

Rising Sons (and Daughters)

Building Japanese

In the annals of modern architecture, particularly over the last two decades, Japan has held a singular position. Never quite like work from anywhere else, Japanese architecture seems to have emerged from a particular set of conditions and proclivities not replicated elsewhere. While it is a fool's game to generalise too emphatically when it comes to form and geography, or culture (architects like nothing more than being exceptions to rules), it is difficult not to observe that buildings in Japan are, well, only like other buildings in Japan, and very unlike buildings in other places, even within Asia. It is hard to think of any other country where this is such a pronounced truth. A region? Scandinavia perhaps, although still not so strongly.

Which is not to say that Japanese buildings lack variety or inventiveness, or that they hew to collectively 'acceptable' guidelines. Yet certain characteristics seem to run commonly through structures of different scales, programmes and sites. Precision. Material clarity (and simplicity). Unique approaches to the incorporation of natural light. Equal interest in, and attention to, all scales of a project, from largest to smallest. The rejection of spatial typologies from building traditions outside Japan. And so forth. It is true that many buildings in Japan (and in this story) are residential and of modest size. The Japanese sense of scale is necessarily different from that in places of lower density or greater land availability. But Hong Kong and New York are dense as well, and buildings in those places look nothing like those in Tokyo or Osaka.

The young generations of architects practising now are being formally aggressive in ways different from their European, North American or Chinese counterparts. Often their finished works look initially, almost intentionally, awkward. Then other impressions move in; the sheer care involved in crafting positive form and negative space. Yes, some of these buildings seem to be very much objects of craft. Their sobriety. As if

even the smallest coffee shop or home hallway is meant to express a set of cultural – national – concerns. A lack of bombast, so intriguing in this day and age, when nearby China or the Arab Emirates seem to glory in how loud they can architecturally shout. Oddity is plentiful in Japanese architecture, but it constantly finds expression in the quietest of voices.

It is all too tempting to decide that these qualities are simply the manifestations of national personality traits. To many outsiders, Japanese people are mysterious, intelligent, obscure, meticulous, secretive, patient and frequently surprising. We are reminded how dangerous it is to generalise. National stereotypes, as ex-patriots well know, are rarely accurate in whole. And architecture doesn't mirror personality so directly. If it did, American buildings would be belligerently self-satisfied, over-scaled and rather poorly detailed. Italian buildings would be superficially gorgeous, superbly made and intellectually shallow. British buildings would be dour to behold, witty and self-deprecating to understand, and traditionalist at heart. Brazilian buildings would... Well, anyway, the point is made. Such associations are absurd.

Yet clearly a culture as unified and undiluted as Japan's – even in this age of globalisation – conveys its core nature in what it builds, no? It is oddly pleasing to think that buildings still do, can or must embody traits special to place or people. Is this quaint? Is it illogical, when all information, entertainment and trends travel the globe in seconds, and nothing is hidden from us? In Japan, where modernity and tradition co-exist in possibly unequalled tranquillity, co-dependence even (though not without the enticing frisson of clash), architecture manages to manifest, perhaps more potently than any of the other arts, a society comfortable with time. Forward and past meld into a present unlike either

but inclusive of both. External forces and ideas are hungrily absorbed, internalised and transformed in a process inscrutable to others and entirely unlike, say, in China. What comes out is never very similar to what went in. As with the secret recipes of Colonel Saunders or Coca Cola, Japan has a way of processing data, even if that data is form, that makes it into things that could only be Japanese.

This phenomenon makes for a 'culture' of buildings, but does it make good buildings? Are apparent quirkiness, the fixation on precise construction quality, the ability to squeeze habitation into impossibly constricted sites, or the avoidance of regular geometry, guidelines for truly innovative work? Are these often cute, sometimes homely buildings what we'd want for our own cities or families? Does the world's enduring fascination with Japanese design represent aspiration, or something closer to self-identification through contrast-study? Do we actually like the buildings, or do we just like to look at them?

The icons of contemporary Japanese architecture, such as Tadao Ando or Kengo Kuma, have earned our absorbed notice not by startling us with the unfamiliar or the unprecedented, in the manner of, say, Hadid or Koolhaas or Herzog & de Meuron. Indeed, Kuma's work gathers some of its force from

the very familiar, and Ando creates form out of things we know, rather than making things whose form we don't. Both are completely at peace with doing less, not so much in the Miesian sense (since both make highly expressive constructions), but in the sense of exploring a language of quiet, hushed placidity. And oh, how exciting it is. This ability to command attention with a whisper is less common outside Japan, and of course, not just in architecture.

Perhaps this is one of the lessons we can learn from our Japanese colleagues: how to speak loudly in undertones. Another may be how to divorce ourselves from conventional formal typologies while evading the thrall of weirdness. Yet another: how to convey seriousness about ideas regardless of their importance or scale (and without taking ourselves too seriously while at it). And since we're listing lessons, how about: remembering that the art of architecture relies on the craft of building, down to the screws and bolts, and that how well we make things, even minuscule things, tells the world how to value them.

Japan isn't the only place to learn such things, but right now, in architecture, it is one of the best – if, that is, it doesn't take being Japanese to learn them.

Jun Igarashi Architects

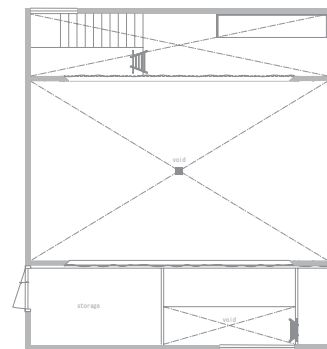
Hokkaido-based Jun Igarashi seems to specialise in deliciously avant-garde interiors encased in deliberately mundane exterior shells, setting up theatrical juxtapositions that surprise and delight and invite speculations on the meanings possibly embodied.

Images courtesy of Jun Igarashi Architects

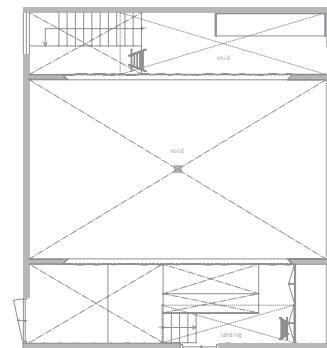


House of Through

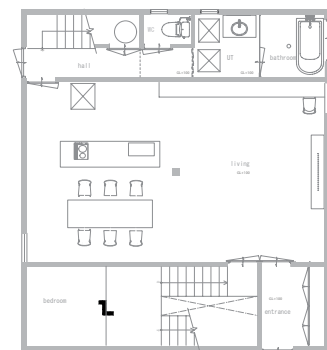
Making the best of unattractive surroundings, Jun Igarashi created a house for a couple with spatial 'buffers' on the north and south flanks, made of secondary spaces such as study, bedrooms, bathroom, etcetera, that protect a central living/dining/kitchen core. Indirect light is 'bounced' into this double-height central space, making it a welcoming sanctuary, while the edges become, through careful openings, a sort of gallery extending its scale. The introverted space, through the architect's skill with light and proportion, becomes a true urban oasis.



2nd floor



between 1st-2nd floor

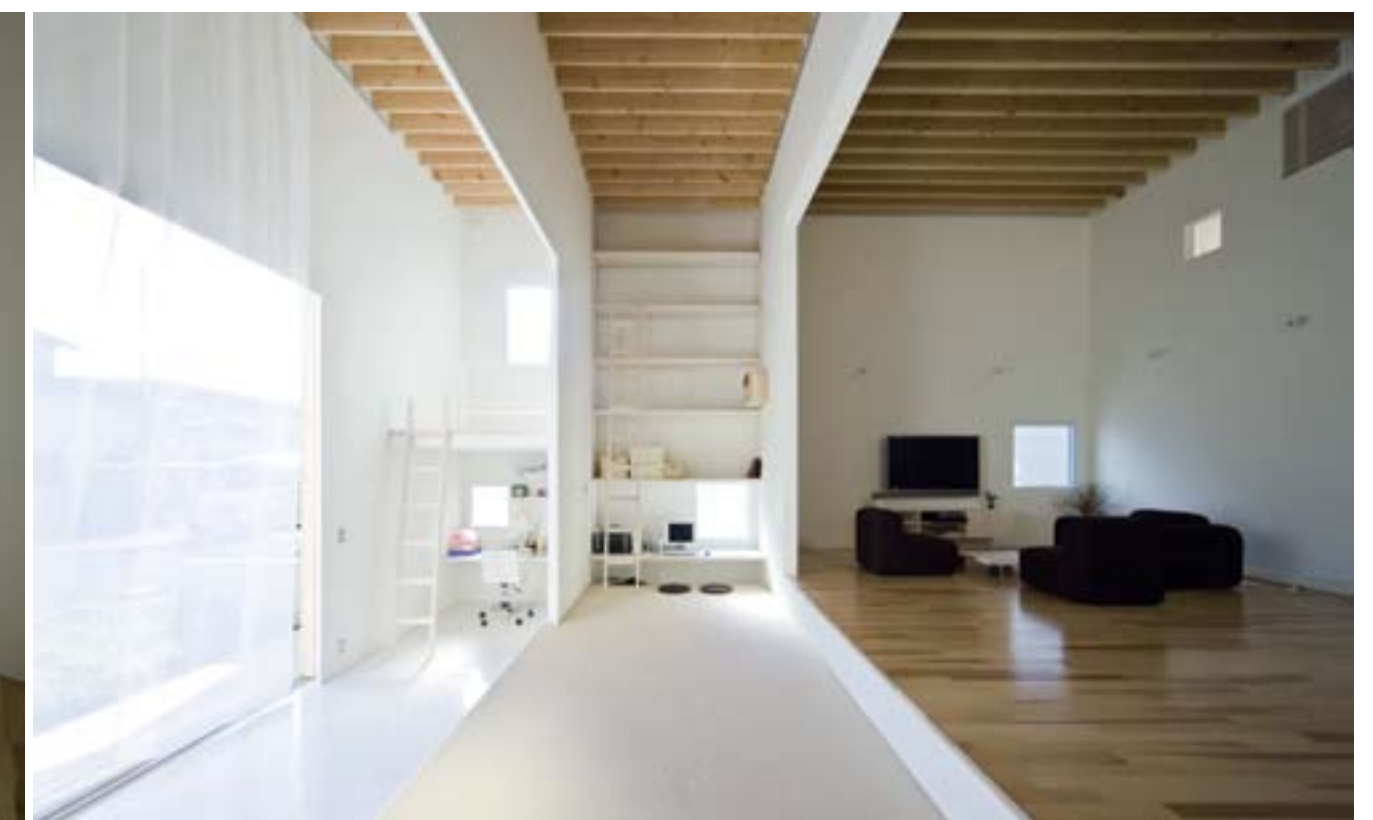
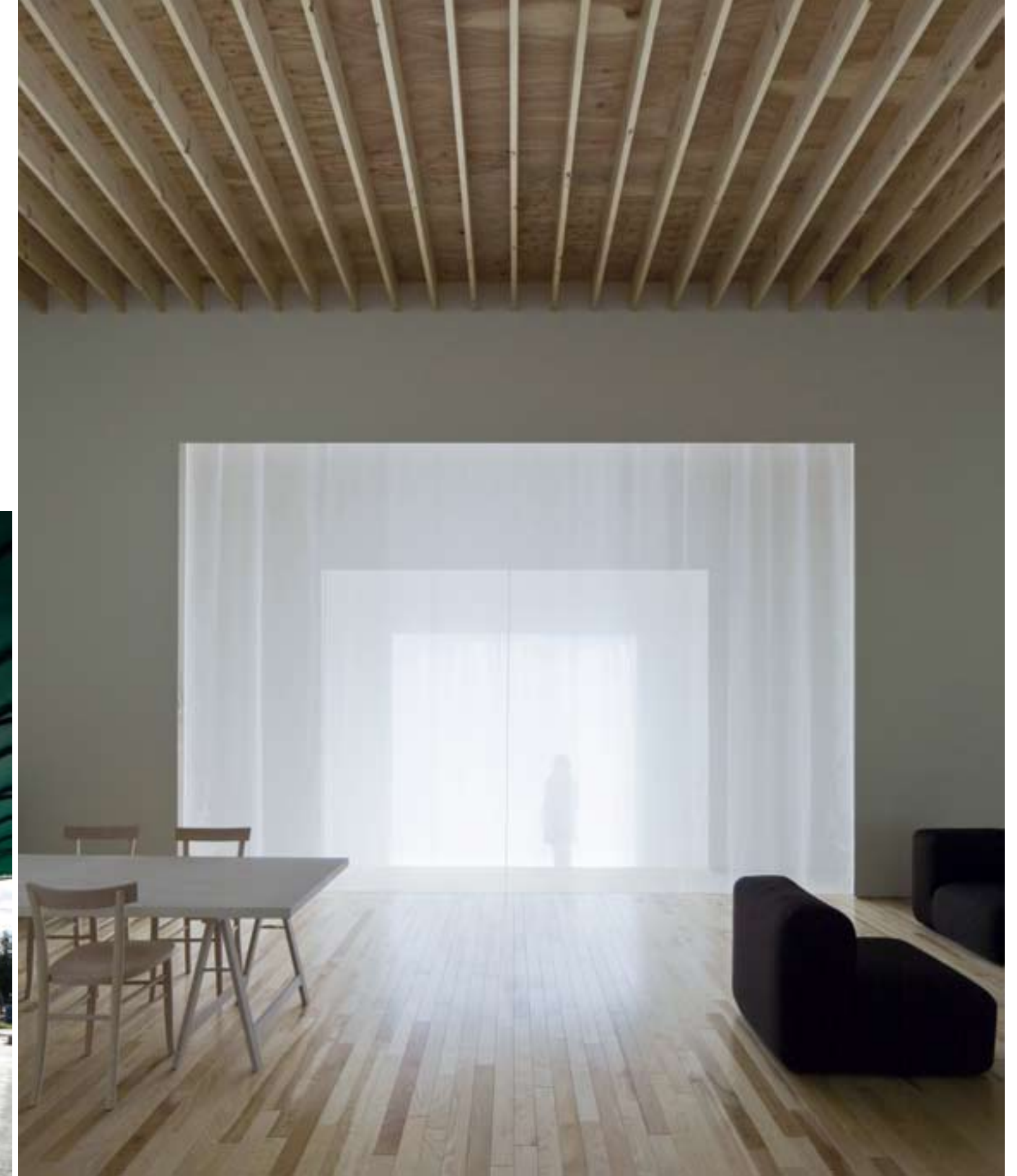
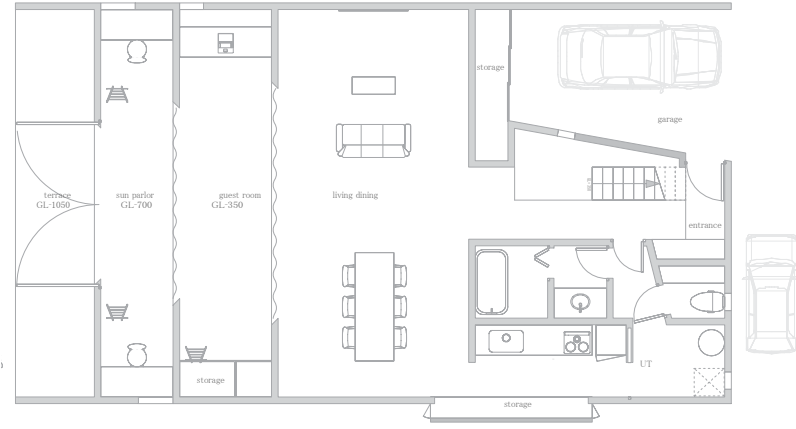


ground floor



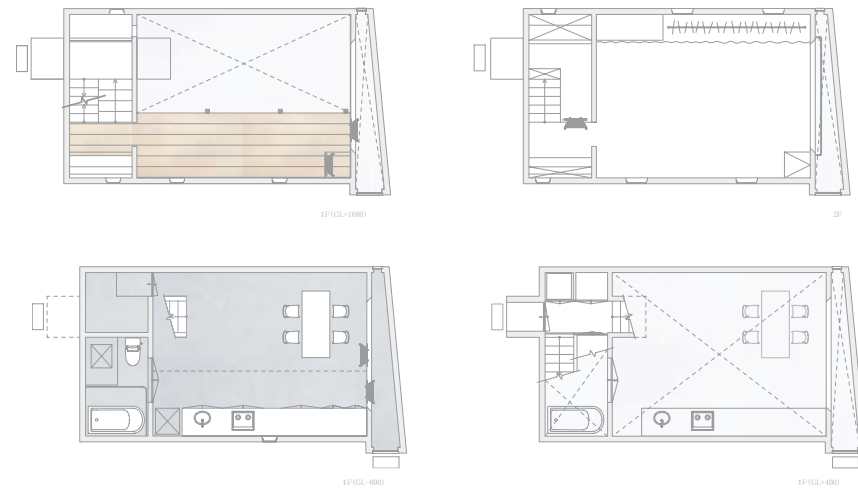
Layered House

The name says it: this house, adjacent to farm warehouses and traffic arteries, shelters its inhabitants with actual layers of space. Actually built for the architect's own parents, the house protects an inner sanctum by wrapping it with buffers of space, thereby also enlivening the interior experience and altering perceptions of scale. Igarashi believes that "architecture is an act [of making] a certain closed-door room on the earth". His prime interior spaces make this declarative and poetic idea manifest, and he renders them appealing by manipulating indirect light, what he terms "airlight", which seeps indirectly through layers of space increasingly distant from windows.



Rectangle of Light

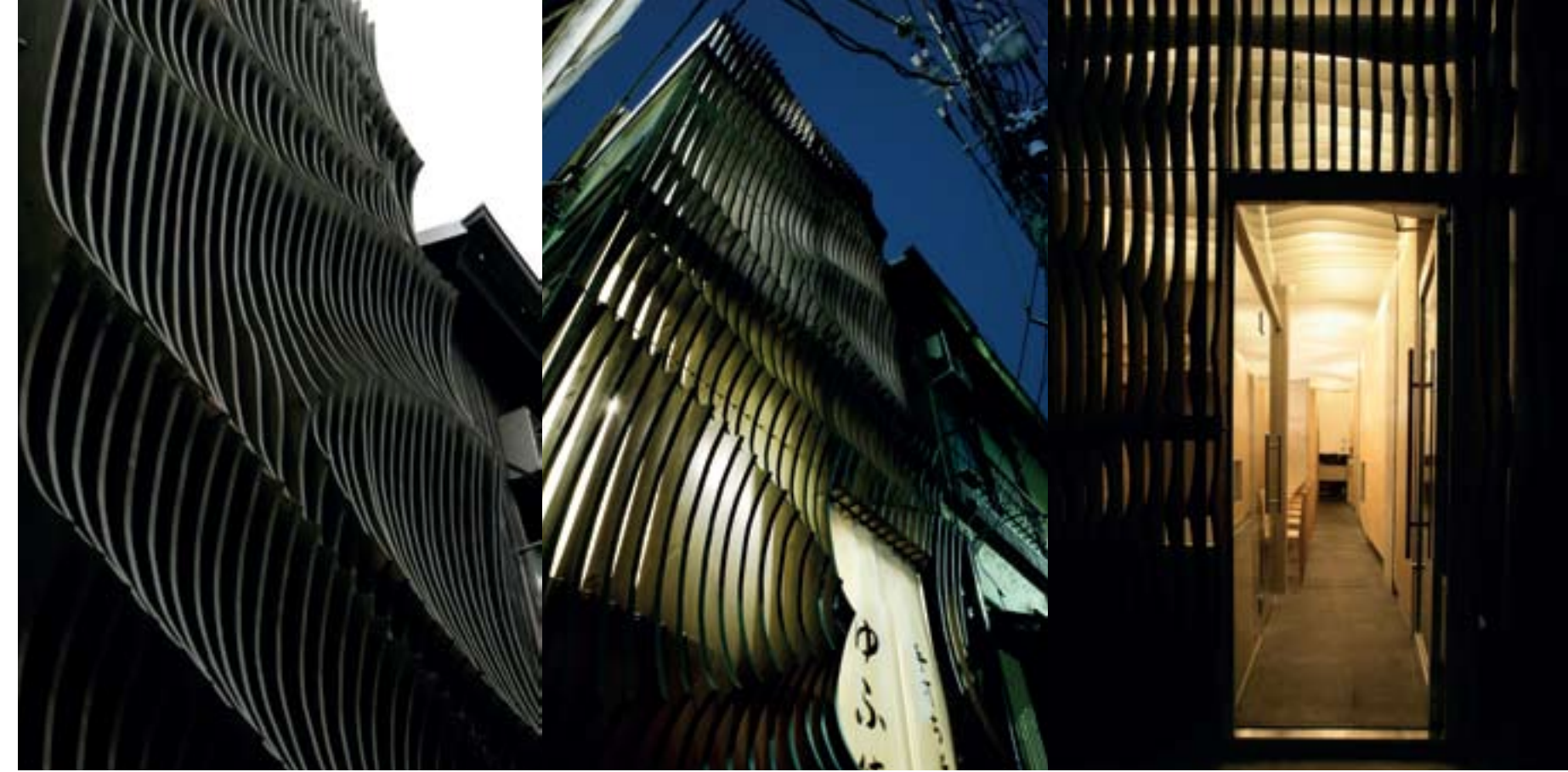
This minute residence in Sapporo, designed for a young family of four, slips intimately between buildings on three of its sides, claiming a mere 100sq m of land. The architect needed to use the vertical dimension to squeeze in the programme, first by sinking the living level 60cm below grade in a semi-basement, keeping the principal level double-height, and then inserting an overhang above the kitchen area. Igarashi cloaks the few apertures in panels to hide views, and clads the entire building in wood boards. Natural light is collected mainly through a protruding bay on the south side of the house, but darkness is as much on the architect's mind here, plus all the states in between.



ISSHO Architects

Photography by Kaichi Tarimura

Tokyo-based duo Jun Vera and Tomchisa Miyauchi run ISSHO and are making their mark with small but noticeable projects in Japan, including the Yufutoku Restaurant in the city centre, near Meguro Street. The owner lives above this tiny soba noodle shop squeezed into a narrow site, and the whole street elevation is clad in a dark-toned skin of wood louvres. By slightly varying the depth of the slats, the architects have created an undulating dynamic facade that the eye searches for patterns in. On the inside, the effect casts different patterns of light through the slats as the day progresses. The pinched space of the noodle shop interior might make some foreigners claustrophobic, but it is very much in the tradition of minuscule eateries around the city and the blond tones inside help to turn closeness into cosiness, in a nice contrast with the exterior.

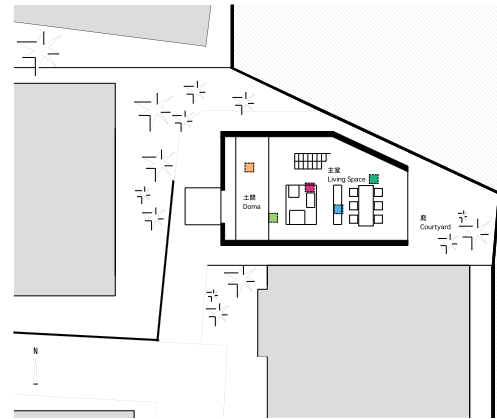


Keiichi Hayashi Architect

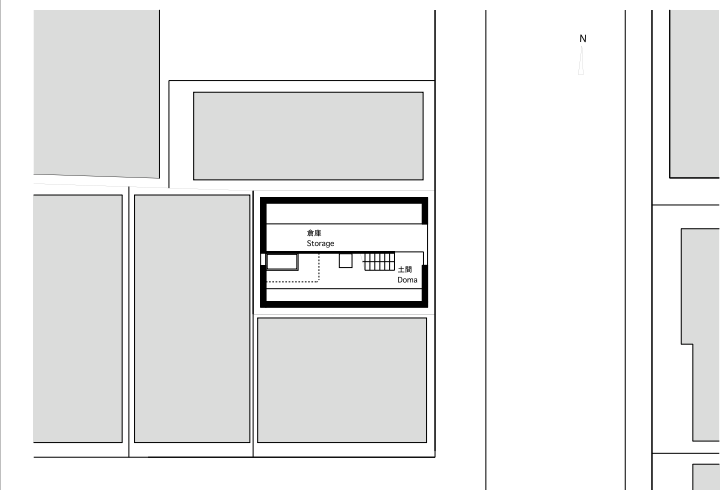
Photography by Yoshiyuki Hirai

A young architect from Osaka, Keiichi Hayashi takes pride in creating architecture of complexity for the user, out of materials that are simple and parts that seem likewise. For the House in Osaka, designed for a family and their tortoise on a constricted site, the total built area is 95sq m, spaced over three levels. While the 'mini-house' is a rich tradition in Japan's urban centres, this one is noteworthy for the habitability of the interior spaces and the relative privacy between different functions of the house. The roof is incorporated as a functional outdoor space focused on the tortoise pond. Never pretending to be more than it is (an extremely small residence), it nevertheless seems larger than it is. In the Lightwell House, scale-wise another baby, this time in Kyoto, a narrow-lane site is pinched by retaining walls of adjacent properties to the north and east. The architect uses a series of seemingly randomly placed lightwells, all the same shape and size, to bring daylight inside. These tubes also double as structural supports for the roof. Angled differently, the wells on the ground floor offer varied views skyward. This reinforced concrete building totals 89sq m, and makes the most of each and every one.

Lightwell House



House in Osaka

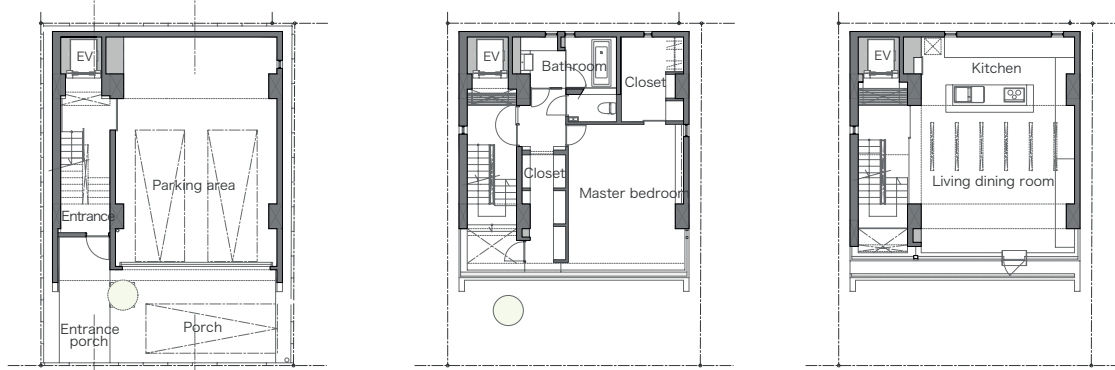


Furumoto Architect Associates

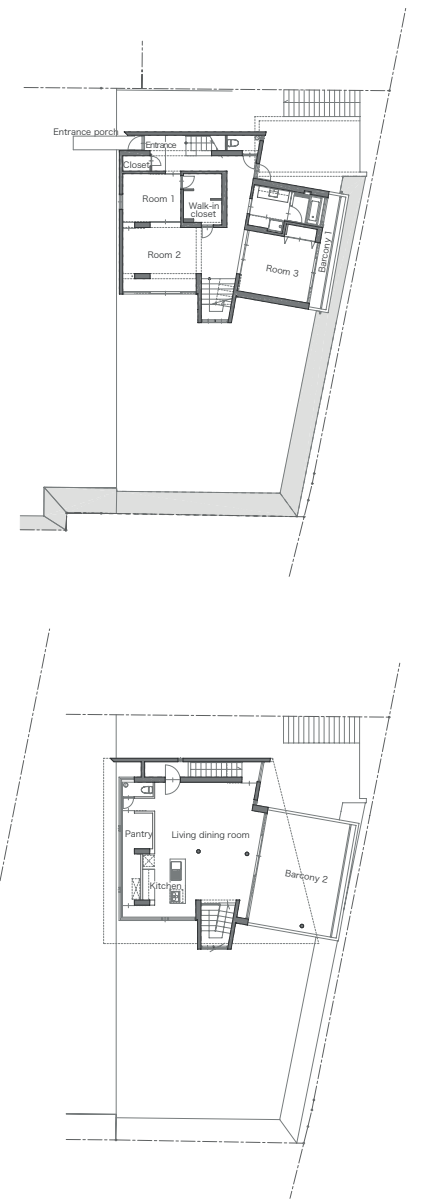
Photography by Seiichiro Ohkake

Hiroshima-based Ryuichi Furumoto has produced a series of concrete houses that explore the dynamic plasticity of concrete within a formal grammar of strong volumetric and elevational statements. Individually unique but consistently rigorous, these houses make firm declarations from their often-condensed sites. Yet for all their visual force, the buildings achieve tranquility and contextual beauty, due in some measure to a highly skillful balance of uninterrupted surfaces and carefully positioned contrasts; of shadow and light, of solid and void, of object and field. These are sculptures in three full dimensions, that people happen to live inside of. Furumoto's mastery of concrete manifests an artist perfectly engaged with his ideal material, a marriage blessed. In the architect's hands, concrete becomes luscious, gentle, warm, strong, sexy, permanent, like skin over a toned body. It is craftsmanship rarely seen outside Japan. K-House is a stack of dynamic internal spaces glanced by choreographed light behind an almost anthropomorphic facade, which leans first back, then forward over the street, and is punctuated by a modest 'nose' cantilevered outward. The Niho 2 House, though smaller, lets the concrete planes diet down to svelte cantilevers and frames seemingly encasing a simpler white container within. Corbusian quotations are understated. In the Slope House, Furumoto may be channelling Mies instead, though again via

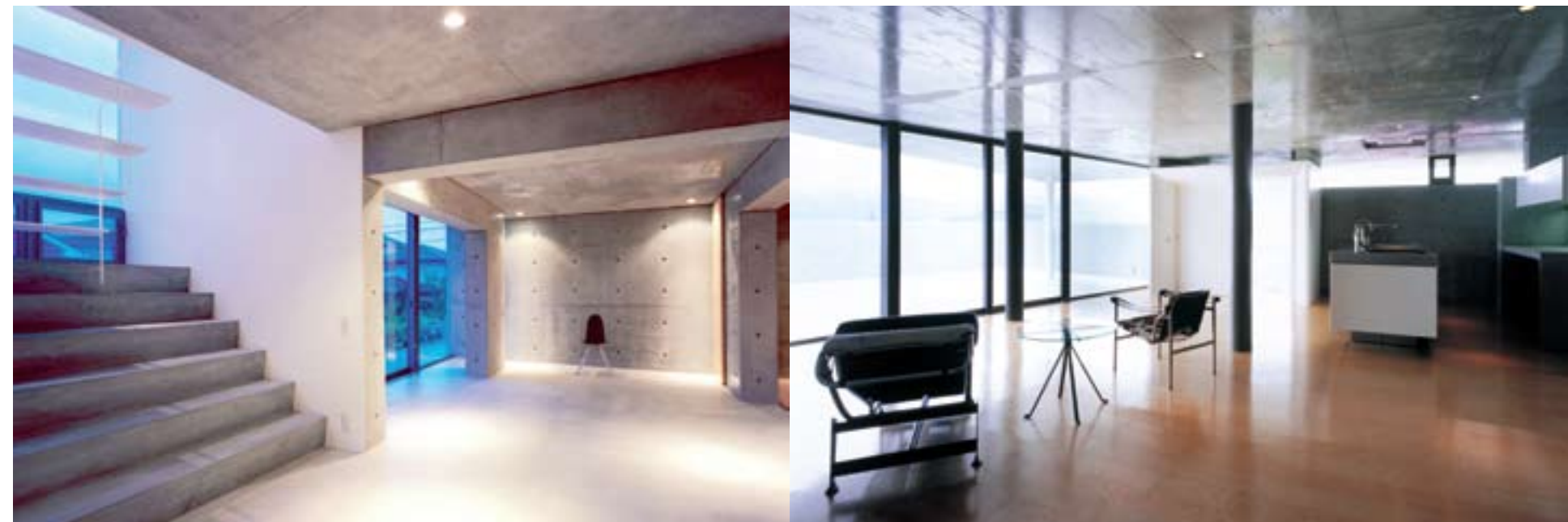
K House



Niho House

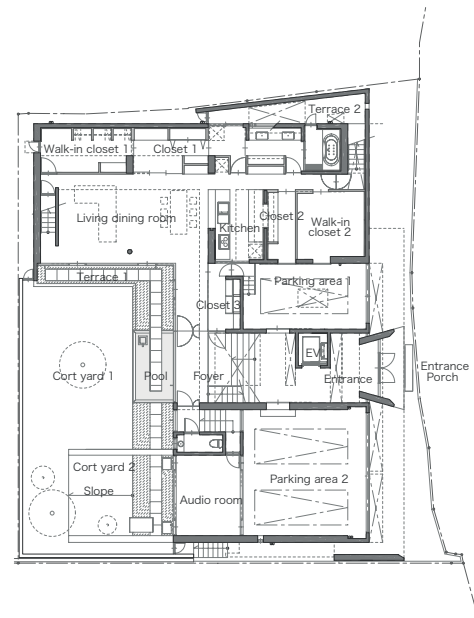


numerous intermediary influences. This is an achingly elegant, horizontal box with a sculptural central courtyard that breaks through the long public facade in a compositional climax of recession and projection. Sheltered within is a sun-filled garden space wrapped by the fully glazed facades of the private side of the house. The contrast between the outer and inner character of the elevations sparks a relationship of pleasurable surprise. In the Waterside House, the architect drives a different path again, with a vertical frame openly expressed as a concrete grid of inserted glass panels. The relative conventionality of the approach is belied by the interplay of spaces visually interconnected and the play of natural light through multiple layers of space afforded by





Slope

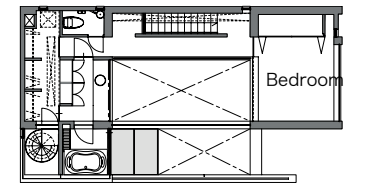


modification of the section. Even in an emphatically urban context, and rendered entirely in grey concrete, the house feels somewhat like an abstracted tree house.

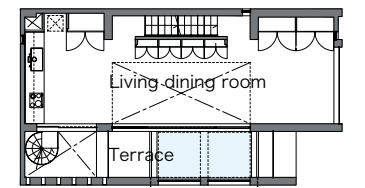
Furumoto Architect Associates is eking out a niche in refined, skillfully executed small buildings in Japan. These works are most impressive in their mature command of a language involving vigorous form, material succinctness, and proportional and interspatial ingenuity. Ryuichi Furumoto is destined to gather greater attention to his works both inside and outside his country.



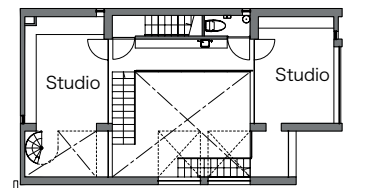
Waterside House



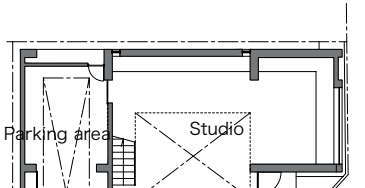
Fourth floor plan



Third floor plan



Second floor plan



First floor plan



Takashi Yamaguchi & Associates

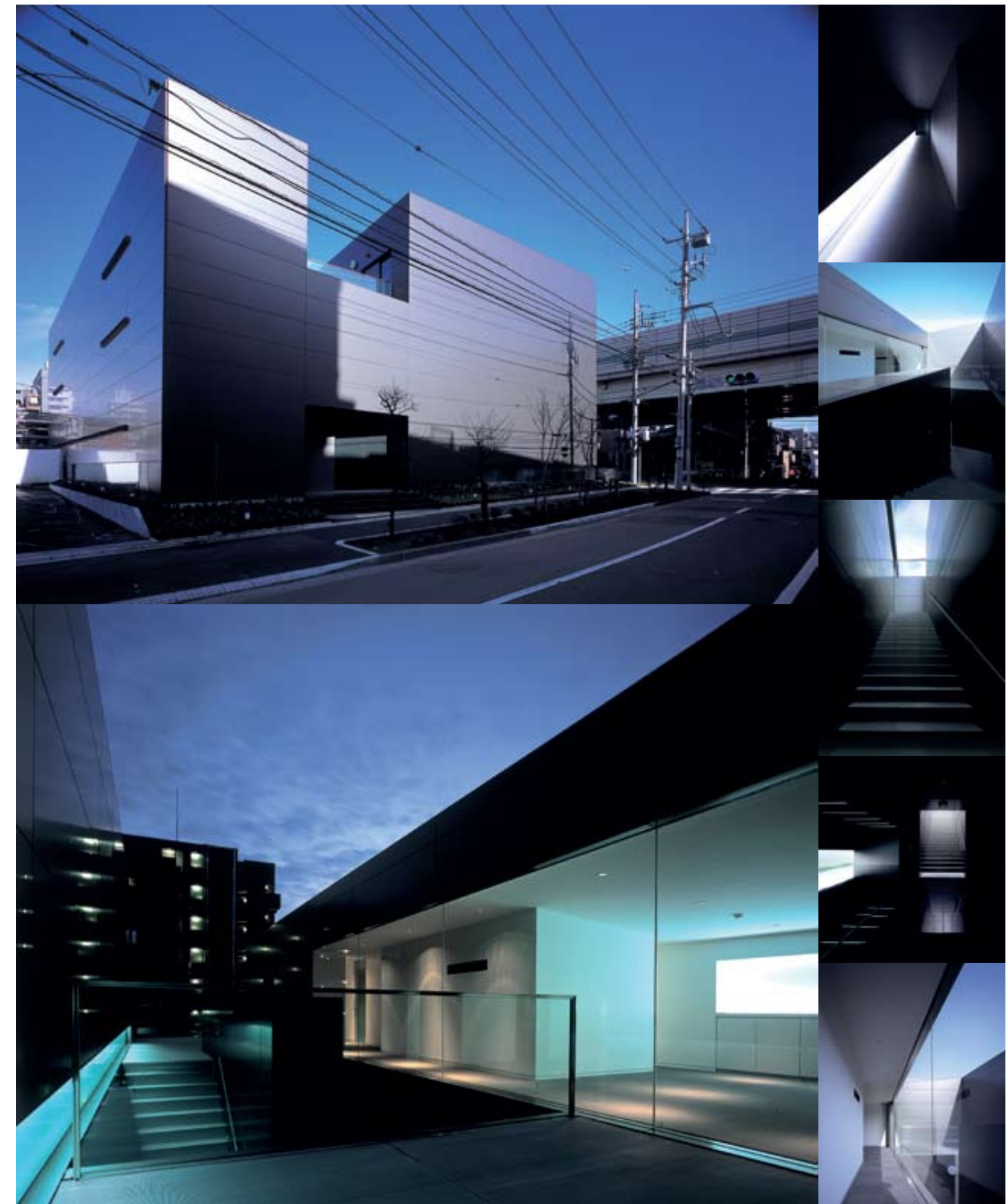
Photography by Takashi Yamaguchi & Associates

The two sleek metallic structures shown here, by Takashi Yamaguchi, declare a talent for elevating the apparently mundane into something quite other. Through the manipulation of volume, light and proportion, Yamaguchi's Breathing Factory and Silent Office transcend their sites and even programmes, genuinely adding a voice to the architectural discussion in Japan. Clearly drawn to the juxtaposition of beauty and brutality, Yamaguchi shows a flair for seducing the user/viewer against their instincts. These are structures occupying rough, ungentle sites, yet he has given us surfaces, spaces, visual ensembles that feel soothing, tantalising and sensual. Part of that comes from the contrast itself, but mostly it's the architect's ability to set up minimalist, coolly modern set-pieces that emphasise line, plane, surface quality, shadow and light. Both buildings challenge us to reconsider mundane programmes as opportunities for ruminations on the meaning of work, the suggestiveness of light, and the appealing or repulsive qualities of various materials.

Breathing Factory



Silent Office



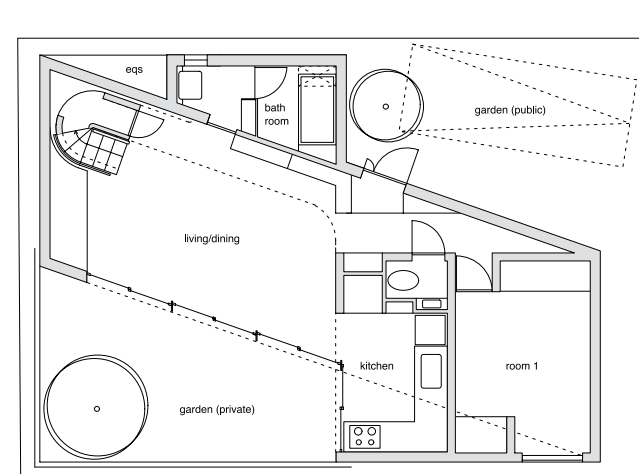
The Breathing Factory earned its name from the skin of metal louvers Yamaguchi applied in order to shelter a rather unpleasant array of exhaust and circulation pipes necessary for the function of the building, a medical device research facility. A mathematical ratio helped orient the groups of louvers into patterns of vertical and horizontal striations, which affect the light reflections off the building and alter as one moves against it. Combining new and old volumes, the architect allowed the joint to become a light-filled trapezoidal void suggesting traditional garden spaces and conveying a distinct tranquillity to the adjacent spaces. Certainly not your average factory... Silent Office, perched directly beside an elevated highway near the airport, set out to 'capture' silence in a hostile environment. Slicing a rectangular box with two slits to produce air movement and a natural light source, Yamaguchi gave the client, a candy distributor, complexity and diversity of spatial quality. In this spirit, an 'incubation office' is included on the third floor to assist promising startup companies. The enlightened client wanted his own staff to be intellectually excited by the office, hence varied meeting and thinking spaces, including an exterior terrace on the third floor, are provided. The exterior aspect of the building hints at introverted creativity via its opaque skin and infrequent, random recesses and openings. Yamaguchi is determined to approach the category of workplace as field of investigation, open to fresh, imaginative research.

Mount Fuji Architects Studio

Photography by Fyuta Atarashi

This Tokyo firm, led by husband-and-wife team Masahiro and Mao Harada (who named their office after the mountain they like to hike), is on a fast ascent to acclaim. With a series of micro-buildings of exceptional skill and dense architectural content and, more recently, decidedly larger commissions, the Haradas are unveiling an abundance of talent expressed through a diversity of forms, materials, ideas – all unified by a kind of no-holds-barred adventurousness. This lends every project a distinct personality based on one or two driving concepts each. To look at the tiny, delightful micro-house, Rainy-Sunny, with its opaque, warm grey exterior cladding sheltering a completely introverted, wood clad interior space and then compare it to, for instance, Sakura, a composition of white mesh facades filtering light into and out of a small oasis, is to see no signature other than an obvious joy in the dramatic possibilities of space and surface. These are stellar examples of the kind of small residence that Japan often seems to be obsessed with, and which dot the urban landscapes of the country like candies, constantly re-invented in new flavours. Underlying these two houses, both under 80sq m in size, is an ambition to elevate the inhabitant's experience of what might be termed 'extra-architectural' qualities such as nature, light and privacy. In Sakura, cloaking the perimeter in 3mm-thick steel plates perforated in a stencilled floral pattern produces a two-dimensional 'forest' surrounding the internal, private living spaces. Within the density of Tokyo, the architects have produced an abstraction of the glass-box-in-a-landscape idea of Mies van der Rohe or Philip Johnson – a sanctuary of complete privacy and expansive natural illumination.

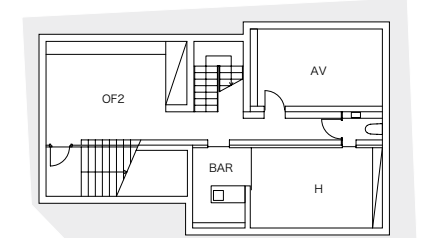
Rainy / Sunny

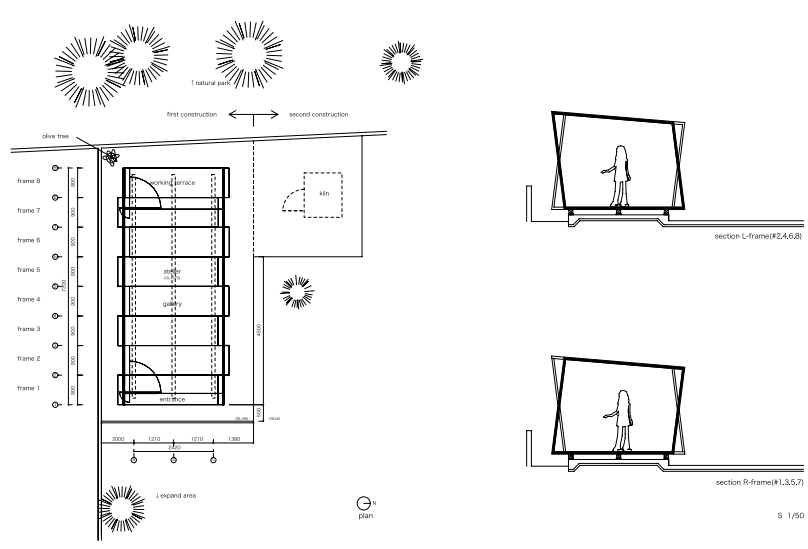
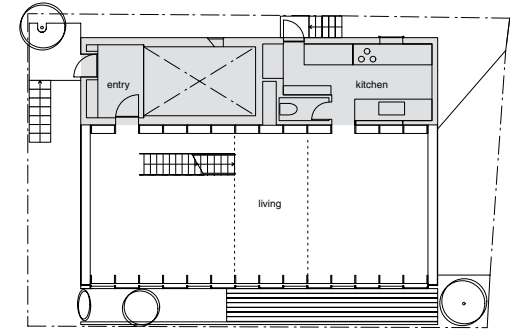


Sakura - 1



The firm's XXXX project is the result of an argument with a car. Or rather, an argument about how architecture could bring more value than a car acquired for the same price. The client needed a small ceramics studio/gallery space but had only the equivalent of 11,000 euros to build it – the price of a compact car in Japan. The Haradas were intrigued by the challenge, and invented a pavilion building assembled by friends and consisting of laminated plywood sheets that multitask as structure, enclosure and, well, everything. Light penetrates through the zigzag facades and the opened ends; further expansion is simple. Task accomplished, and you don't have to fill it with petrol. At M3_KG, a house for a movie-producing couple, Mount Fuji straddles the rough and the refined, producing a volume of concrete and wood that balances warm openness with protective shell. In order to accommodate the reposeful aspects of intellectuals, the Haradas proposed a very casual, book-lined open space in engineered wood and metal, while the 'protected' elements of the programme, including bedrooms, film archive and gallery, are in concrete. The juxtaposition, hinted at on the exterior, charges the whole and lends the 252sq m house its aspect of modest elegance. Simple, clear, intriguing, the building, in hindsight, also foreshadowed Mount Fuji's progression to larger, more sophisticated commissions. The combination of originality and enthusiasm for the poetic possibilities of tangible built form streaming through all their projects, large or small, early or recent, unquestionably marks this firm as one to keep a very close eye on. It has already moved beyond 'promising' to the higher strata of contemporary Japanese practitioners.





Keisuke Maeda

Images courtesy of UIID Architects

From his base in Hiroshima, Maeda produces works of mostly residential use for diverse clients. He believes that the architect-client relationship is paramount to the process of creating architecture, which may explain in part the range in character between his built works, one building not apparently similar to the next. Though still only in his 30s, Maeda has produced a number of interesting projects, each concisely attuned to its site, which is the second critical relationship in the architect's opinion. He undertakes to set up a dialogue between building and site in which climate and geography play influential roles. Comfortable with various materials, Maeda has built in timber, white stucco, steel and glass, and he is skilled at composing dramatic views between inside and outside – in both directions.

Maeda's avoidance of formal trends, when coupled with the diversity of formal approaches from project to project, lends his collective work an aspect of experimentation, as if the practice of architecture were less an expression of confirmed skills than an ongoing laboratory for testing conceptual strategies and seeing what they yield. That is not to say the buildings look experimental in conventional ways, or that they are unskilled; on the contrary, Maeda displays a command of different vocabularies. But the eclecticism is not gratuitous or perhaps even deliberate. Unlike architects who pursue linear research through sequential commissions, Maeda is enjoying the full panoply of formal, material building activity.

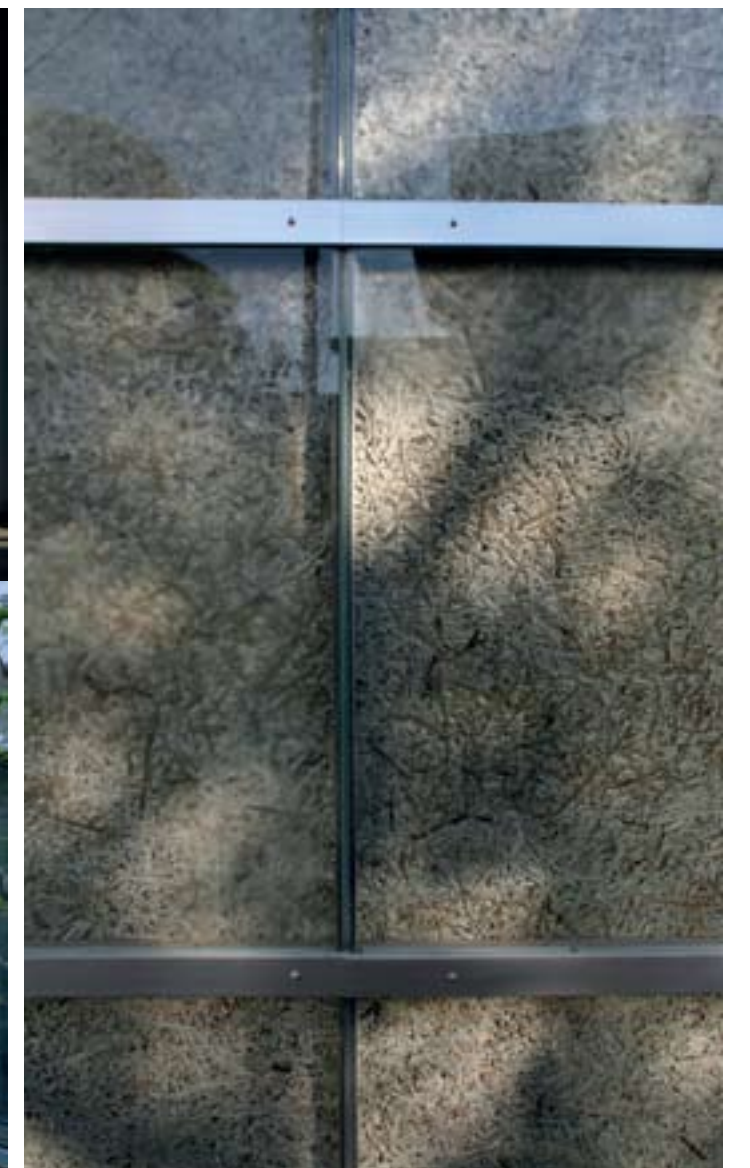


Kochi Architect's Studio

Photography by Daichi Ano and Kazuyasu Kochi

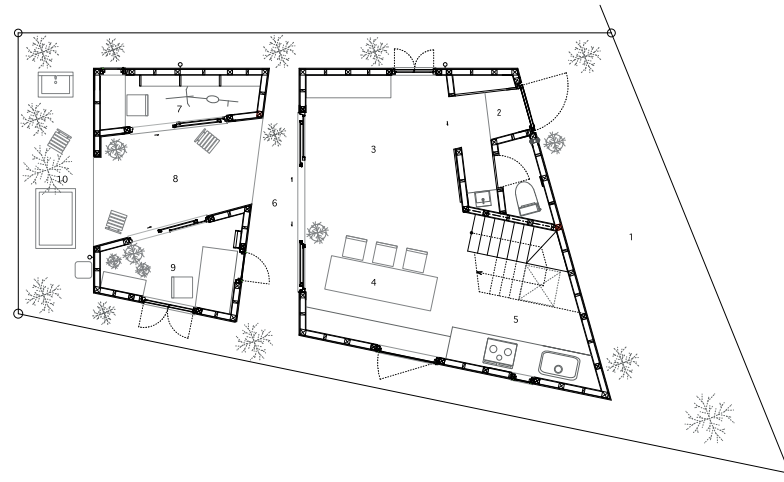
In the Garden House, Kazuyasu Kochi places two boxes, one a two-level residence, the other a tall one-level atelier, centrally within a large garden in Tokyo. The volumes touch, just barely, at their respective corners, immediately producing two adjacent open courtyard spaces, facing different directions and aspects. The site planning was a major component of the challenge, since the built area was limited by budget; the architect was tasked with making the most of the remaining site. Kochi clad the buildings almost entirely in glass to minimise their visual presence within the garden. Where solid panels are, he backed the glass with wood/wool cement boards, which 'softens' them and heightens their reflectivity, so that when one is looking at the other building (always present thanks to the site positioning), the garden itself is reflected and the boxes, though small to begin with, recede into an almost mirage-like state, something between solid and vegetal. In minimising the building's presence thus, Kochi happens to have helped make them more elegant, svelte and alluring. Their polished skin doesn't so much reflect the existing garden back at the viewer as idealise it, so that sitting near the walls one occupies a specialised 'in-between' realm. It is a clever trick and fairly simply achieved.

The house/atelier is a pleasing building that rests comfortably between garden pavilion and principal object. It benefits from the unusually expansive site, of course, but then also takes full advantage of it. The odd positioning of the two volumes relative to each other happens to heighten the privacy between the workplace and home, while enriching the garden itself.



Takeshi Hosaka Architects

Photography by Masao Nishikawa



This miniature jewel by the Yokohama architect is a mere 70sq m, but thinks big, aiming to examine the relationship between inside and outside with its irregular shape; simplified, oversized apertures (some glazed, some shuttered); and close integration with the gardens north and south. By opening up the wood doors, a continuous viewline is completed straight from outside, through inside and to outside again. Hosaka envisions the outdoor spaces as continuous and an integral part of the programme, and terms them the 'outside house'.

Two main volumes – white boxes of different sizes – huddle close together, creating a slot of space foreshadowing in internal courtyard. Walls and ceilings are liberally cut open to invite abundant natural light in and to abstract the internal spaces, eliminating somewhat the conventional treatments of surfaces. As almost all the planes feature at least one large opening, and all is rendered in white, it is like living inside a benign cubist sculpture, and the tight site makes remaining spaces outdoors of similar scale to the interior rooms, which further blurs the distinction. Outside surfaces are also white where possible, completing the meld. The house expresses a whimsical interpretation of urban life in a non-tropical country, seeking sunlight so enthusiastically that on bright days it seems to bloom open.

