

Project

Terrace House Near Demachiyanagi

Architect

Atelier Luke

Review by Julian Worrall
Photography by Yohei Sasakura

This diminutive Japanese-Australian architectural hybrid reconstitutes the fabric of the original townhouse in a respectful yet compelling way, creating spaciousness as much through darkness as through light.





↶ Atelier Luke's contemporary yet respectful design for Terrace House Near Demachiyanaagi includes a restored lattice window that enables views of the street from the loft.

↑ Despite its diminutive site, the house incorporates a sliver of indoor garden between the living area and the laneway.

↗ Sliding screens at the rear form an adjustable interface and bring an Australian sensibility to the house by opening it to the semipublic domain.

→ The grey cement render used for the floor and bounding walls seems to extend the exterior indoors.

Machiya are the townhouses that historically housed the merchants and artisans who crowded into the densely packed urban quarters that today make up the commercial heart of Japanese cities. Constructed in timber, plaster and tile, typically two storeys high and set on deep but narrow plots, these residences often included a semipublic zone, adjacent to the street, bounded by lattice screens for commercial display or artisanal manufacture. They gave traditional Japanese townscapes their finely wrought, softly porous quality.

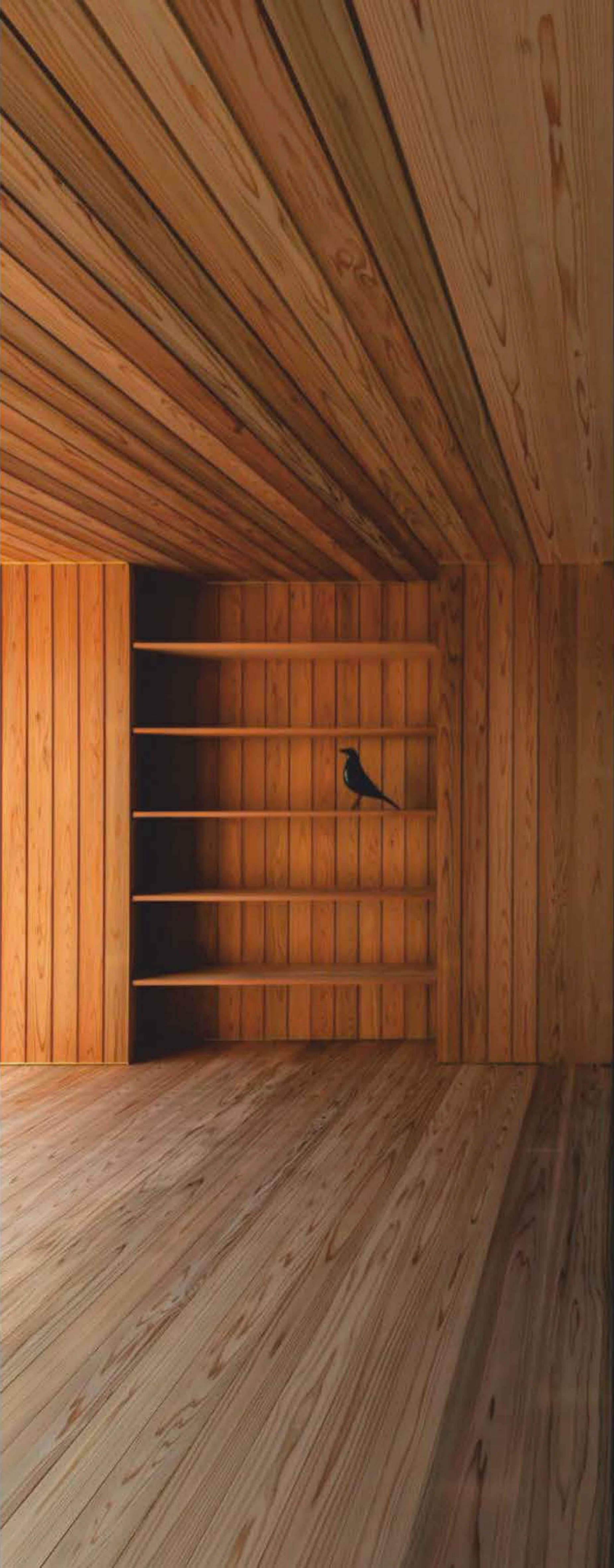
In the latter half of the twentieth century, this typology was rapidly abandoned. Sometimes erased through disaster or war, but more typically through property economics and changing planning and construction codes, *machiya* were replaced by multistorey constructions in steel or concrete, often within the tight confines of the original plot to form so-called “pencil buildings.” Consequently, the streets of Kyoto, whose reputation as a living museum of traditional Japanese culture attracts tens of millions of tourists a year, look very similar to those of Tokyo, even though Tokyo’s urban fabric has been largely destroyed twice in the past century – first by earthquake in 1923, then by war in 1945. However, in the twenty-first century, efforts to recover and recuperate *machiya* have gained pace, with architects often leading these efforts.

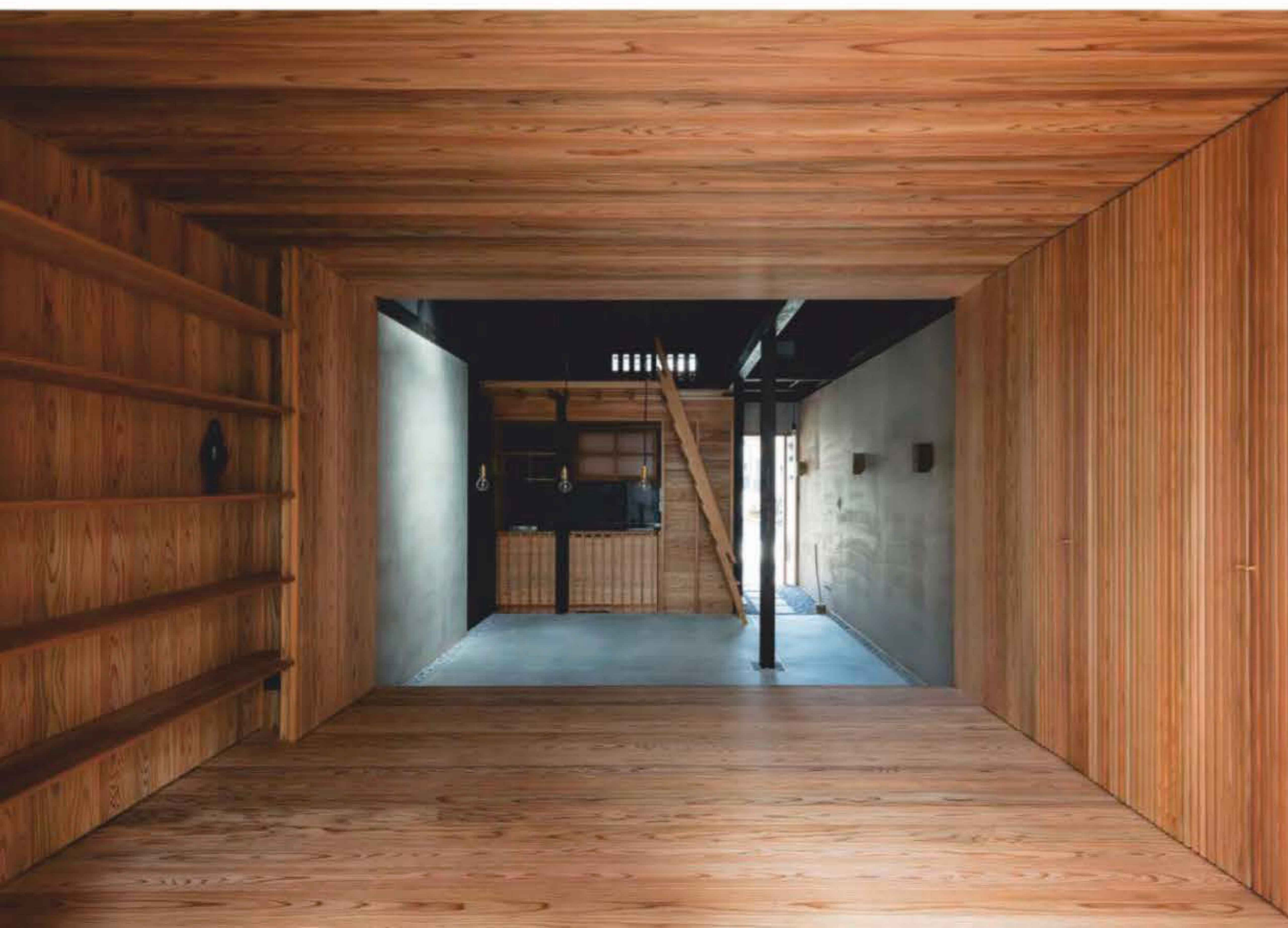
One such effort is Terrace House Near Demachiyanaagi, a renovation of a Kyoto *machiya* executed by Atelier Luke, a young partnership based in Osaka comprising Australian architect Luke Hayward and Japanese interior designer Junko Nakatsuka. The result is an exquisite demonstration of the potency of careful, adaptive reuse, when a respect for the basic fabric of the original is combined with a contemporary interpretation of the aesthetic and social universe that animated its existence. It also represents a model of a Japanese–Australian architectural hybrid.

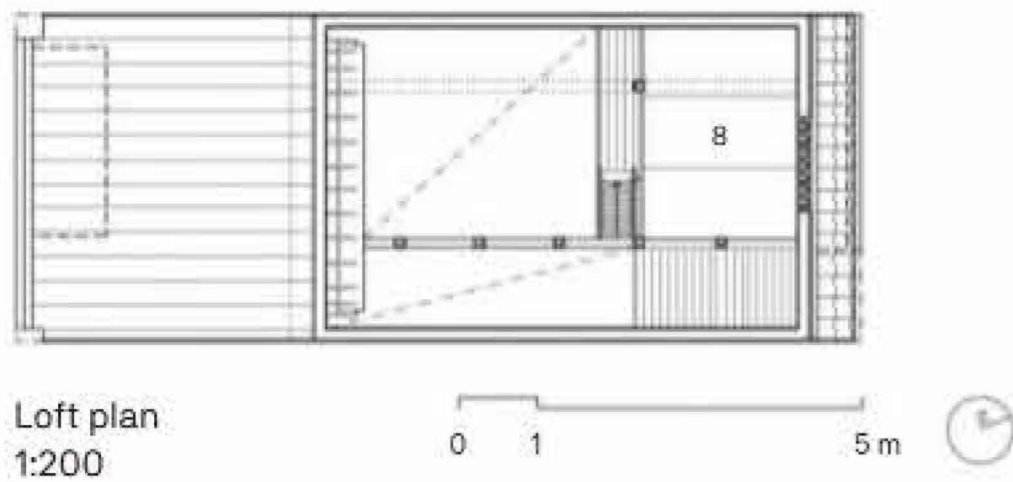
The original dwelling was constructed after World War II on a diminutive site of four-by-ten metres between two narrow roads – part of a block of similar houses. A number of modifications and minor additions had accumulated over the years; however, the basic structure was intact. The architect’s approach was to strip back the house to its essential skeleton and reconstitute the space of the dwelling through interventions that are clearly distinguished from the existing fabric. The robust timber members of the roof structure were exposed and stained black, creating a darkened upper realm, while the ground plane and bounding walls were finished in a neutral grey cement render, conceptually extending the exterior indoors.

Two timber boxes, finely crafted from Japanese cedar sourced from the Yoshino region of Nara, were then inserted into this purified volume, like large-scale furniture elements. The box to the front contains the bathroom and the kitchen and, above, a sleeping space accessed by a steep, ladder-like stair. With its detailing in batten and shiplap, the space alludes to the patterns of traditional *machiya* exteriors. The other box, smoother and more contemporary, is sleeved into the rear of the existing volume like a rectangular tube. Its raised timber floor, embedded shelving and concealed storage spaces provide a flexible living area that opens onto a tiny indoor garden and the laneway beyond.

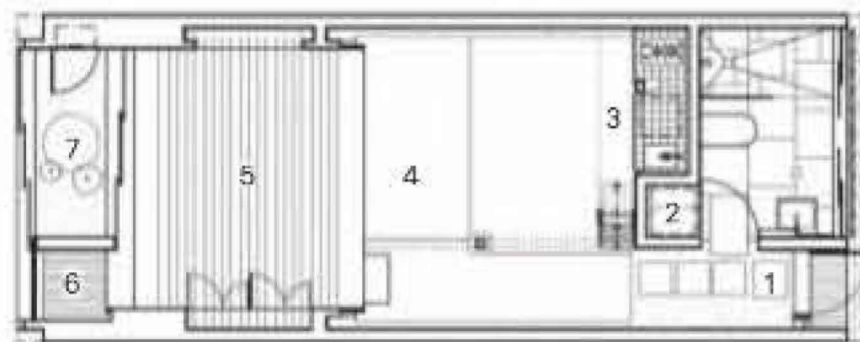
The major moves of the design can be understood as responses to the limited dimensions of the plot; they seek to increase and enrich the sense of depth and spaciousness. The first impulse has been to work with shadows rather than light to shape spatial experience. The inevitable source here is Jun’ichirō Tanizaki’s *In Praise of Shadows*, a classic text that has become so ubiquitous in architects’ discussions of traditional Japanese aesthetics that Hayward acknowledges that it is “a bit cliché.” But the contrast



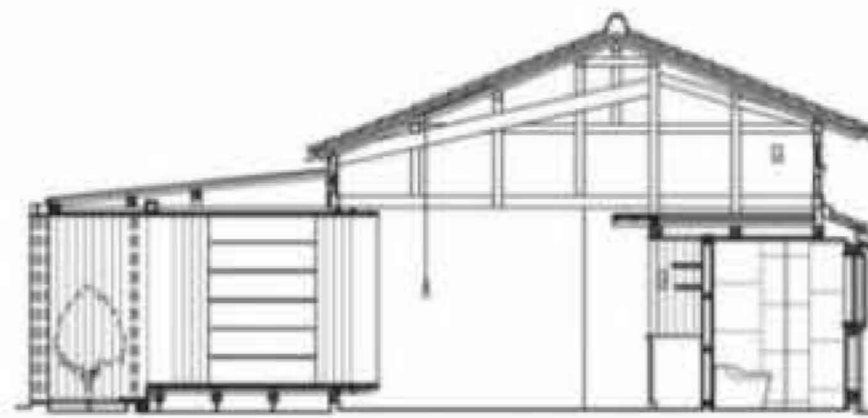




Loft plan
1:200



Ground floor plan
1:200



Section
1:200

Key

- 1 Entry
- 2 Laundry
- 3 Kitchen
- 4 Dining
- 5 Living
- 6 Bicycle store
- 7 Courtyard
- 8 Bedroom

with the Australian celebration of light nonetheless provided a potent design stimulus. “In Japan,” Hayward says, “there is the opportunity to embrace shadows and void, and to create spaciousness through dark, instead of through light.”

The effect is compelling. Darkness envelops the upper reaches of the interior. Although two skylights draw a theatrical wash of light down into the well of the central space, the glare they generate only conspires to deepen the blackness of the roof cavity, rendering the higher reaches of the volume a void of indefinite depth and beguiling mystery. Glints of gold from brass fixtures penetrate the shadows, evoking gilded relics beneath temple roofs. Climbing the ladder to the tatami-matted sleeping loft is an ascent to a hidden eyrie. From one side of this secret retreat, the interior realm can be surveyed from on high; from the other, the life of the street can be spied through the restored *mushikomado* lattice window.

If the darkness of the roof cavity effectively extends spatial sensation vertically, the timber box to the rear expands it horizontally. Here, the spatial strategy moves from the phenomenological to the social realm, enabling the life of the dwelling to augment the semipublic domain of the rear lane. Paired sets of sliding screens – glazed on the interior panels, a fine *koshi* (traditional lattice) on the exterior – enclose the garden bed that marks the threshold between dwelling and street. Through various configurations, these *koshi* form an interface adjustable to season and occasion – drawing in winter sunlight and summer breezes; gently framing a serene indoor garden or opening up the interior completely to the street. In Hayward’s telling, this element represents a distinctively Australian response to the shuttered reserve that characterizes the streets of Japanese urban residential districts, in which all

is built hard to the boundary line and everything is “turned in on itself” – the result of an inordinate emphasis on privacy. “In Australia,” Hayward notes, “we instinctively do the opposite, and connect to the outside.”

Ironically, neither the delicate porosity of traditional *machiya*, with their latticed frontages, nor the landscape concept of *shakkei* (“borrowed views”) found in Japanese gardens, is evident in these tight urban environments. Hayward’s response has been to emphatically assert an openness to the exterior, not only to create a greater sense of spaciousness for the dwelling, but also “to create a different kind of engagement, and a different sense of what the street is.” Although rooted in Australian instincts, this intention aligns with a strand of local architectural thought that denounces the atrophy of publicness in Japanese urban environments.

It is tempting to claim that the values that give this project its quality – a refined sense of craftsmanship and material, and a sensitivity to place – are characteristic of the University of Tasmania, where Hayward completed his studies in 2009. But the project also demonstrates that the most resonant responses to place often stem from sustained encounters across distance.

— Julian Worrall is a professor of architecture at the University of Tasmania.

← While the darkness of the roof cavity appears to extend space vertically, the living room at the back of the house creates a sense of depth.

← Two timber boxes, finely crafted from Japanese cedar, have been inserted into the purified volume, much like large-scale furniture elements.

Architect Atelier Luke; Project team Naomi Murasaki, Junko Nakatsuka, Luke Hayward; Structural and services consultant Matsuhiko Construction