



TYPICALLY TOKYO

Junichi Sampei designed a concrete house that he wrapped in steel.

Text Cathelijne Nuijsink / Photos Kouichi Torimura



There is now a solution available for Japanese clients who are trying to decide between the certainty of a prefabricated catalogue house and the long, vague process of a unique home designed by an architect. These days, more and more mediators are appearing, bureaus that offer 'housing planning support' to ensure that the client ends up with an unusual house that is matched to his own lifestyle, but realized under the supervision of a coordinator who vouches for a rapid building process.

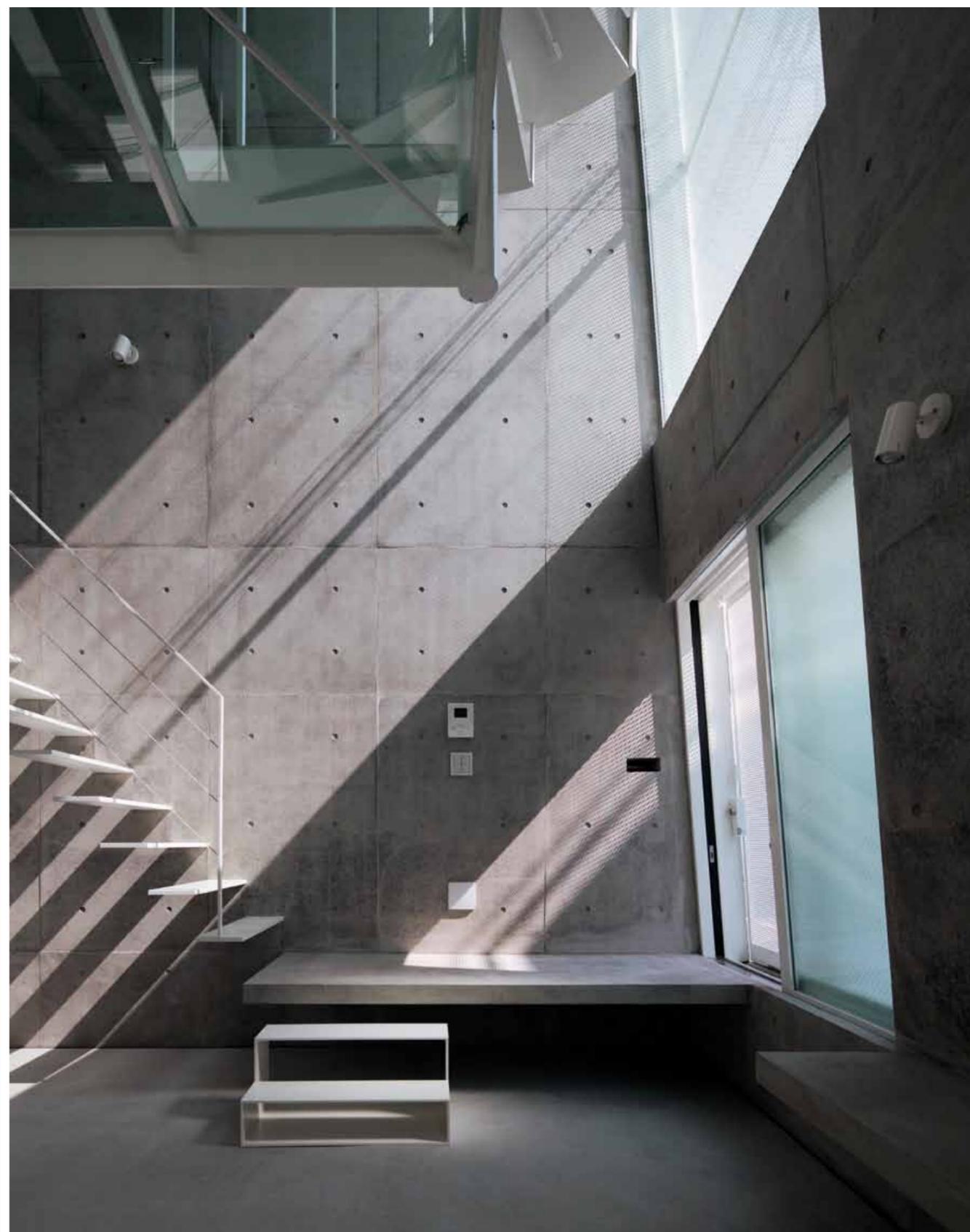
This is how 42-year-old Junichi Sampei of ALX received the commission for House Tokyo, situated in the residential neighbourhood near Mitaka station in west Tokyo. The clients, a young couple, called in mediation bureau Ozone. 'The client could select three architects based on their portfolio,' Sampei explains. 'After the coordinator made a detailed description of the clients' lifestyle, the selected architects took part in a mini-competition. It turned out our design was the clients' favourite, so we received the commission.'

Sampei has divided the living space over several levels. The building plot was only 44 m² in size, and furthermore only 70% could be built on, so he used the height to give the two occupants extra space for movement. He located the living room on the ground floor and a sheltered roof terrace on the ridge of the house. In between there is a bedroom, a bathroom and a closed box containing a hobby space and the future nursery. 'This closed box horizontally pierces the vertical interior,' says Sampei. 'The two rooms inside this box may look very private, but they actually keep in contact with the "public area" by means of openings and viewing holes.'

One sunny Sunday morning, the architect and I stand in front of the sterile, white façade and ring the doorbell beside a front door that borders immediately on the street. We take a single step and find ourselves standing in the *genkan*, the entrance area where shoes are removed. In just our socks we walk into the living room, which lies 50 cm below street level. 'Besides structural stability, the height difference provides a feeling of distance from the street,' says Sampei. 'Like a traditional Japanese pit house, House Tokyo has an unusual relationship with the street and that gives the clients a certain serenity; 50 cm is enough to make you feel at ease in the living room, even though it is situated so close to the street.'

Houses so close to the street usually cause problems in heavily-populated Tokyo. Often rented apartments on the ground floor are unoccupied or the residents keep the curtains permanently drawn on the street side. Sampei has effectively regulated privacy in House Tokyo by providing the external wall with an extra shell of steelplate, perforated where the windows are positioned. During the day, it is almost impossible to look in from outside, » while people on the inside manage to retain a certain outward view. Despite the fact that the house now looks »

HOUSE TOKYO'S STEEL SHELL IS PERFORATED WHERE THE WINDOWS ARE POSITIONED.



‘THIS HOUSE INCORPORATES TOKYO’S SPATIAL QUALITIES’

— Junichi Sampei —



closed from the outside, the interior has a surprisingly airy feel. The unusual height of the living space, glass floors and floating stairs clearly have an optically enlarging effect.

‘We tried several house-building companies, but just couldn’t find what we wanted,’ the young female resident tells us while she serves Japanese tea at the built-in concrete dining table. ‘Prefab houses contain too many things we didn’t want, and we weren’t even allowed to leave them out.’ The young couple told the mediating coordinator that they like the abstraction of Tadao Ando’s concrete architecture. But the last thing Sampei wanted was to make a copy of Ando’s iconic work. So he took the concrete wall just as a starting point and folded the thin white steel veil around it.

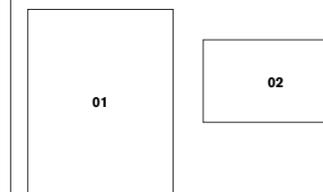
‘Our main request was to keep the communication with people on the street,’ explains the male client, a manga cartoon collector who has all his *Gundam* model figures on display in the hobby room. ‘We like to hear the sounds of people walking by, the local tofu seller whistling or children playing on the street. It makes us feel part of the city.’ Because of the warm weather, all

the windows are wide open during our visit and the sounds of the street can be experienced very clearly from the ground floor. But still no-one is bothered by it. For the inhabitants of Tokyo, it is a familiar feeling to live your life at a minimal distance from other people but still manage to feel comfortable in the situation.

‘Tokyo has a chaotic image because the city is interpreted too much from the exterior alone,’ says Sampei. ‘This house incorporates Tokyo’s spatial qualities.’ By calling the project ‘House Tokyo’, the architect refers to the typical circumstances of building in Tokyo that he does not wish to conceal but does try to soften. After all, no Tokyo architect can avoid the inevitably small building plot, the mandatory maximum building envelope and the slanting façade line required to ensure enough sunlight. ‘The site is so compact that we couldn’t even make a parking space and a living room on the ground floor,’ says Sampei. ‘Typically Tokyo. Fortunately, it is a city with a very well-organized public transport system so the owners, like many other Tokyoites, don’t suffer any inconvenience from not having a private parking space with a car.’

Back outside again, we conclude that the tight, abstract façade seems like a work of art in its surroundings, but at the same time it reconciles city and private life. Sampei: ‘It is a building that was adapted to the regulations and clearly shows this side of its character, but at the same time connects in a very friendly way to the ambient surroundings of this residential neighbourhood’. «

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01 THE LIVING ROOM LIES 50 CM BELOW STREET LEVEL.

02 HOUSE TOKYO IS SITUATED IN THE RESIDENTIAL NEIGHBOURHOOD NEAR MITAKA STATION IN WEST TOKYO.

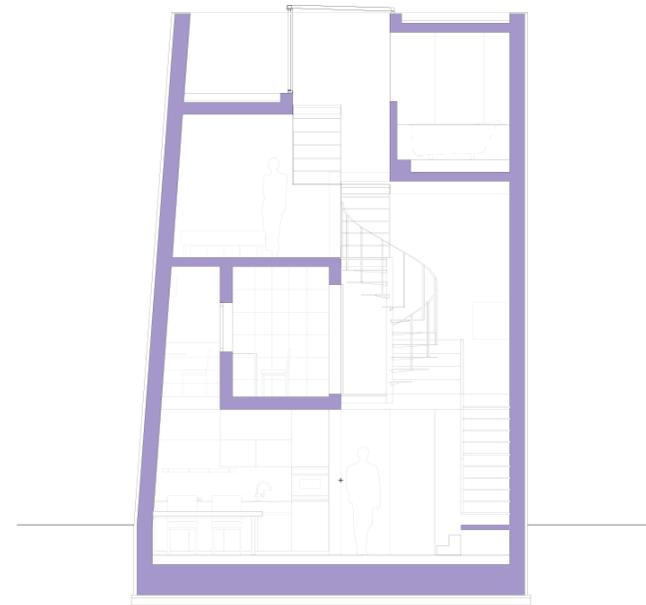


HANGING IN THE VOID ABOVE THE LIVING ROOM IS A CLOSED BOX CONTAINING A HOBBY SPACE AND THE FUTURE NURSERY.

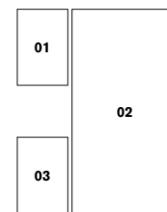


‘OUR MAIN REQUEST WAS TO KEEP THE COMMUNICATION WITH PEOPLE ON THE STREET’

— The client —



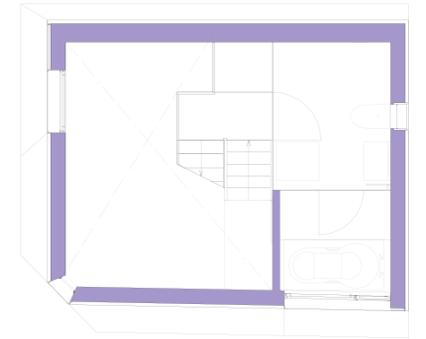
SECTION.



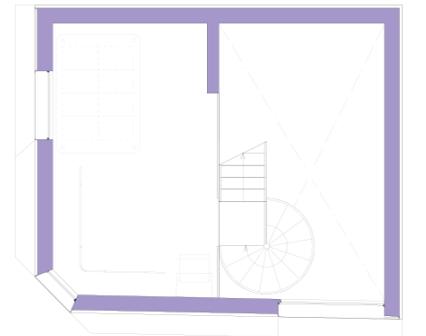
01 THE BATHROOM AND THE ROOF TERRACE AT THE TOP OF THE HOUSE.

02 DESPITE THE SMALL SURFACE AREA, THE HOUSE HAS A ROOMY FEEL.

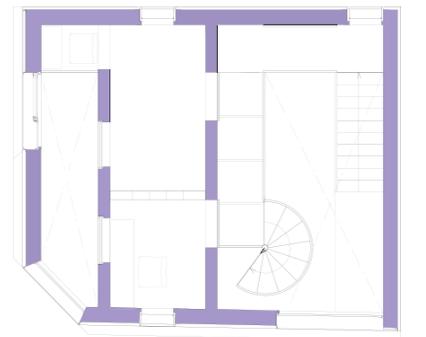
03 BUILT-IN CONCRETE FURNITURE PROVIDES EFFICIENT USE OF SPACE.



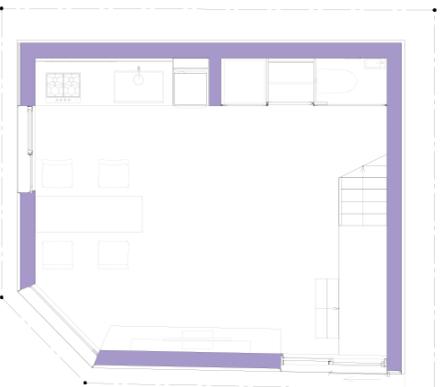
THIRD FLOOR: BATHROOM.



SECOND FLOOR: BEDROOM.



FIRST FLOOR: HOBBY SPACE AND NURSERY.



GROUND FLOOR: LIVING ROOM.