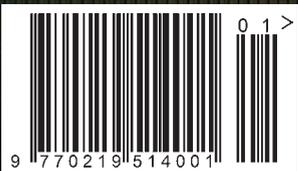


DESIGNERS OF THE YEAR TANG GUAN BEE AND CHAN SAU YAN SONNY  
HANSHA REFLECTION HOUSE NAGOYA JAPAN BY STUDIO SKLIM  
HOUSE AT BUKIT TIMAH SINGAPORE BY RT+Q  
VILLA-A NAGANO JAPAN BY SATOSHI OKADA  
THE ALL-NEW SPACE ASIA HUB BY WOHA  
preview THE FLOWER DOME at Gardens by the Bay

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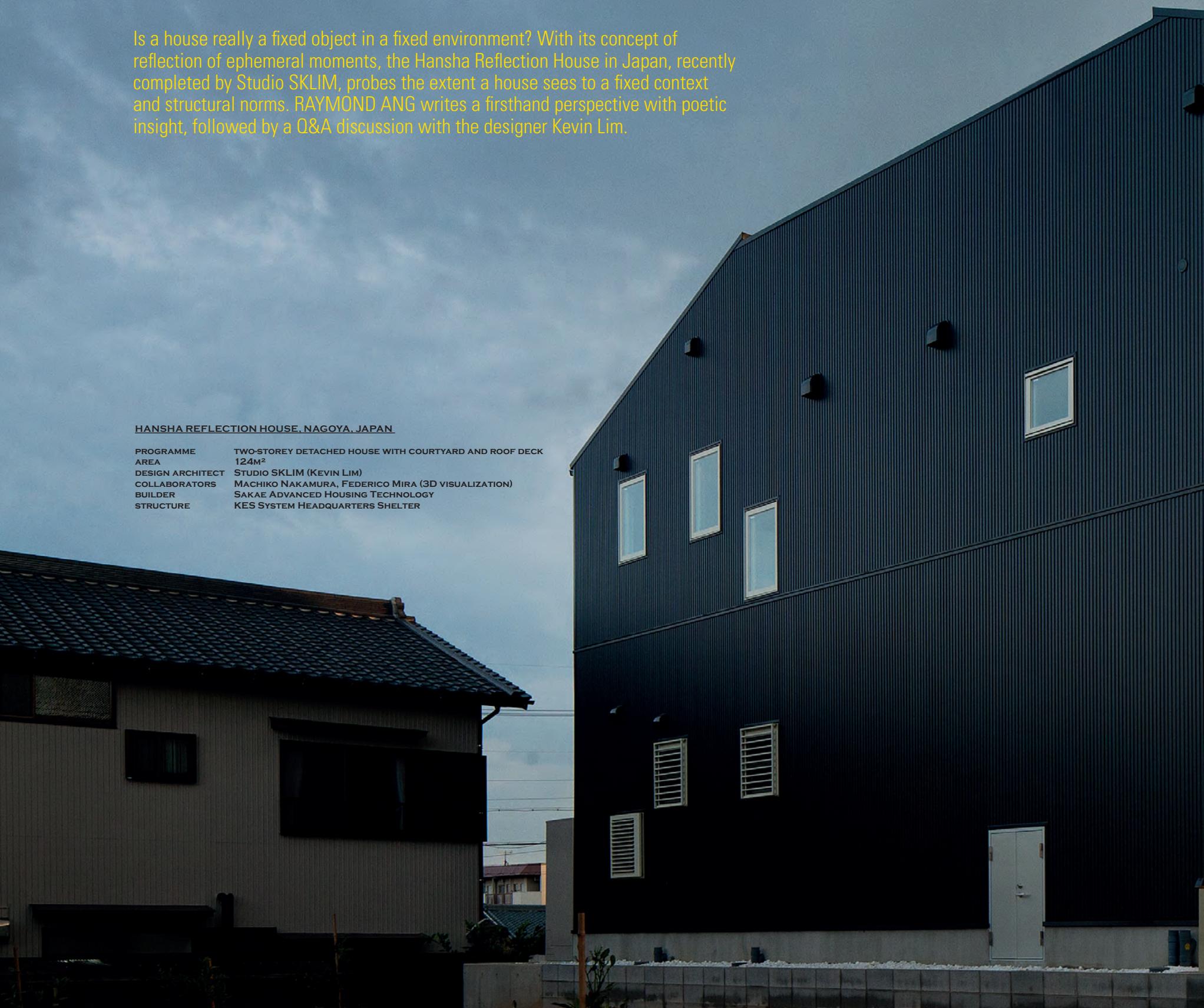
# a house seen and seeing

BY RAYMOND ANG | PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEREMY SAN

Is a house really a fixed object in a fixed environment? With its concept of reflection of ephemeral moments, the Hansha Reflection House in Japan, recently completed by Studio SKLIM, probes the extent a house sees to a fixed context and structural norms. RAYMOND ANG writes a firsthand perspective with poetic insight, followed by a Q&A discussion with the designer Kevin Lim.

## HANSHA REFLECTION HOUSE, NAGOYA, JAPAN

PROGRAMME	TWO-STOREY DETACHED HOUSE WITH COURTYARD AND ROOF DECK
AREA	124M <sup>2</sup>
DESIGN ARCHITECT	STUDIO SKLIM (KEVIN LIM)
COLLABORATORS	MACHIKO NAKAMURA, FEDERICO MIRA (3D VISUALIZATION)
BUILDER	SAKAE ADVANCED HOUSING TECHNOLOGY
STRUCTURE	KES SYSTEM HEADQUARTERS SHELTER



**I** drive along a ubiquitous row of houses in suburban Nagoya. The Hansha Reflection House strikes me strongly with its projected overhang. Three cars parked under fully explain its column-free front.

As a result, living spaces are lifted to the 2nd storey and higher up, to the open roof deck. Programmatically, three distinct zones organize this house – ‘Public’ in front (storage, library, living room), ‘Service’ in the middle (stairs and airwell), and ‘Private’ at the back (bedrooms).

In a classic relationship-play between scenic foreground and form, Studio SKLIM visually connected larger spaces contained in the 2nd floor projecting form, towards *Misakimizube Koen*. Up a ladder from 2nd storey, soon I am standing on a landscaped open-air roof deck, sensory connection to low-rise surrounds.

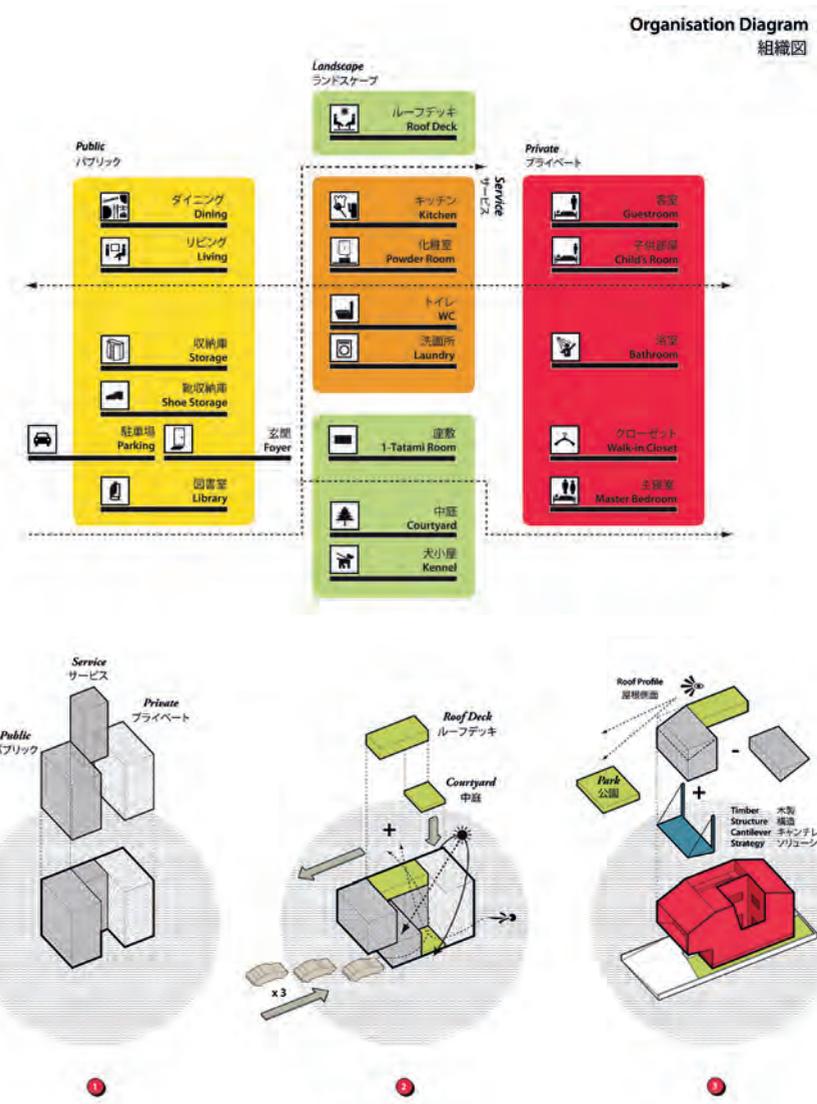
I look down the adjacent airwell. A vertical breathing void, it links all levels within the house massing. On the ground floor opposite this airwell is a Nagoya 1-tatami-sized room in quiet juxtaposition. I think, ‘...this is where I may sit, have a drink, a read, keenly aware of nature’s change of daylight and seasons...’

Inclined surfaces for rain drainage and snowfall, daylight concerns interacting with the timber frame structure of this house, chisel the outer form – a stark black galvanium-panel clad *camera obscura*-like object in stark contrast to the neighborhood’s subtle grays.

Gazing intently through its projected glazed frontage, articulated by its indents, two sides aloof to its neighbours with non-descript small openings to emphasize its unwavering frontality, the house sits in quiet survey of the lake waters, waiting to capture through its lens fleeting ephemerality of Sakura blooms that flank the lake and garden opposite.

Timber is viewed as more pragmatic for small scale construction, in terms of handy industrial sizes and cost. In many parts of the world, timber is preferred for low-rise structures. Attributes include high strength-to-weight ratio, and plant fibres being more pliant than brittle concrete. Timber is more suited for earthquake prone areas like Japan where the Hansha Reflection House sits.





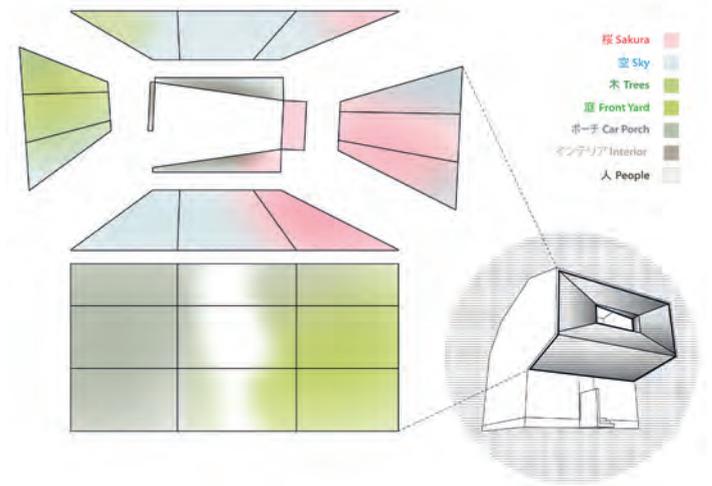
Of note is the year-long struggle by Studio SKLIM, the Engineer and Builder, in refining the house's timber frame cantilever, to a final figure of 3.2m over the 3-car parking space – a feat, given the 1.5m norm. From a simple premise of a basic truss, it became a constant year-long straddle between twin structural ideas – of book-shelf bracketing and tensile bridge construction. 'Cantilever' as an idea was pushed to a new reasoned limit. Result – a new structural basis that underwrites a new level of spatial freedom for the family to explore, and grow in facing family life complexities.

As I move downstairs, I now become more aware of light/dark contrasts. White walls and vertical spaces bring out the full diffusion of sunlight, a feeling of lightness and movement, in airwell and living room space, kitchen and

dining. In contrast, of contemplative dark timber walls are library and entry – darkened lustre enhanced by careful spotlight placements and small windows.

Upon house entry, in an alcove display of dark timber, seasonal objects selectively placed under spotlight catch your eye; a reminder of time's passage in a subtle yet unmistakable way. Beyond, as you sit in the 1-tatami room, its surrounding empty dark timber surfaces lend a mindful repose, all the more manifest in contrast with the 'diurnal energy' of airwell space opposite.

On toilet walls, gold leaf *appliqué*, surely garish in full light, through a small window, picks up struggling rays of low light to envelope your privacy in classy sheen – not unlike gold leaf *kirikane* on black lacquer screens (circa *Heian* era) that appear best in dim light bygone days before electricity.



'Reflection' off slanted stainless steel panel surfaces of the cantilevered space, surely is designed as more than just physical appearance, you think. As you gaze out, you are also gazed. A physical image, or a mental condition that flows from that image seen? And isn't the exterior's passing of time, the Sakura tree blooms and wither – nature's ephemerality, not your reflection in time, not yourself gazing back at you, in your habitat? Whose reflection are you?

So, a cascade of thoughts emerge in you, dear Inhabitant, sitting in your Habitat – of contrastive relations between extroverted form/introspective personal space, of one-point of personal cognition/two-point perspective via flat reflection/onto 3-dimensional interior space/onto fourth dimension of time that links exterior to interior, as existence

evolves...this house asks that you think with your mind's eye. The Architect as Artist as Philosopher, and his counterpart the Intellectual Inhabitant – this relationship surely underpin emergence of these Questions that lead ultimately to basic ideas of House and Existence. So your mind grips... And what physical formula must emerge to rationalize answering of all these? Surely the raw black house form, yet highly contrastive light careening off steel panels, and yet the coy normalcy of life within, is a juggling act to thread this dissimilar fleet of meanings present in everyday life of this house to stimulate the mind's eye? You ponder.

A house, by nature of private lives within, is highly personal, as opposed to generic public spaces that cater to a common denominator of masses. In other words, a sweeping view of impersonal humanity. Any notable house

by the great architects has a 'house personality', despite in same breath, their sweeping proclamations of universal design values. *A house is a machine for living in* (Corbusier). Yet – *All fine architectural values are human values, else not valuable* (Frank Lloyd Wright). Clearly Studio SKLIM wanted to bridge these two ideals here.

Leaving this house, you have no doubt Studio SKLIM has aimed even further beyond. An Architect's paean for artistry of human life and mental values, this rarefied pursuit to capture the subliminal Art of human 'Reflection' stands clear to you. *Architecture can be lived in, moved around in, and simultaneously ignored* (cultural theorist Frederic Jameson). However, in the Hansha Reflection House, from narrations by the family, you sense its deeper relevance is never seen, but always felt.



conditions explicit in a new light. Banal is almost a word associated with another B-word – boring, which challenges architects/designers to over create. Architects have increased pressure to create and perhaps overly complicate things. At Studio SKLIM, Banal could be Beautiful by relooking at spaces in a new perspective. For example, most modern Japanese houses have done away with the tatami-room due to changes in cultural rituals. We have shrunk that concept from the common four-and-a-half mats to just a single mat in a cosy niche overlooking the courtyard.

**Certain design methods underpin your design process, surely. How do they affect its current and future usage?**

Learning by observation, and pragmatics as a design tool are predominant in my design process. We are surrounded by a complex built environment and this design solution tries to tackle these complexities in the most obvious way instead of shrouding them with metaphorical ideologies. The fundamental question was how to navigate a habitat on a modest site facing the larger context of a park and surroundings? Our answer – an elevated viewing platform cum sculpture that serves as an extension of the park for all seasons, which also happens to be a house! Pushing the program upwards was pragmatic as it solved the problem of parking for three cars, and provided a better view of the park.

Shifting scales down to interiors involved a shifting of sensitivity to the human scale informed by cultural and lifestyle rituals but in a new orchestrated way. Residential design should always cater for flexibility and evolution. Here, we created spaces that would serve the family well for next 50 years, and for various seasonal cycles. For examples, location of the master bedroom on the ground-floor in anticipation of later years, slope of internal courtyard form to optimize daylight during winter, and having south-facing roof slopes for future accommodation of solar panels, etc, all fundamentally very practical but involve re-thinking as design elements. +

**In contemporary Japan, houses and offices are often full of personal items, yet temples and tea spaces are 'empty' – polarities you surely noticed. How did you address that?**

Polarities of 'emptiness versus full' could be likened to the sequence of compression and expansion of spaces in the house. With areas of contemplation such as the 1-tatami room facing the courtyard placed in close proximity to the manga filled bookshelf of the library, and the low, dark and narrow entrance opening up to the bright double volume space, there has been a careful orchestration of these moments that allow polarities to juxtapose, exist and enhance each other by oppositional quality in the same space. Perhaps quite similar to macro urban conditions that you are talking about. Acceptance of pluralism seems to be a nonchalant aspect of Japanese life.

**This house seems to be 'assembled' and 'crafted'. How do such processes define your space 'making'?**

Japanese modules and building systems have an extensive network of interrelated modular dimensions, from bathroom fittings to façade cladding that is country specific. It is a learning curve for any foreign company to execute an architectural fit-out in Japan, for instance – most items are smaller and follow a 910mm module. The process of

'making' is perhaps a more suitable word to describe the construction process in Japan as there is the connotation of crafting something of quality. Such perfect wall-plastering applied by hands of a 70-year old worker! We 'make' the house spaces through many physical models, sketches, drawings and mock ups, as architecture can only be grasped as an abstraction before built. Critically, I needed to be sure amidst all the cultural, language and working method differences. To achieve this extensive timber cantilever involved several tests and computer simulations by the timber structural engineer as well.

**This architecture is unanimously without stylistic features, which are seemingly banished by certain strong primary design impetus...**

I think of our work more as virtual archaeology rather than architecture, uncovering aspects that are already there or too banal to the common eye...

**Archeology...? Banality...? Please elaborate.**

'Archeology' rediscovers material which leads to an understanding of human lifestyle during past periods. We rediscover parameters associated with the existing, in this case conditions such as sightlines, seasonal variations and building methodology. We try to make these