





KAMAKURA

Pushing the Boundaries of Design in Heavy Snow Country

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ニセコの建築に
新たな風を
吹き込む革新的外観。



The appearance of the bold and playful, powder-skiing-inspired lines of chalet Kamakura in Elevation Estate signals an evolution towards more avant-garde architectural design in Niseko.

While the scale and quality of Niseko's residential architecture have elevated with each season over the past two decades, the realities of heavy snow loads and resultant added build costs tend towards conservative, traditional exterior designs. Designed by William Tam, Stephen Chan and Cecilia Tam of Hong Kong architecture firm ARVA, Kamakura's success in engaging and delighting with its exterior facade will inspire other owners and architects to push the boundaries of what is possible when creativity meets reality in heavy snow country.

Elevation Estate in West Hirafu was master-planned by one of Japan's preeminent architects, Kengo Kuma, with overarching design guidelines for the houses to be built on the estate's 15 lots. Developed by Zekkei Properties, and with almost half of the lots already built on, the estate has attracted buyers willing to invest in architecture that makes a statement and will pass the test of time.

From the street front, Kamakura's swooping concrete lines hold up a pitched roof and frame a double-storey glass wall encasing a floating timber "box", which houses the kitchen on the second floor. A picturesque brook bounds the rear of the three-storey property, with layered, curved balconies and cornices crisscrossing in a playful series of waves mimicking the meanderings of the watercourse below, catching and echoing the sound of cascading water.

The interior design, by Hong Kong-based architecture and interior design company BTR Workshop, is similarly striking. Paul Nikel, president of project manager West Canada Homes, who has presided over Niseko's most successful residential projects, describes it as "the pinnacle of interior design detailing among our projects in Niseko".

"It's true craftsmanship carried out by the Japanese builders, managed by West Canada Homes in close coordination with the architect and interior designers," Nikel says. All finishes in the house are either fine timber or stone, sourced and painstakingly



selected from hundreds of samples from around the world.

The ground floor of the three-storey, 550sqm residence has a double-volume hallway, children’s quarters, maids’ quarters and utilities. On the first floor are the living room, dining area, large kitchen and a guest suite. The master suite and an additional guest suite occupy the top floor.

All three floors are linked, both spatially and visually, by a staircase located in the middle of the northern side. Service facilities such as kitchen, bathrooms and circulation are all located on the north side, with minimal openings, forming a visual and environmental buffer from the street.

From the first floor upward, all living areas are connected to south-facing balconies and decks, gaining maximum solar access during the winter while shaded by dense trees on both sides of the brook in the summer. Views facing the ski slopes and Mt Yotei are carefully framed.

Tam says the natural characteristics of the mountainside location – its “genius locus” – inspired the design. “The soft and

curvy path up and down the snowy slope and the streamlined snowboards so often seen in Niseko are inspirations for the building’s form,” Tam says.

“The oriental subtlety of dialectic playfulness of seeing through, yet maintaining the privacy for the occupants, and the beautiful low angle sunlight coming into the house in a northern altitude are the references for making the space. We tried to come to an equilibrium of fluidity.

“The roof ties together the layered and recessive southern facade. The balcony edge morphs around the western facade like a ribbon to form the steps onto the patio of the main entrance. From the patio, the ribbon continues and becomes the string course of the internal grand stair leading up to the first floor. Against the recessive facade to the south, the northern facade is more reflective and refractive. It separates the inside from the street as a glass curtain. Within the glass facade, the kitchen is hanging there as a timber box.

“The double-volume entry hallway heightens the sense of



arrival. The hall faces west with a sunset view. It has maximum sunlight before the evening when the client comes home after a long day skiing. The hall leads to the grand stair, which winds its way up to the top floor, all expressed in the elevation. Form follows movement.

“The pitched roof is treated as a cap, more open to the south and slightly enclosed to the north. A swift split on the north and the cutting back to the south of the roof in a curve, recall the curvature of an ancient oriental roof but in a contemporary manner. Form follows tradition with a twist.”

Tam has known the Hong Kong-based Chinese owner of the property for 20 years and said they were excited when they bought the land in Elevation. They’d been to Niseko for several holidays and committed to building a home-away-from-home retreat for themselves in the resort. The owner’s brief for the home was quite simple: one master suite, two guest suites, children’s quarters, maids’ quarters, and generous living and dining areas, deck and/or balconies with views to Mt Yotei for

outdoor gatherings, as well as other informal gathering areas, such as snug sitting corners and a study where they could still work remotely.

Tam had numerous discussions with the owner during the planning stages to ensure that it would suit their needs, but beyond that, the architects had a free hand on the building form, elevation and materials. Tam aimed to create “something specified to the place and yet could somehow lift the spirit of the place”. His favourite part of the house is the sitting area off the main living area on the first floor, with the trees in front of a distant view to Mt Yotei framed by the curved roof.