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PRAGMATISM WITH A TWIST

THIS HOUSE IN NAGOYA BY **STUDIO SKLIM** INTERACTS WITH ITS SITE IN THE MOST UNEXPECTED WAYS.

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STAND OUT:
*The dramatic cantilever
was achieved with a
hybrid structural solution*

THINK OF CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE MATERIAL CULTURE of any genre and two dominant impressions might come to mind – on the one hand, quiet restraint; and on the other, wacky inventiveness. The realm of Japanese residential architecture contains no shortage of abodes that present one or both tendencies.

It is fair to ponder the degree to which social and cultural factors inform the design of many Japanese homes – be they characterised by meditative minimalism or crazy urban contortions on tiny plots. Drawing conclusions about what feeds such recognisable design tendencies is a risky business though, as it inherently involves the making of assumptions. So what might be expected (or not) if a foreign designer were to create a house for a local family on a comfortably sized site in a quiet Japanese suburb?

Kevin Lim, a Singaporean architectural designer and principal of *Studio SKLIM*, was commissioned to design a house in Nagoya for a well-travelled Japanese couple, their ten-year-old son, and their pets (a cat and dog). Judging by the self-assertiveness of its dramatically cantilevered, reflective steel-clad frontage,



↑ **VIEWFINDER:**
This reflective house makes a bold statement

↓ **BLACKOUT:**
The side elevation contains strategically placed openings





you'd be forgiven for thinking that the house does not necessarily have a characteristically Japanese appearance. However, behind the high-performance reflectivity of the façade, another story – that of privacy and contemplative subtlety – is revealed.

Lim sees the house as being something “between Japanese and foreign,” and the approach with which he sculpted it is fascinating for its considered manoeuvres. He consciously elected not to reinterpret the philosophies or mimic the styles of existing Japanese architecture, (Although, some of its traditions did influence the technology and spatial composition of the house.) Rather, he authored a building form that would be specific to the site and his clients' brief, achieved via a process of programmatic composition and diagramming.

Lim refers to his design process as “super pragmatism,” which firstly, investigates practical aspects in a functional and analytical manner; but that secondly, caters for design deviations through the abstractions of the process itself. That is to say, the actual process of diagramming can generate design inspirations and design tools.

↑ **INTROSPECTIVE VIEW:**
The one-tatami-mat room looks to the courtyard

↓ **GUARD HOUSE:**
The family's pet dog is catered for at the porch



It's an approach used for all the work of the Singapore- and Tokyo-based Studio SKLIM. “The image, imagery, or the metaphorical is never part of the initial design process in our projects,” says Lim. “Our initial investigations are more archaeology than architecture. We try to discover what exists now and how these conditions could be harnessed toward the future conditions of the inhabitants.”

The *Hansha Reflection House* was the first project undertaken by Studio SKLIM in Japan. It shimmers conspicuously on its suburban street, deviating markedly from its static, grey-brown, pitched-roof neighbours. Its cantilevered, metal-clad form seems to be stretching earnestly towards something opposite it while the set of inclined stainless steel panels on the front façade bounce the day's colours back toward the street.

These exhibitionistic panels project outward from a central window. Evidently, there is an important vantage point within the house. Indeed, across the street is Misakimizube Koen – a popular and picturesque park where one can sit beneath *sakura* (cherry blossom) trees and gaze over a lake. It was the presence of these

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↑ **BRIGHT WHITE:**
*The private
courtyard
dissipates hot
summer air via
the stack effect*

← **CROSSING
THRESHOLDS:**
*The view from the
library past planes
of walnut veneer
and the elongated
genken*

THE SHELL OF
THE HOUSE FUNCTIONS
AS A MIRROR,
A VIEWFINDER, AND
A FILTER – CAPTURING,
GRANTING, AND
CONTROLLING
VIEWS IN AND OUT



←
READ ME:
*A bookshelf for
manga extends
beyond the library*

environmental features, and the intention to engage the occupants with their ephemeral moments (largely through reflections), which drove the design of the abode. The house was conceived, says Lim, as an object with – rather than in – its environment.

Lim's clients (a salary man and a housewife) wished to capitalise on their park views, but were concerned about compromising their privacy. Other desires, including parking space for three cars and a courtyard, led Lim to organise the house into three zones (public, service, and private), with a landscape element (comprising front yard, courtyard, and roof deck) punctuating the main massing. "This base form was further chiselled with structural daylight, ventilation, and viewpoint concerns," he explains.

The kitchen, dining, and living areas were pushed upstairs to harness an elevated view of the park, while freeing up space below for car parking. The central window – or lens – of the front façade punctuates this zone, and was developed in a way that would enhance the occupants' appreciation of their context without fully exposing them to the gaze of park users.

While the external steel-clad aperture reflects views of the park context back outwards, a narrower reflective window surround re-reflects glimpses



←
UNFOLDED VIEW:
Glimpses of the park infiltrate the dining area upstairs



→
TEXTURED SHEEN:
Golden wallpaper brings warmth to the powder room

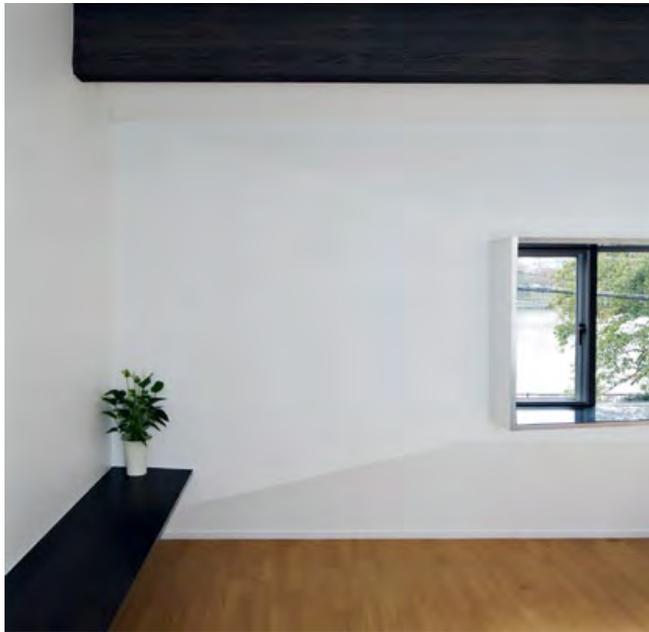
of the environment into the house. Also reflected, of course, are the car porch, the parked cars, and the occupants themselves as they come and go. With the resolve of a scientist, Lim diagrammed and investigated all of these possibilities.

Meanwhile, small windows in the unbroken side façade present an apparently random pattern. These too, however, have been positioned with intent – specifically, to admit light for, and offer glimpses of, particular domestic activities while granting the occupants views outside. The windows sit within a blacked-out skin of Galvanium (alloy) cladding. Angled wall/roof planes shun rain and snow, and gutters are concealed.

The shell of the house functions as a mirror, a viewfinder, and a filter – capturing, granting, and controlling views in and out. On the whole, the exterior was detailed for cleanliness of form – as though it were a low-resolution image. Lim’s aim was to relate the house exterior to the scale of the larger context and preserve the impact of the reflections as they change through the seasons.

The interior has more to do with “texture, sheen, and exposing certain glimpses of the structure,” explains Lim. Contemplative, walnut-veneer-clad spaces of an intimate scale open up into loftier ones, culminating in the courtyard, which also serves to dissipate hot summer air through the stack effect. It is lined with white Galvanium, which distinguishes it from the public face of the house. Flanking it are a library (housing an extensive

↓ **FOCAL POINTS:**
*Lake views are balanced by
the horizontality of an exposed
beam and TV console*



collection of *manga* books), the master bedroom at ground level, and the living area and other bedrooms upstairs.

Also adjacent to the courtyard at ground level is what Lim calls a “hybrid space” – a one-tatami-mat room that allows for reflectivity of an introspective variety. “Changes in cultural practices have made the tatami room dispensable,” he explains, “and the clients did not really need one. Besides, we did not have space for the typical 4.5-tatami-mat room.” He found space for a smaller incarnation, and partially explains its presence through the inherent desire of the foreign designer to justify the local context.

In another instance, a traditional domestic space with lingering relevance – the *genkan*, or foyer, where shoes are removed before entering the house proper – was modified to suit the clients’ needs (or rather, those of the canine member of the family). “We elongated the *genkan* to allow the dog access from the courtyard to the exterior without stepping over the threshold of the house,” reveals Lim.

One of the most significant manners in which local practices influenced the design was in the type of building technology adopted. A timber structure was selected for its cost effectiveness (65 per cent of single-family houses in Japan use this method). However, this choice presented a problem when it came to the cantilever. Initially, a cantilevered timber-truss floor was proposed, but this would have added too much dead weight to the projected structure. The considerable depth of the cantilever necessitated a hybrid structural response.

“Taking inspiration from tensile bridges and the typical domestic wall-hung bookshelf, the solution involved diagonal bracing and a triangular wooden strut at the base of the cantilever,” says Lim. A hybrid of sustainably sourced timber (with traditional mortise and tenon joints) and steel bracketing provided the solution.



↑ **PURPOSEFUL FIT:**
*A singular timber
column was
exposed to reveal
the materiality of
the structure*

Lim is keenly anticipating how the Hansha Reflection House will respond to and engage with the first *sakura* festival since its completion in 2011. Already, the house attracts the wondrous stares of children from a nearby elementary school, who have been overheard referring to it as the “*kakkoii* house” (“cool house”). When a flutter of pink petals appears at Misakimizube Koen, the students will no doubt be joined by a number of park-goers in admiring the reflections from the street while the house’s occupants contemplate them discretely from the living room. ♦

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