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Italo-Australian architect Riccardo Tossani has devised a master plan for redevelopment of the main street of Niseko-Hirafu ski resort (shown above) in Kutchan, Hokkaido. ROB GILHOOLY PHOTOS

Bigger picture in sight for local development **Architect devises plan for 'rehab' of famed upscale Niseko-Hirafu ski resort community**

By ROB GILHOOLY
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For some it was a flash in the pan, at best an experiment destined to fail, at worst a mini-bubble hyper-inflated by greedy "outsiders" with little interest other than the type accumulating in the bank.

For others, however, the Niseko ski resort in southwest Hokkaido is much more than just a picturesque snow globe waiting to be smashed. A criticism often leveled at Niseko's real estate boom that started around eight years ago is that it has lacked planning and long-term vision, with some developments showing little concern for building codes or the local environment.

If Italo-Australian architect, designer and master planner Riccardo Tossani has his way, all of this is about to change. "We're seeing a shift in the type of force that is developing this area," says Tossani at his second home in the village of Hirafu, which he terms "the nexus of the area's social activities."

"It's moved on from individual pioneering entrepreneurs to becoming more institutional, long-term money. Corporations that are coming here have deeper pockets and a longer time horizon, and they can step back and take a better look at the bigger picture."

The bigger picture that Tossani hopes the ever-growing list of developers will ponder comes in the form of a project that his Tokyo-based practice, Riccardo Tossani Architecture Inc., assembled after being commissioned by the Niseko Promotion Board to develop new signage guidelines for the area. Tossani's response was to go one step further and create a master plan for more extensive developments with wider-reaching implications for the community and, potentially, Japan.

"We told the Niseko Promotion Board that we couldn't look at signage without looking at the bigger picture — one that integrates all elements of the environment into a wider, more desirable urban design vision, which we did pro bono," says Tossani, 53, who has master-planned resorts, university campuses, airports and other large-scale projects worldwide.

"This bigger picture produced a master plan consisting of several components that could be enacted over a 20-year period to gradually transform the urban environment of Niseko-Hirafu from a loosely planned collection of ad-hoc developments into a world-class ski village."

The first component of that master plan is a ¥750 million redevelopment of Hirafu's main drag, Hirafu-zaka, a street running from Niseko Grand Hirafu to the center of the village that largely has been untouched by the construction boom and which Tossani says is "in dire need of rehab."

To get that rehab under way, Tossani examined six renowned ski resorts worldwide, including Whistler in British Columbia and St. Moritz in Switzerland, and adopted elements such as low-key signage, underground utility cables, buildings with roofs designed to prevent heavy snow accumulations from suddenly falling off, outdoor cafes with promenade seating, a fully heated road and a pedestrian walkway into the Hirafu-zaka plan.

"Hirafu-zaka currently features none of these and is clearly falling behind the quality and stature of the majority of architecture that is being built here. Local businesses and the local community liked the master plan to the point that they lobbied the government for funding and got it — which is not bad for 400 hours of pro bono work."

Tossani, who has lived in Japan for 14 years and spends around 30 percent of his year in Hirafu, hopes the Hirafu-zaka guidelines also serve as a blueprint to help shape other Niseko-Hirafu areas. Yet, he expresses concern about whether the local government and community will be able to act quickly enough to ensure upcoming developments conform to those guidelines.

"If developers know about the utility wires being underground, the landscaping, the trees, that parking must be handled in a way that does not detract from the architectural character of the village, and so forth, they will plan their developments differently and in character with the area. But without them, we could see more of what has gone before."

The Niseko boom began in 2002, when adventurous Australian ski buffs, who had been scared away from North America's resorts after 9/11, were attracted to the resort area by its legendary powder snow and minimal time-zone difference. As its popularity spread, some began buying up and converting aging pensions into foreigner-friendly backpacker lodges and serviced apartments.



Since then the pace has quickened. Two of the area's ski resorts are now foreign-owned while multimillion-dollar condominiums and boutique hotels have sprung up one after the other.

And despite the global financial crisis of 2008, things seem to be gathering pace. A number of large-scale developments are already in the pipeline, such as the Tadao Ando-designed Capella Niseko, which is due for completion in 2012.

To date, an estimated ¥50 billion to ¥80 billion reportedly has been invested in the area by developers, and in Hirafu alone, around 230 condominiums have been built since 2004, local government officials say.

Yet some developments, which Tossani calls "eyesores that denigrate the character of the area," have taken advantage of lax government building ordinances. Fearing this could exacerbate should guidelines not be put in place, Tossani is hopeful the local government will adopt the Hirafu-zaka model as a template for future developments.

"It remains to be seen which other components of the master plan will be funded or enforced, but without a cohesive vision, we could face disaster."

Another barrier clouding the potential of the master plan is a number of local residents who have lobbied against changes that have already taken place. Local potter and guest house owner Nariyuki Yamaguchi decries the relentless buying up of land by foreign investors and the "lame submission" to them by local authorities.

"It's not so long ago that we held in our grasp a wealthy ski area that was referred to as the 'St. Moritz of the East,' " Yamaguchi says. "But in the blink of an eye, it passed into the hands of investors from Australia and Hong Kong.

"They now cater to well-heeled Australians and Chinese who can afford flashy ¥100,000-a-night accommodations and expensive restaurants. I am not against developing this area to attract foreign tourists, but it should be done by Japanese residents."

Another shop owner in the area, who asked not to be named, wondered how he could reform his store to conform to the stipulated guidelines. "In this economic environment, the costs would cripple me," he says.

The case put forward by the likes of Yamaguchi is difficult to contest, considering the wintertime proportion of domestic visitors to Niseko is more than 16 times that of their overseas counterparts.

Yet, the share of the latter is the one that is surging. While total annual domestic visitors to Niseko have leveled out over the past decade to average around 1.4 million, overseas visitors have increased eight-fold to just under 40,000 in 2009, according to local government data. "Visitors from Asia, particularly Hong Kong, China and Taiwan, increased 70 percent over 2008," says Niseko government official Masahiro Shigemori.

It is this sector that Hokkaido in general, and Niseko-Hirafu in particular, increasingly is turning its attention to. In March, a new ¥6.5 billion international terminal was opened at Chitose airport, some 115 km from Niseko, catering to visitors from Hong Kong, South Korea, China, Singapore, Australia and the U.S.

Tossani is adamant that Asia is the way forward for Niseko-Hirafu and a prime reason why his master plan, which is due to commence next spring with the Hirafu-zaka component, should be more widely embraced. "Asian visitors are likely to come here not only for the skiing but for the lifestyle — for the culinary possibilities, local traditions, hot springs, shopping and other year-round activities.

"Until Australian entrepreneurs 'discovered' Niseko, this town was degenerating into a shabby destination that I believe was on the verge of cardiac arrest. While the Japanese have been slow to respond, losing out to a hybrid culture that seems to be less and less Japanese and becoming increasingly international, I believe one day soon that position will be reversed, aided by an Asian visitorship that tends to be more in tune with what the Japanese hold dear.

The Hirafu project is just a microcosm, but an important model for future development in Hokkaido and indeed all of Japan, he adds. "This unique Japanese-foreign-public-private initiative is the first of its kind in the country that addresses a potential new and important industrial sector in Japan — international tourism. This underdeveloped and poorly understood industry is a latent boon for Japan's economy and with 2 billion people living within two-hour time zone either side of Japan, a significant number of them experiencing increased prosperity, international tourism of the kind developed in Niseko represents a huge opportunity."