

ASK AN ARCHITECT

TARO TSURUTA

With his London-based studio, Tsuruta Architects, this Japanese architect has been exploring CNC machining as a new form of timber craft. Here, he discusses the ideas behind his innovative approach

Why did you become an architect? 'I'm from Osaka, Japan, the same place as Tadao Ando. I was at high school when he became really famous, so everyone in my generation wanted to become an architect. He was so inspirational.'

What kind of buildings do you like to design? 'I've worked on a lot of private homes, but I'd like to work on more community-focused projects. We recently did a project for a local authority, creating five apartments above and behind two shops, and people have told us that it made them happy. I like having this kind of impact.'

What is your design approach? 'There are two main components; digital fabrication and storytelling. There's always a story, and that can change a building. There's a house in Hong Kong that's in a prime location, but which has been unoccupied for years, just because someone said there's a ghost inside. I think these stories are important; they can add value or take it away.'

What led you to experiment with digital fabrication? 'An architect's role is fragmented into so many stages – design, tender, construction

'I THINK STORIES ARE IMPORTANT; THEY CAN ADD VALUE OR TAKE IT AWAY'



The architect, Taro Tsuruta, in his Wooden Roof project (and below), which features an intricate triangular design



– and projects can suffer as a result. We believe the only way to deliver good quality and value is for an architect to work on a project from beginning to end. That's why we started doing some of our own fabrication. The pieces arrive on-site as flat-pack assembly, and they're too complicated for anyone to change. It means we can protect our original intention, and it's also much more cost-efficient than a traditional build.'

What types of things are you building with CNC-cut [computer numerical control] wood?

'We started small: a tiny staircase, furniture, a bigger staircase, then a free-standing single-storey structure. Next we want to try using it for larger and more complex projects, across multiple storeys. But we want to move away from mass production by focusing more on customisation. We're interested in how we can use unique computations to create personal narratives.'

What are the challenges of building with wood in this way? 'We built a plywood staircase for our project Marie's Wardrobe and that has lasted really well, even though the house is ►

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always full of people and the client has two teenage daughters who are constantly going up and down the stairs. But one thing we were really surprised by was how much the wood shrinks in the winter, when you have the radiators on. Each piece only shrinks 0.2mm, but when you put 50 pieces next to each other that's a total of 10mm; that's something you have to be really careful of!

Tell us about a project you're particularly proud of? 'House of Trace was a special project. The client is a friend of mine and he bought a property in need of serious repair and extension. We never thought we'd get planning permission for two storeys but we did, so we were able to do something really unusual. Because he had a tight budget, we decided to try to keep as much of the existing extension as we could, which resulted in a unique experience.'

What does your own home look like? 'It's very utilitarian, with bare pink plaster, and features some of my custom-designed furniture.' tsurutaarchitects.com **ED**



Clockwise, from top A timber annex brings the outside in at this 1950s end of terrace; Marie's Wardrobe features a beautiful bespoke plywood staircase; a regeneration housing project in Catford town centre; exposed brick at the House of Trace pays homage to the original structure

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