

Tops in many Aspect(s)



Aspect Niseko, designed by Riccardo Tossani Architecture

Front façade with breathtaking view of Mt. Yotei in the background

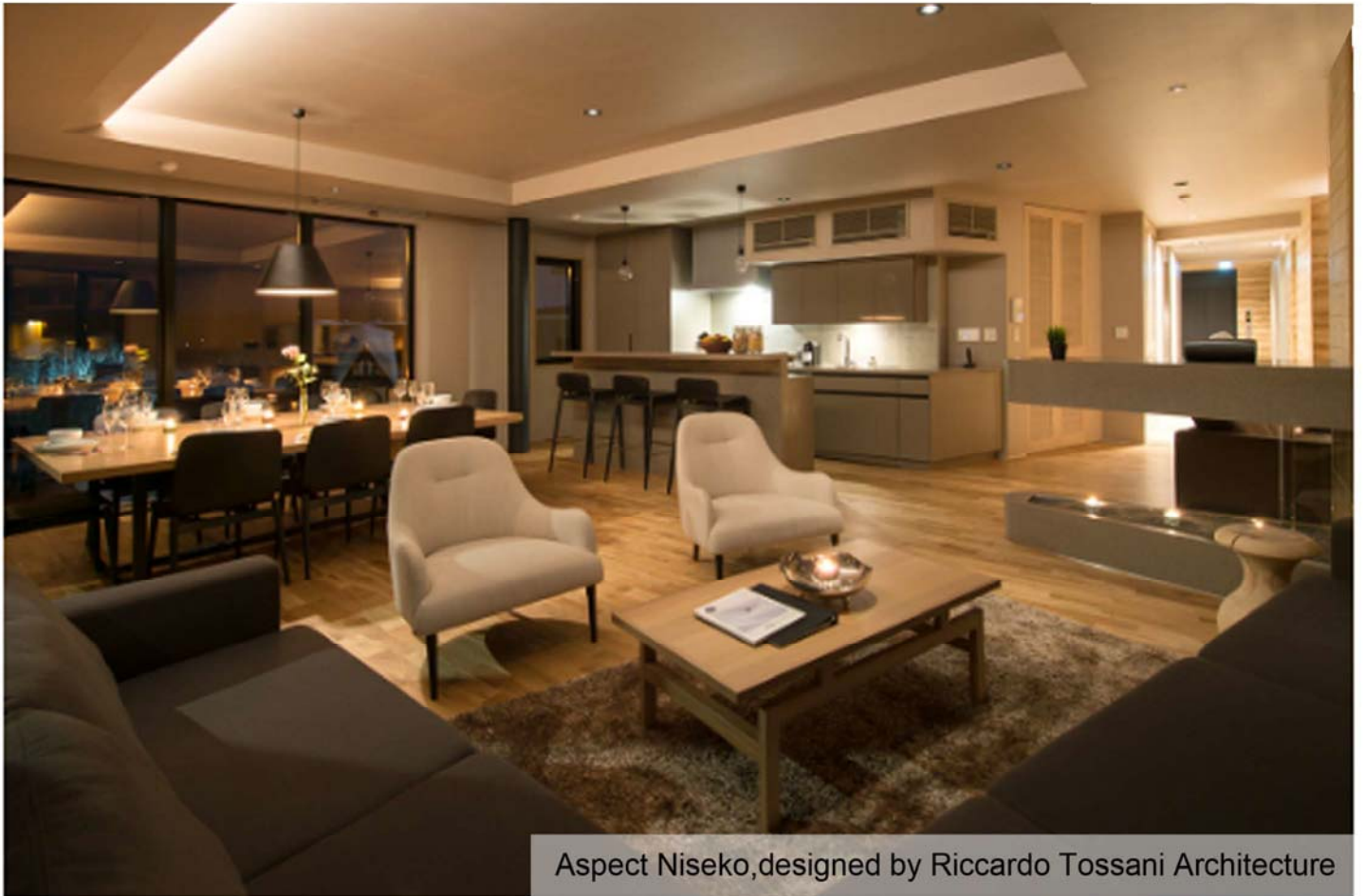
A happy turn of events after a ski mishap led Datuk Loy Teik Ngan to set up an award-winning ski resort in Niseko, designed the way he likes to live on holiday

Some things happen by accident, some by design. How Aspect Niseko in Hokkaido — named Travel & Hospitality Awards Triple Winner as Resort of the Year in 2020, Luxury Accommodation of the Year in 2021 and Luxury Apartments of the Year in 2022 — came to be is a combination of serendipity and decisions led by family rather than business opportunity.

Aspect opened in December 2016, a decade after the story of what led Datuk Loy Teik Ngan to buy the land it stands on begins. “Snow sports was something I tried late in life,” he starts. It is a delightful tale that warms a beautiful accommodation designed to bring holidaying families together in a cold clime.

On the second day of a ski vacation in Niseko in 2006, Loy’s 11-year-old daughter was hit by another beginner coming down a slope. She fell, broke her leg and had to be hospitalised for six and a half weeks.

At that time, Niseko had a growing reputation for the exceptional quality and quantity of its powder snow. Visitors had started flocking there but accommodation was limited.



Aspect Niseko, designed by Riccardo Tossani Architecture

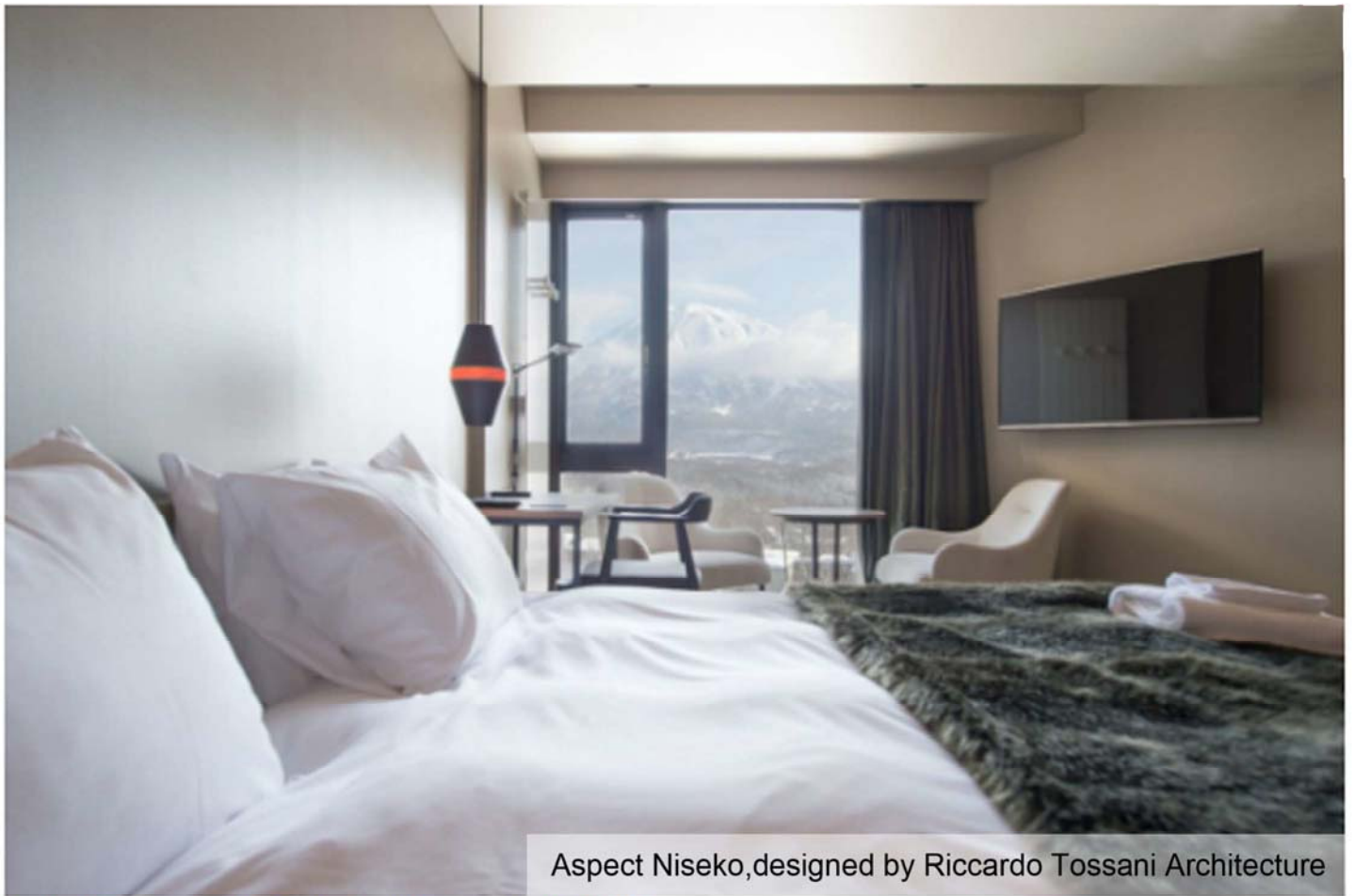
A perfect place to unwind and relax after a day on the mountain

“Places for rent were booked up the entire winter season and there we were, a family of six, with no place to stay,” says Loy, Taylor’s Education Group CEO and president of Family Business Network Asia Ltd. So, when the management of a not-fully-ready apartment said they could use it and not complain if things did not work, they gladly did.

“As it turned out, everything in Japan works. We stayed there and my wife and I took turns to visit our daughter at the hospital. Eventually, we bought a unit in that block and it became our second home, a place we went back to every year during the holiday.

“We learnt how to ski and to enjoy skiing. We learnt that a ski vacation is when the family gets together in the apartment because it’s cold and you don’t want to hang outside too long. So, families stay together and do things together.”

In time, Loy’s four children outgrew the two-bedroom unit and he decided to build a house. While his wife wanted a bigger place that could accommodate more people, his only condition was it had to have great views.



Aspect Niseko, designed by Riccardo Tossani Architecture

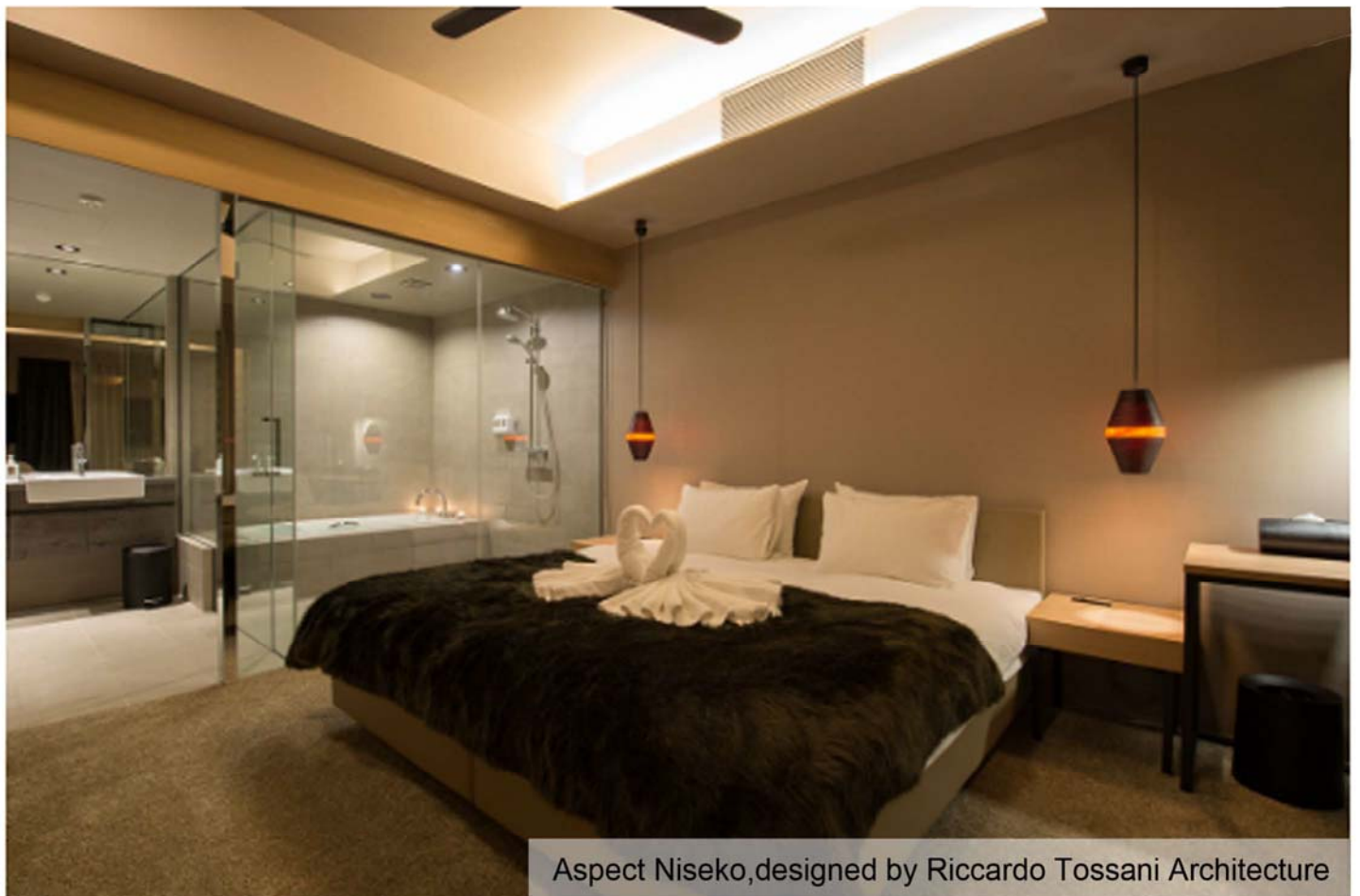
Awake from your slumber to the breathtaking view of Mt. Yotei

“I have a thing for views. I want to sit down, maybe have a morning coffee, a beer in the evening and just look out. Views are peaceful and therapeutic. When outside is cold and blustery, it feels really nice, safe and cosy,” he says.

They found a piece of land, a backpackers’ place on an escarpment overlooking Hirafu village, with Mount Yotei looming majestically right in front. To protect that view forever, Loy acquired the land at the base of the property so it would not be blocked by a new neighbouring building. He also bought up two small strips of land at the side that cost “next to nothing”.

His plan was to have a house with eight bedrooms so he could bring his large family there. All 21 of them live within the same compound in Kuala Lumpur and often vacation together.

But the architect suggested erecting an apartment block, and placing his house at the top. Sell the units below, make your money and own the penthouse for free, he told Loy. It was an exceptional deal.



Aspect Niseko, designed by Riccardo Tossani Architecture

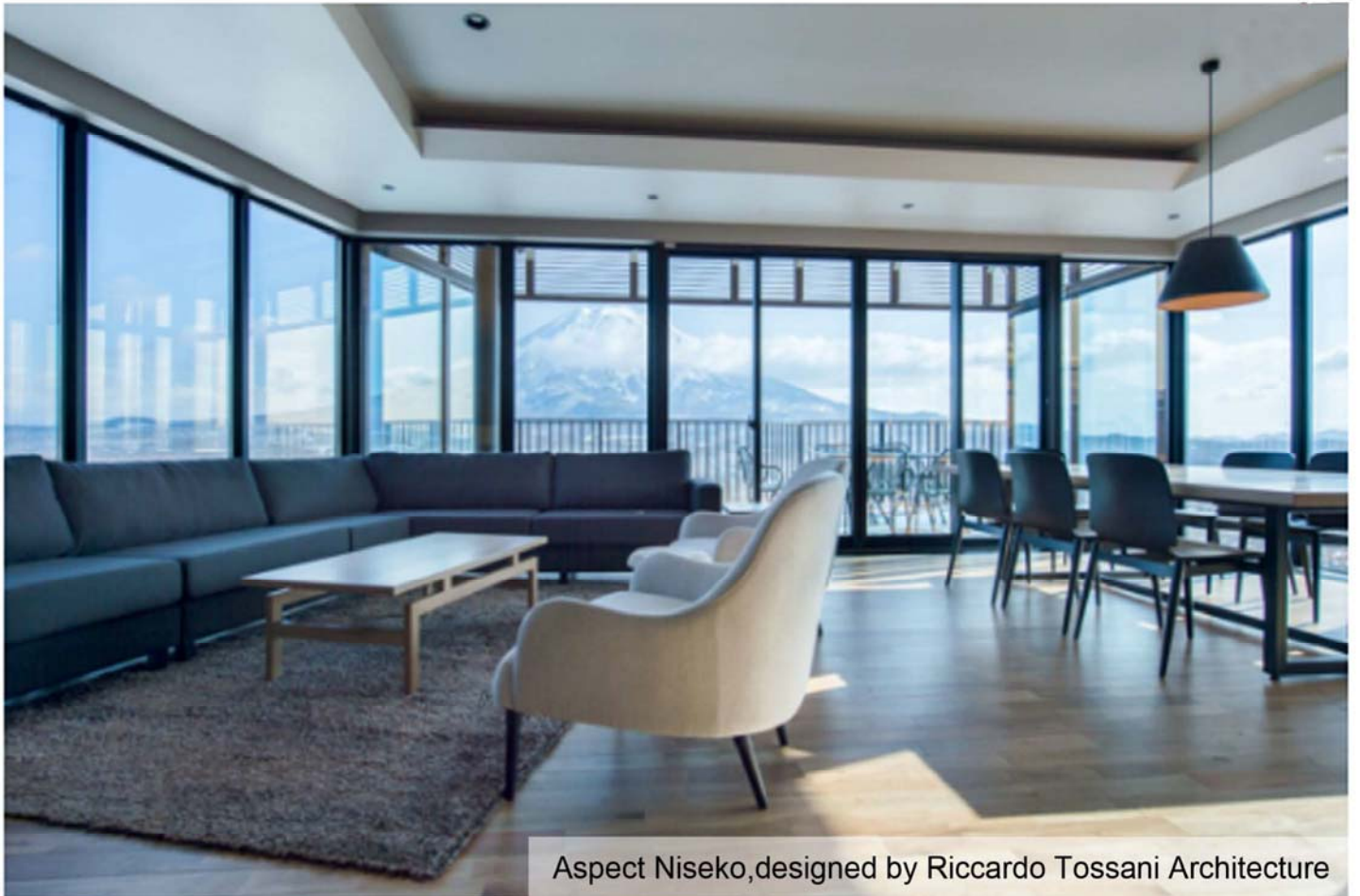
Bedrooms with attached en-suite bathrooms with bath tubs for a relaxing soak after a tiring day in Niseko.

“That was how from an accident on a ski trip, I got a piece of land. I wanted to build a house but eventually it became an apartment block,” Loy says.

Design needs to be balanced by function and efficiency, he believes. It struck him that eight rooms were far too many if he visited Aspect with only his wife. Also, as the children grew up, the family would go on holiday at different times.

Guided by need, he redesigned Aspect to facilitate the way they like to live on a holiday. The penthouse morphed into three interconnected apartments with two, three and three bedrooms. Each unit has its own living and dining rooms and kitchen, so three families could have privacy and still be connected. Loy made similar changes to the other floors as well.

Today, Aspect has 11 keys and 30 bedrooms built across four levels, with amazing vistas of hill and vale. The apartments can be reconfigured to five bedrooms for bigger groups when needed, and still feel private and personal in a building that is basically a community, he says.



Aspect Niseko, designed by Riccardo Tossani Architecture

Comfortable open-concept dining and living areas with impressive panoramic views of Mt. Yotei _ the Hirafu ski hill

The comfort and convenience of guests influenced design again when Loy, who had to wake his children early for ski school, dress them, lug their stuff up the slopes, then rush to his own lessons, often found himself tired before his day began. He brought his helper along to Niseko to help out. To accommodate Asians with larger families who might also want to travel with their helpers, he designed rooms with bunk beds for them.

Heavy lifting of ski boots, snowboards, poles and a host of other things was a chore too, he found, so Aspect introduced ski concierges to help make light work of that. Guests can change in their apartments, walk down and everything they need on the slopes is there, waiting.

It is always the service guests remember most, he believes. For a few years now, Aspect has been hiring students from Taylor's University's school of hospitality, tourism and events, who have learnt the basics and are comfortable with strangers, as interns.

"I think that has [taken] the level of service to a totally different plane," says Loy, who credits his staff for the awards Aspect — so named because of its many angles and modern, minimalist design — has garnered yearly since 2019.



Aspect Niseko, designed by Riccardo Tossani Architecture

External façade facing Mt. Niseko-Annupuri

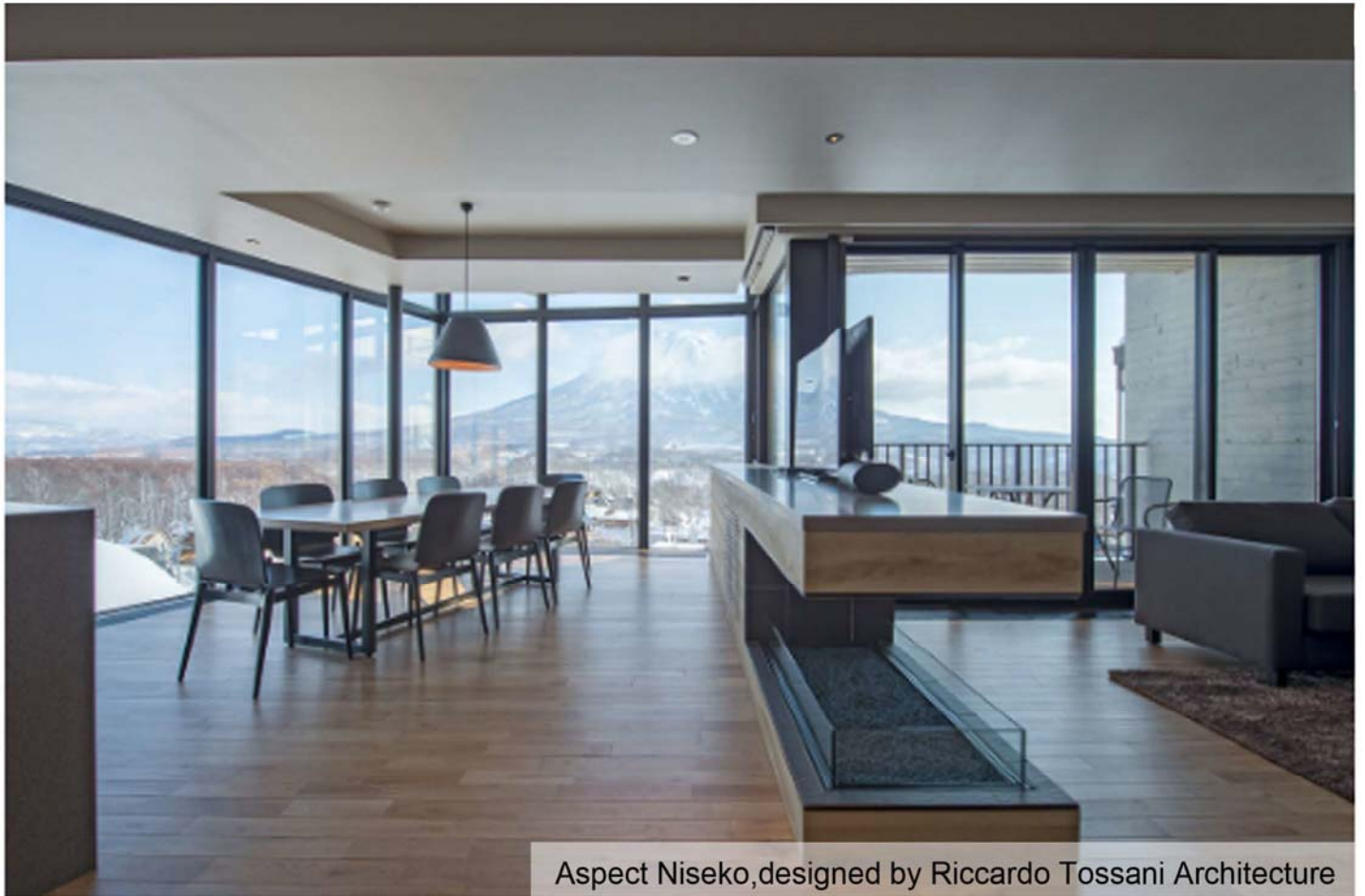
“The staff have done something fantastic — it’s all their effort and work. People can always put money into a beautifully designed place. The things that set it apart are fantastic facilities and great service.”

At the end of the day, the brand’s prime attraction is its location — a quick walk to restaurants serving delicious cuisine, and 270-degree views of Mount Yotei, ever-changing through the seasons, and different from morning to night.

“I never get tired of looking at it,” Loy says. “When I wake up and turn around, there is a huge window and I see the mountain in front. In winter and summer, the colours are different.”

The pandemic has taught him, a newcomer in the resort business, to “make sure you have very little debt if you don’t have revenue coming in”. It has also given him time to think about what he wants to do next.

The summer season has become bigger than winter, he notes, especially in places like Hokkaido, where the food (beef and milk products) is good, the air clean and the weather perfect for golfing. Cycling is big and there’s also fishing. Or, visitors can rent a car and drive around.



Aspect Niseko, designed by Riccardo Tossani Architecture

Floor-to-ceiling windows providing impressive panoramic views of both Mt. Yotei and the Hirafu ski hill.

Loy is looking at other places in Hokkaido to invest in. Another ski resort might be an opportunity to grow Aspect into a chain of resort properties, small enough to be intimate and have a family feel to it. At some point, they might build some to sell, retain some and manage the rest.

Looking at how Aspect Niseko grew organically, he wants to take it slow and enjoy the journey.

“This has been a project that was fun to do. I didn’t go into it because we saw the chance to make money in a rising market. It wasn’t business-led but family-oriented. I was focused on how I wanted to use the space but the project just got bigger and bigger.”

He hopes to find the same winning features for his next property. A quiet spot slightly off the main road with a fantastic view would be awesome. A place just coming up, like Niseko 10 years ago, would see lower prices. “And if we build something, it will be a point of difference.”

Snow holidays have become a lifestyle and people tend to go for longer holidays, at least two weeks, Loy observes. In the last five years, 680 ski resorts have opened in China. The more there are, the more affordable they will be.