

**Vol.21**

Indesign.com.au  
May 2005

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House on the Hill

Nestled in the heart of Tokyo's Daikanyama district is a house that combines the best of West and East, with an elegant, modern twist. Jason Coates looks at an outstanding example of the work of expatriate Australian architect, Riccardo Tossani.

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A stone's throw away from the central hub of Shibuya, the urban sanctuary of Daikanyama combines chic cafés and boutiques with foreign embassies and freeways – a dizzying mesh of retail and commercial structures that somehow finds the space to have a human side.

It is in Daikanyama that Tokyo's elite jostle to reside. From low-rise apartment blocks to larger properties, Daikanyama has managed a sophisticated domestic mix that is a fresh take on modern Tokyo life. Despite a core of traditional architectural styles, it has nevertheless encouraged experiment, with commercial and residential buildings designed by figures such as Fumiko Maki and Ettore Sottsass.

So, when the opportunity arose for expat Australian architect, Riccardo Tossani, to build a private residence for the president of one of Japan's largest real estate development companies, on a massive block in central Daikanyama, the results were as unexpected as they were magical. A calculated mix of traditional and Western styles uses space but also celebrates every single inch of it. Taking just one year from first draft to occupation, it's also an example of swiftly co-ordinated planning and construction. "With handover about a year on from the initial sketches, we were under the gun from start to finish," Tossani points out. "And always only one step ahead of the contractor."

Constructing a house in a high-density suburb like Daikanyama is not plain sailing. "The house, at least by Japanese standards," says Tossani, "was very

large. I wanted to avoid, however, the institutional and commercial character that so easily accompanies large structures of this type, and so articulating the architecture to reduce its apparent mass was an early priority."

As you approach the house from the busy intersection of Kyu Yamate Dori, down a small slope, it is easy to walk by without noticing this massive residence – which is how the architect intended it. The owners insisted on a high level of privacy. So the house plays a hide-and-seek game with the outside world, offering only snatched glimpses of what is going on inside.

This sense of surprise hidden behind a massive wall is achieved mainly through the magnificent hand-chiselled grey granite and Brazilian slate retainer that defines the two sides of the corner block that face the street – an envelope that combines the traditional Japanese answer to retaining walls, fusing it with the Italian bugnato style that hints at Tossani's heritage. Yet the slate's green tinge makes sure it still stands subtly apart from its neighbours, with the granite bringing the structure well into the 21st Century.

From the outset, it is clear that this house is no temple to Zen perfection. Above the slate, amidst glimpses of giant bamboo and towering glass windows, one can see the corners of a burnished wooden structure jutting out – a timber box set at an irregular angle to the rest of the house, softening the hard edges of the building and its surrounds and providing a sense of focus. The heart of the building

1 Aerial view of the house



is the traditional Japanese tatami room, an ode to the country's past that serves as a comment on the tension between East and West - a cantered flame-finished Cedar conversation on the collision of cultures where elongated windows give glimpses of the garden, proportioned to be appreciated from the point of view of those seated on the tatami mats.

"Our work, where possible and appropriate, addresses the phenomenon of uneasy balance or tension between cultural layers, both social and technological," comments Tossani. "Many of our projects, such as internet cafés, presentation spaces and client consulting areas, are rich in information technologies. These can easily overwhelm and dominate the character of space or furniture. We have approached this problem from a more romantic and humanistic point of departure, subsuming (rather than celebrating) the technology within forms and elements that are not diminished in their playfulness or humanity."

This is Tossani's archetype for a modern Japanese family house: the setting is very Western, yet the core is wholly Japanese. Even the front door, almost hidden in an aluminium-lined alcove, is humble and indirect. The hyosatsu, the traditional Japanese family name plate usually carved into stone, here has been water jet-blasted into a 20mm aluminium billet to blend with its surroundings. Nothing in the design of this house has been forced. Restrained in some parts, it flows organically in others.

From the landscaped gardens with references to Hokusai in the patterned use of white and green foliage, to the sleek indoor dining and living furniture, organic outdoor sculptural iron wicker furniture - even the art lining the walls - there is a flirtatious sense of homogeneity. "This indigenous approach to architecture was clearly the inspiration behind the integration of our built and landscape space design," says Tossani.

Collaborating with abstract calligraphic artist, Rieko Kawabe, whose art covers the walls of the living room, dining room, and lower level foyer, Tossani was able to use the art as an architectural tool to reel the viewer in, filling space yet also drawing attention to the vastness of it with enormous monotone, calligraphic slashes.

The palette of materials was also handled with restraint. Materials such as Brazilian slate, limestone, Zebra stone, Corian, Zebra wood, Teak, Cedar, aluminium, stainless steel and glass all come together through creative handling and unusual treatments. The Zebra stone floors of the bathrooms and entrance are made into purposeful features using sand blasting, water polishing and conventional polishing to pattern the floor, creating the illusion of multiple matching materials.

However, light is the major architectural element. Walk across the threshold and there is a gigantic explosion of space, with limestone walls and windows reaching up three levels, all shrouded in the most incredible luminosity. Outside, glimpsed >

- 2 A slender airfoil canopy highlights the drama of the volumes below.
- 3 Timber forms a counterpoint to the stone, steel and glass.



- 4 Tall curtain wall allow the sky to be viewed from all rooms.
- 5 An open plan allows rooms to merge visually and functionally.
- 6 The interior stair is a slender, transparent sculptural element.

## The house plays a hide-and-seek game with the outside world, offering only snatched glimpses of what is going on inside.

through the floor-to-ceiling windows, giant bamboo stalks climb from the lower level up three flights. A free-standing flight of stairs acts as an architectural element, zig-zagging its way to the rooftop garden, drawing the eyes up and out. Unstained Teak handrails follow the stairs, designed to take on a darker hue with the passage of time.

There are six bedrooms, each with its own commode, but with centralised communal bathrooms — another traditional Japanese element designed to keep the family together. These shared bathrooms boast steam rooms, full showers and baths, and play on an indoor/outdoor theme that sports with the tradition of outdoor washing and the communal ritual of Japanese bathing. Each bedroom is designed according to the occupant's wishes, so individuality blossoms without overwhelming the entire design.

The dogs are also taken care of and many of the doors feature attractive scratch-proof glass panels that can't be opened by them. The dogs also have their own washing room, situated near the private entrance. A maid's quarters is located in the vicinity of the large open kitchen. Floor-to-ceiling panels slide to separate or seduce the eyes with the view through the dining and living rooms where more sliding doors open up to the gardens, creating a large entertaining and living space.

In the basement, a massive gym and garage take up the building's entire span, and provide the occupants with an alternative entrance to their home. Entered through custom-designed steel doors, the garage can hold up to six cars, and leads into the house through a foyer with custom-seating, then up an elegant stairway into the house's main hall.

On the second level, high above the entry, a dramatic bridge links the two sides of the house, emphasising its linearity and dynamics. Large ornamental metal pipes perched at knee-level follow the metal balustrade and increase this sense of movement. At one end are two bedrooms, and at the other, directly above the tatami room, is the chic home theatre. Here one can clearly see the house's homogeneous harmony, as custom-made cabinets hide and store electrical equipment and cords, as well as maintaining the clean lines of the design. >





- 7 Shared bathrooms play on the indoor/outdoor theme.
- 8 Light is a major architectural element.
- 9 Bedrooms are individualised.

With so much space, and the strong connection between indoor and outdoor, heating and cooling were an important concern. Tossani was able to exploit the sun, especially on winter days. All of the windows are double-glazed and a slick convection system is used, pumping hot air from the upper floors down to the basement in winter, and allowing hot air to escape through the windows near the ceiling in summer.

The open-plan rooftop garden is more like a ship deck than a roof. The Australian Cyprus flooring is surrounded by manicured foliage – a horticultural ode to the art of *Hokusai*, and emphasising the nautical theme. A slick steel outdoor kitchen sits separate from the deck's sail-like canopy. There is even a fenced lookout at the bow where one can indulge in a Titanic moment.

For all its intimacy, this is a large family house. While its budget was not unlimited – Tossani talks with a smile about having to "value engineer" on massive support columns and other areas – a building like this gives character to an already vibrant neighbourhood, without losing focus on the family it houses.

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