

## **Small Houses, Big Ideas**

Judith van Praag

In his foreword to "The Very Small Home: Japanese Ideas for Living Well in Limited Space", by Azby Brown, architect Kengo Kuma remembers, "An Account of My Hut", an essay by poet and literary recluse Kamo no Chomei (1153-1216).

Kuma notes there are many similarities between the twelfth Century poet's era and the present; political turbulence and natural calamities shocked the lives of people then, as they do now. Kamo no Chomei erected his "ten-foot-square hut", as a reaction to the turmoil.

Today's small housing boom in Japan may have happened for reasons not unlike Kamo no Chomei's. People wishing for something compact and more affordable; a departure from the mansions erected during the "bubble economy" of the 1980s. And yet, this flight from opulence doesn't altogether mean, "going back in time".

"Many more people embrace hyper modern lifestyles," said Brown during his lecture about small houses, at the AIA conference here in Seattle.

His book proves that designs adapted from age-old ideas, can be highly innovative.

Through his essays, Brown's eye for detail –before becoming an architect, he was a sculptor, interested in Japanese fine cabinetry– is like a power point, leading the untrained reader's eye across the photographs on the page. His line drawings exemplify his words, and lead layman and professional to deeper understanding of the photographed structures.

The house in Naka-Ikegami (portrayed on the cover of the book, is filled with surprises: from clever storage (in the floor) to the ingenious pullout kitchen counter.

Out of the hundreds of houses Brown looked into, fifty were chosen for closer examination and only thirty of those were visited. Each of the eighteen, featured buildings, which made the final cut, has a small footprint. And all of them harbor what the author calls "A Big Idea".

Whether it's natural light, the view, and a stairwell as conceit –for continues movement– in a home with a young family; there's a core element, which centers or anchors the house.

"The house in Umegaoka", designed by Mitsuhiro Sato, for instance, has a footprint of 321 sq. ft. and is built on an 840 sq. ft. lot. The total floor area of the house adds up to 963 sq. ft., and each floor has its own distinctive function.

The "Ambi-Flux House" designed by Akira Yoneda, is contained in a steel frame construction, which holds five floors. Two lower, rental floors, for commercial use, are topped by a three-story town home, including an intimate roof garden. Cantilevered stairs in an open stairwell add a sculptural element throughout the structure. White nylon netting prevents accidents.

At times living within the walls of innovation appears to be an experiment within an experiment. As is the case in the "Natural Wedge House" designed by Masaki Endoh. Lightweight steel trusses are left uncovered where possible, allowing for natural light on lower floors. One would think that sleeping in the bed – which is perched like an eagle's nest atop steel branches– demands tremendous self-control.

If you are sold on the Big Idea on a small lot, you'll be particularly pleased with "Details That Make a Difference" in

Part II of the book. Smart small kitchens, "now they're here, and now they're gone" partitions and ingenious storage solutions, provide inspiration. Ways to bring natural light into interior spaces are pure magic. That even the smallest house can have a music or guest room is a welcome surprise.

As for the bathrooms, I'm all for small homes, and the Big Idea, but please, give me some knee room.

Azby Brown (who also authored "The Genius of Japanese Carpentry, Small Spaces"), is an associate professor of architectural design at the Kanazawa Institute of Technology, and leads the Department of Media Informatics. He's the founder and director of the Future Design institute in Tokyo.

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