



In This Manhattan Apartment, Every Room Is a Testament to Japanese Tradition

The artist Hiroshi Sugimoto's first architectural project in New York City is a defiant celebration of a bygone age.

By Thessaly La Force (February 6, 2019)



One of the apartment's two master bathrooms. The walls are made entirely of Towada stone, and the cypress bathtub sits atop old stones salvaged from a defunct tram station in Kyoto. The ceiling is cedar.
Credit: Photograph by Anthony Cotsifas. Styled by Michael Reynolds

THE ORIGINAL IDEA wasn't very ambitious: a tearoom in an empty apartment. Though not just any tearoom: This would be a tearoom that served as a work of art. The artist Hiroshi Sugimoto, 70, had made tearooms before. There is one in his Chelsea studio in New York City; in 2014, he created "Mondrian," a glass teahouse on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice that debuted during the city's architecture biennial. The couple who had made the request were devoted collectors of Asian art and already owned works by him. They understood that to Sugimoto, who was born and raised in Tokyo, where he still lives half the year, the tea ceremony is more than just a cultural ritual. As he has written:

In the sixteenth century it became the custom for cultivated Japanese people of a certain social status to enjoy the rituals of the tea ceremony. The quotidian act of preparing a cup of tea for a visitor was raised to the level of art, with meticulous care lavished upon the unique goal of entertaining one's guests. In a small room, a single but magnificent picture would be hung. Flowers to set the picture off were arranged in the alcove. Especially strict attention went into selecting a bowl of the right color and shape from which to drink the tea. Finally, every movement of the host conducting the ceremony had to be as graceful as a dance by Nijinsky.

Sugimoto's point was that the Japanese tea ceremony possesses the same elements of art valued in the West: There is dance in the movement of the person performing the ceremony,

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music in the sound of the water moving between vessels and states of cold and hot, sculpture in the form of the ceramic bowls. The earliest record of tea being grown in Japan dates to the ninth century, when a Japanese monk, having brought seeds back from China, served tea to Emperor Saga in 815. The ceremony as we know it today was largely developed in the 16th century by the tea master Sen no Rikyu. It is intended as a marriage of practicality — to unite enemies over a cup of tea — and art. The harmony and gracefulness of the performance is almost as crucial as the quality of the tea being poured. Though Sugimoto has made his name as an artist who has long questioned the meaning of an image — consider his earliest photographs, beginning in the 1970s, of the dioramas at the American Museum of Natural History, in which tableaux of animals and primitive man took on an uncanny reality when framed by Sugimoto’s lens, or his 1990s images of architectural masterpieces, where monumental buildings shimmer out of focus like an early Gerhard Richter painting — he is also a cultural completist, someone who finds his inspirations from both the ancient world and the contemporary. To Sugimoto, dismissing the tea ceremony as nostalgic or quaintly historical is to ignore its aesthetic meaning in the context of contemporary art.



Photograph by Anthony Cotsifas.
Styled by Michael Reynolds

But as Sugimoto contemplated the commission, the idea of “just a tearoom” began to metamorphose into something bigger, more ambitious. The couple’s original architect had dropped out, leaving the 7,700-square-foot apartment, located on an upper floor of a skyscraper in the middle of Manhattan, untouched, with bare walls and dusty cement floors. The couple had already visited a few architectural works of Sugimoto’s in Tokyo, including a restaurant in Aoyama and an art gallery in Ginza. They wondered: Would Sugimoto be interested in designing the entire apartment? He agreed, though both sides were unaware that it would eventually require four years, multiple trips to Japan, the shipping of rare materials (stones salvaged from an old Kyoto tram station, enormous planks of ancient cedar wood) from Japan to New York, the flying in and housing of specialized craftsmen from Japan to complete finishing details, the training of New York-based contractors in other site-specific tasks and the dedicated input of several experts, including the Brooklyn-based architects Susan Yun and Felix Ade of Yun Architecture; the main contractor, Xhema of New York; and the former curator of the bonsai collection at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, Julian Velasco, who imported and shaped two ficus trees grown in Florida, 75 and 85 years old, for an indoor garden Sugimoto designed.

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Today, the finished apartment is a totalitarian vision — every room conforming to the one before it, each made completely in, as Sugimoto calls it, “Japanese style,” hung at the client’s

request exclusively with his artwork and furnished with his custom-made furniture and light fixtures. It is unlike any home I have encountered, for a home, even the most luxurious, normally offers at least occasional hints of its owner’s personality, from a misplaced leather couch to a plant that survived a previous marriage to the inevitable smaller clashes in style of two people forced to share a space. But that was not the case here. No, this entire apartment was — as Sugimoto made sure I understood — entirely a work of art.

“AFTER SEVERAL WEEKS,” Sugimoto tells me of his early visits to the apartment, “I’d rather look at the sky. So this was my conceptual idea. It’s so nice to see the clouds.” He’s describing not just the view, which is incredible — from roughly a thousand feet above ground, I am able to see New York City from every direction: to the north, the dense green foliage of Central Park, with pretty Park Avenue a few blocks over; the hazy mismatched skyline of Midtown to the south; Brooklyn and Queens sprawling across the east; and then the Hudson River and New Jersey unfurling to the west — but the apartment’s custom-made blinds as well. They are modeled after traditional Japanese shoji screens, typically fashioned from latticed bamboo and washi, or mulberry paper, though no one in Japan, Sugimoto says mournfully, uses shoji screens anymore; they’re too expensive.

These screens, however, are bigger, motorized and reinforced by plexiglass. They’ve been designed to either completely cover the window or to allow only half of it, upper or lower, to be visible — functionally, there are far more useful options, but they are at the heart of Sugimoto’s aesthetic principles. When covering just the bottom half of the window, they mimic the haunting black-and-white seascape photographs that Sugimoto has produced since the early ’80s, where the horizon is divided by sky and sea. Sugimoto has previously stated that he was searching for the same view that early man or woman might have held thousands of years ago — a sight uninterrupted by the freneticism of modernity. But his seascapes are more than just poetic meditations on life; they are utterly transportive of both time and place, as well as technical masterpieces — in some, the ocean is the darkest black, flecked with the white caps of waves; in others, the sea glints just in front of your eyes, the foggy sky offering untold depths.



The kitchen, sheathed in hand-hammered metal. The cabinets have round windows that allude to a ship’s portholes. The Towada stone table and the cane chairs are designed by Sugimoto’s New Material Research Laboratory in Tokyo.
Credit: Photograph by Anthony Cotsifas. Styled by Michael Reynolds

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The lowered screens also perform another trick. They obfuscate any sight of the city, allowing you to see only the blue sky above. It is an incredible, overwhelming experience — I sat by myself on the bed in the master bedroom and let my gaze drift across the windows. Moments

before, in the kitchen, I had looked down at the sprawl of Manhattan and watched a car the size of an ant stop at a red light. I felt my stomach drop, as if I were plummeting to the ground. But here, I felt as though I could simply reach my hand out and graze the side of a cloud.

Every tearoom that Sugimoto creates is formally named, and the one in this apartment is called “Ukitsuho,” which means “floating inner garden,” a reference to the 11th-century novel “The Tale of Genji,” which is set within the wealthy, refined Heian court. One of Sugimoto’s original ideas was to create an indoor garden. But that was impossible in a tower, and so instead, he chose to place the two bonsai trees in a rectangular garden in the dining room, a 10½-foot-long slab of Komatsu stone between them. If the windows offer a lightness, a moment to pause in time and drift into infinity, then the two bonsai, whose dense, visible surface roots (nebari, which are considered a balance to the tree’s sinuous branches) return you to earth.

Sugimoto also insisted on using as many premodern materials and techniques as possible. The lustrous smoky black square tiles that blanket the hallway are clay, handmade by a ceramist in Nara, near Kyoto, whose ancestors made the tiles for the centuries-old Todaiji temple. They are intended to be used on roofs, but Sugimoto prefers them for the floor because of the particular way they reflect the light. The walls are covered in soft-white Japanese shikkui plaster, which was carefully applied by trained craftsmen — though it is smooth to the touch, their strokes glint unevenly in the natural light. The kitchen cabinets are entirely covered in long metal sheets hammered by hand. Nearly all the apartment floors are clad in splendid planks of unfinished cedar (the notable exception is the master bedroom, whose floors are laid with chestnut, the wood hand-scooped to lend it a dappled effect; Sugimoto calls the sensation of walking on it “a free foot massage”).

SUGIMOTO IS NOT a licensed architect, though he doesn’t really care for labels. As he wrote in the chapbook he created about the apartment for his personal collection: “Recently, architecture is getting closer to art while art is becoming more architectural; seldom, however, does one hear of them coming together in a beautiful or harmonious manner. Architecture’s sense of inferiority to art and art’s own jealousy of architecture are inextricably entangled.” His first foray into architectural work was restoring the medieval Go’o Shinto Shrine on the island of Naoshima, in 1996. He subsequently opened an architecture practice in Japan under the name New Material Research Laboratory with Tomoyuki Sakakida, a trained architect. New Material has completed a number of noteworthy buildings, including the Enoura Observatory, which is part of the Odawara Art Foundation that Sugimoto founded in 2009 on the coastline of the Kanagawa Prefecture, just south of Tokyo. Enoura’s cantilevered main gallery with glass walls is elegantly oriented to glimpse the sun as it rises from the east. The firm’s name, however, is cheekily disingenuous; Sugimoto is fond of repurposing ancient materials. In the Manhattan apartment, the dining room floors are planks of Yakusugi — cedar from Yakushima island that is more than a thousand years old. (It is now illegal to harvest the forests of Yakushima; the wood he used had been in storage for some time.) For centuries, the wind

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ripped across the island, causing the growth rings of the trees to bend and swirl into mesmerizing shapes. Several of the stones placed around the house — one as a decorative end piece to a hallway, another as a step to the tearoom — are from centuries-old Japanese gardens, now vanished. Sugimoto has long admired the patina of unfinished cedar in Nara's

temples, where the wood's color has transformed over time from tawny yellow to a mossy gray. "After 1,200 years, beautiful," he remarked. "It gets darkened. The surface is still beautiful." He pauses. "But whether this building survives 100 years ..." He didn't need to finish that thought. We both knew none of us would be here to find out.



The second master bathroom, with a rainfall shower and two rust-colored slabs of Komatsu stone from Japan.
Credit: Photograph by Anthony Cotsifas. Styled by Michael Reynolds

It is impossible to walk through this apartment and not think of Jun'ichiro Tanizaki's famous essay on aesthetics, "In Praise of Shadows." Tanizaki was writing almost a century ago, in 1933, when Japan was first modernizing en masse, but he could have just as well been writing today. The author was contemptuous of the ways in which various Western innovations — from an electrical fan to a gas stove — were wholly displeasing to his eye. Japan had surrendered to a superior way of life (not even Tanizaki could deny that plumbing and electricity offered more efficient ways to live), but in doing so, he believed the country had lost something far greater in the exchange: its culture. Against candlelight, a gold-lacquer bowl delicately reflected the light with a depth and richness, but against the bright glare of an electric light bulb, the lacquer became too glossy, too crass. As Tanizaki began his essay:

What incredible pains the financier of traditional architecture must take when he sets out to build a house in pure Japanese style, striving somehow to make electric wires, gas pipes, and water lines harmonize with the austerity of Japanese rooms — even someone who has never built a house for himself must sense this when he visits a teahouse, a restaurant, or an inn. For the solitary eccentric it is another matter, he can ignore the blessings of scientific civilization and retreat to some forsaken corner of the countryside, but a man who has a family and lives in the city cannot turn his back on the necessities of modern life — heating, electric lights, sanitary facilities — merely for the sake of doing things the Japanese way.

To Tanizaki, there is beauty in a cedar toilet, a shoji screen, even in the shadowy corner of a temple — his book has had an enormous influence on Sugimoto. Both very much see the past as having value in contemporary life. As I departed the apartment, I stepped back into the building's anonymous-looking lobby, with its Eames chairs and potted orchids, black cars idling outside. I found that the glitziness of Manhattan looked too chaotic now, overwhelming compared to the rigor of Sugimoto's choices, where every line, every surface, every shadow had

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been considered and reconsidered again. Sugimoto told me that he felt “the spirit of my art comes with the spirit of the space.” In his mind, his photographs are inextricably linked to the coiled rings of the cedar floor. There is a humility in celebrating the beauty of a grain of wood or in the changing leaves of a bonsai tree. Most of us, I suspect, fall for the shinier, bigger thing. To live like this was a celebration of obsolescence. But was that not worth preserving?

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