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Renaissance man

Work in Progress: Riccardo Tossani. By Gwen Robinson

As a child growing up in suburban Adelaide in south Australia, Riccardo Tossani dreamed of being an astronaut or a jet pilot. The boyhood enchantment with space and speed gave way to a life-long fascination with form and design. And while he still has a weakness for fast cars and motorcycles (despite a serious bike accident in Japan eight years ago) architecture has been the focal point of Tossani's adult life.

His dream, of a multidisciplinary profession encompassing urban planning as well as building, interior and industrial design, has become a reality – everything “from designing houses, stores and resorts to lamp posts, main streets and even furniture”.

But buildings, both residential and commercial, are the focus of the practice that Tossani and his Japanese architect wife, Atsuko Itoda, run from their two bases, in Tokyo and the island of Hokkaido. With their simple yet innovative forms and emphasis on natural materials, space and light, their projects span multiple disciplines in locations from Japan and Thailand to Italy and Australia.

It has been a long journey. Tossani graduated from the University of Adelaide in 1980 with an architecture degree and set up his own practice aged 23. But he soon decided he wanted more training and international experience (“the focus of my practice just didn't feel right”) and, after selling the business to his partner, he spent a year travelling, primarily in Asia, before arriving in Italy in 1984.

With the advantage of speaking fluent Italian (thanks to Italian-immigrant parents and hard study), he enrolled in an urban planning course at the University of Florence and worked with a firm of architects before moving on to the US, where in 1988 he earned a masters degree in urban design from Harvard. He then spent nine years as an architect with California-based Johnson Fain &

Pereira, travelling extensively for projects including resorts in Guam and a business district in Thailand.

This was a transformational period. But it was Tossani's earlier experience as a young budget traveller, seeing China's seething cities and the chaotic urban development in other parts of Asia, that helped develop his ideas about architecture as a “renaissance” pursuit, drawing on a range of design skills and ideas. Italy reinforced that notion.

Too often, he says, architects are put into “narrow boxes”. So instead “I sought the kind of training that would help me understand how to apply architecture to a range of fields. Academic training at Harvard and Adelaide universities reinforced traditional capabilities...but in Italy I learnt that an architect was someone who could design a building at the same time as he is designing knives and forks.”



When he met Itoda at JFP in California he found they shared common ideas. The couple left the company in 1997 with a plan to travel and eventually to set up a business.

They landed in Japan, intending to stay just six months, but their first commission, from a property developer for low-cost, family housing that could be easily replicated and modified, won a top Japanese design award and launched them in the country.

Twelve years later, Riccardo Tossani Architecture is a thriving business with a small team working from a stylish, renovated building in inner Tokyo and a branch in Hokkaido, where the Tossanis live part-time in a chalet they designed in the ski resort of Niseko.

With Itoda's strong design sense and management skills and Tossani's multidisciplinary approach, the couple have worked on projects ranging from a Tokyo nightclub to condominiums, office blocks, fashion boutiques – including a current commission for Giorgio Armani's new store in Tokyo's Roppongi district – and urban planning projects, including the main street of Niseko.

But residential projects are Tossani's first love. “All the classic challenges of architecture and urban design are there,” he explains, “identity, lifestyle, relationship with gardens, sky and the neigh-

bourhood, comfort, functionality, aspirations and so on, but in miniature and very personal.”

While the fees for residential work often “barely cover the costs”, the creative satisfaction is “immeasurable”, he adds.

One project exciting him is a ski chalet in Hakuba, north of Tokyo. The pentagonal-section house builds on his earlier idea of using a long tube shape – utilised in his own Tokyo residence. Essentially, he explains, “you wrap a tube in metal and sculpt the interior”.

In his home he used concrete to create a compact but striking four-storey house with sweeping timber staircases, views over the city skyline and earthy tones of stone and wood throughout. The ski chalet, a zinc-copper alloy-clad tube jutting over a cliff with huge windows framing mountain and forest views, has a more dramatic feel. The metal is intended to complement the wooded environment and change colour and texture with age, while the high-ceilinged interior features local stone and timber.

The influences of Tossani's adopted country are evident and he acknowledges that he has learnt much from Japan about design and materials.

“Our style is reducing things to a simple level and to work with a limited palette of materials – maybe one type of wood, one kind of stone,” he explains. “Too many materials competing with each other undermine the beauty of each one.”

Japan also advanced his ideas about the role of light and space in his work. “In Australia, and even Italy, the abundance of light and space is often taken for granted but in Tokyo it's very precious,” he says. “It can help define luxury and liveability.”

A prime example was his completion of a 200 sq metre house on a 100 sq metre plot of land in the Japanese capital's chic Aoyama district. Its high, vaulted ceilings and glass walls, wood, stone and airy staircases enhance the feeling of space.



Tube Riccardo Tossani and his Hakuba ski chalet

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