boots from the Wild Bird Society of Japan. Worldwide shipping options available.

wagumi-j.com

3. CIBI
(Melbourne, Australia)

Translating as 'a little one' in Japanese, CIBI is a cafe/restaurant and design store conceived by couple Meg and Zenta Tanaka as an expression of their way of living and a blend of their experiences, both Australian and Japanese, in food, wine, design and architecture. Drawing on three key Japanese elements required for enjoying one's personal environment and bringing happiness to daily life: the Head, the Hands and the Heart, CIBI's products are designed to appeal to all three, aiming to enrich the lives of their customers, friends and family. Products include exquisite Hakusan porcelain, Shotoku glassware and Akari lighting alongside kitchen goods, tableware, stationary, gifts, and Japanese pantry goods. It's also an excellent spot for breakfast, lunch or coffee.

cibi.com.au

(1.) Image courtesy of POJ Studio.(3.) Image courtesy of CIBI.

4. Redcast Heritage Co.
(Madrid, Spain)

Eduardo Sánchez and Isabel Moreno founded Redcast Heritage Co. in 2018, a multi-brand menswear digital store and showroom inspired by Japanese denim and vintage workwear. The couple began to immerse themselves in Japanese culture and design in 2008 and have spent many years travelling around the country. During their travels they met many artisans and small brands dedicated to offering the best textile quality whilst using artisanal techniques to produce high-quality garments and accessories. Now, six years later, their digital store stocks a wide range of Japanese clothing brands including: The Flat Head, Sugar Cane and Whitesville, and have developed a strong customer base across the world. Their showroom, based in Madrid, is also open to customers upon appointment.

redcastheritage.com

5. Junkudo
(Paris, France)

Junkudo or Junku is France's oldest and largest Japanese bookshop. While located in the heart of Paris, it has the feel of a typical bookshop in Tokyo's Jimbocho district. Here you'll discover a wide range of Japanese magazines like Vogue Japan or Popeye, Japanese literature and Manga in both French and Japanese. Alongside magazines, books and Manga, they also stock a range of Japanese stationery.

junku.fr

(4.) Image: Celia Espinosa. Courtesy of Redcast Heritage Co. (7.) Image courtesy of Tokyo Bike.

6. Rikumo
(Philadelphia, PA, USA)

Founder Yuka Morihata envisioned Rikumo as a "door to the world of Japanese design" that brings the work of artisans and craftsmen from their workshops into the homes of design-curious people everywhere. Since its beginning in 2009, this concept store has continued to support and share the unique artistry of traditional Japanese design, with collections including: artisanal jewellery, incense and aromas, natural skincare, and tea and teaware. The shopping experience at Rikumo is a special one, where knowledgeable staff serve tea samples, guide customers and answer their questions, in the true spirit of omotenashi - the art of Japanese hospitality.

rikumo.com

7. Tokyobike
(Tokyo, London, Berlin, Bangkok)

"Designed to explore the places we love and call home," Tokyobike was founded in the quiet neighbourhood of Yanaka in 2002. Its design philosophy sees the humble bike as more than just a mode of transportation, but as a tool for contemplation, emphasising comfort over speed; a concept they call: Tokyo Slow. Now with several stores around the world, including Mexico City and Melbourne, Tokyobike is the perfect way to discover your city and enjoy the ride, not just the final destination.

tokyobike.com

8. Topdrawer
(Multiple locations, USA)

Topdrawer's history traces back over a century to Tokyo's Ginza district. In the early 1900s, the founder of Topdrawer's parent company Itoya, embarked on a global expedition from Ginza and returned with a range of Western stationery products - that were novel to Japan at the time - to introduce to Itoya's range. Many years later, the company expanded to the US, with the first Topdrawer store opening in San Francisco in 2012. While the retailer stocks carefully curated products for "creative professionals" suited to a "nomadic lifestyle" from over the world, its range includes stylish Japanese made pieces such as bento boxes, stationary, watercolour sets and beautiful handkerchiefs.

topdrawershop.com

9. Kinokuniya
(Worldwide)

With its first bookshop opening in 1927 in the Shinjuku district of Tokyo, today Kinokuniya is Japan's largest bookstore chain with 80 stores worldwide, including Sydney, San Francisco and Singapore. The Kinokuniya Sydney bookstore offers the city's largest range of books with more than 30,000 titles in a variety of languages, including: English, Japanese, Chinese, French and German. Also stocking a wide range of Manga and offering a Japanese magazine subscription service, Kinokuniya is the perfect place to explore Japanese literature and magazines further. With the bookstore's headquarters still in the Shinjuku district, it offers a wide range of books and magazines over nine stories and two underground levels.

kinokuniya.com

10. Gaijin Paris
(Paris, France)

Gaijin Paris is a Japanese vintage and second-hand store opened by two childhood friends Thomas Robert and Chahine Bettat in 2020. Located in the heart of the Marais, the store exclusively stocks pieces from Japanese designers. It was after their first visit to Japan in 2015 where they discovered many second-hand shops selling pieces from Japanese, European and American designers, that an idea came to the pair. They wanted to create their own space where they could sell Japanese vintage garments from a range of designers, from both big design names and lesser-known designers. The name Gaijin (meaning foreigner) embodies the pair's unique experience on their travels to Japan and their discoveries. Now offering a collection of unique and high-quality pieces sourced from Japan and through collectors and sales platforms across Europe, Gaijin is a boutique driven by a passion for sharing a love of Japanese culture and fashion in a sustainable way. Among their curated selection of brands some include: Issey Miyake, Tsumori Chisato and Yohji Yamamoto.

gaijinparis.com

11. MUJI
(Worldwide)

This iconic Japanese retailer was founded in 1980 and has more than 1000 stores worldwide. Since its inception, MUJI has been driven by its desire to simplify processes, packaging and products. The ubiquitous beige of its labelling and packaging, for instance, resulted from omitting the bleaching process for pulp in its production processes. Its products - that now number more than 7,000 and range from clothing and household goods to food, furniture and even houses - have always remained unbranded as a contrast to the often "over-embellished products in the marketplace".

MUJI.com

(10.) Image courtesy of Gaijin Paris.(11.) Image courtesy of MUJI.

(13.) Image: Thiago Minoru. Courtesy of Shin & Furoshiki stores (14.) Image courtesy of Pick Store.

12. ZAKKAsine
(Malmö, Sweden)

Translating to "miscellaneous goods", ZAKKA or ZAKKAsine has both a physical store in Malmö, Sweden and an online store that ships worldwide. Partnering with skilled Japanese artisans to offer products and brands ranging from fashion to furniture and from glassware to vintage Kokeshi dolls, all their items are carefully selected and combine good design, style and quality craftsmanship. ZAKKAsine was founded in 2017 by Sine, a Swedish native, who continues to combine her unique blend of Scandinavian and Japanese influences, along with her background in graphic design, to create a distinct and fun aesthetic.

zakkasine.com

13. Shin & Furoshiki stores,
Japan House
(São Paulo, Brazil)

Brazil is home to one of the world's largest communities of Japanese descendants outside of Japan. Japan House in São Paulo, where the Shin & Furoshiki stores are located, was opened in 2017 by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs as part of strengthening its ties with the large community of Japanese Brazilians. On the ground floor, Shin is a space where one can explore and learn about the different regions of Japan and explore an array of homeware products, art and the Japanese rice-based alcoholic drink Sake. On the first floor, the Furoshiki store is a gift store specialising in the use and technique of furoshiki, a traditional Japanese method of folding and wrapping fabric to package and transport things. Customers can learn furoshiki in-store and enjoy bags made using this traditional technique, perfect for everyday use.

japanhousesp.com.br

14. Pick Store
(London, UK)

Pick Store is a London-based Japanese lifestyle store launched by siblings Dan and Alliysa Pickles, combining homeware, apparel and accessories with their personal vision of Japanese culture and fashion. With backgrounds in the creative and retail industry, and a shared interest in concept stores, Dan and Alliysa place lifestyle and experience at the core of their brand, along with the high-quality of their selected brands and products. Some of the brands found in-store include: IKIJI, NANGA and Amabro's colourful, handmade homeware.

pick-store.com

15. DC4
(Berlin, Germany)

Daniel Cizmek's "denim addiction" spurred him on to embark on the journey of founding and owning a premium denim store in 2004, specialising in men's Japanese clothing brands. Cizmek was introduced to denim at a young age by his father, and over time his interest for the material grew into a real passion and his own business idea. Each customer who purchases jeans from DC4 has the opportunity to customise and personalise their leather patches, and has access to in-store chain stitching, repair and embroidery services. All making for a very personal and premium experience, and expressing Cizmek's true love for denim.

dc4.de

Scan for all the links in this hit list:

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