

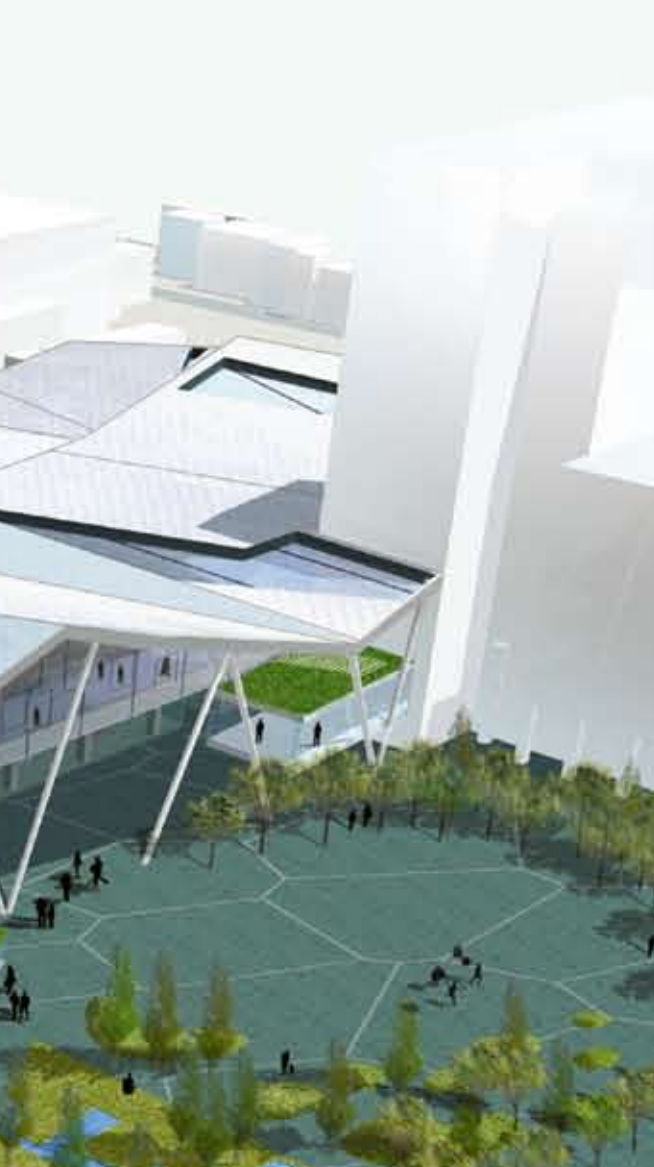


SKY KISS

*Front Office Tokyo
reinterprets urban living*

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Yoyogi House interior

Front Office Tokyo takes in Japanese building methods, culture and expectations and reinterprets them with their own, quirky design approach.

In a city with a notable lack of space, up-and-coming foreign architects Front Office Tokyo must be doing something right, because they have masses of it. The calm inside their large, central Tokyo studio is especially remarkable as hundreds of thousands of designers and visitors roam the exhibitions, openings and product launches around the capital during Tokyo Designer's Week. Stepping into their bright, open apartment-turned-studio, we walk past a kitchen table piled with colorful foam bits and into the living room meeting area. Max, their stoic American intern, sits at a makeshift workshop table, sipping tea and rearranging foam model volumes for a house project still in the conceptual design stage.

It's an international atmosphere in this studio, only a block from Tokyo Tower, a taller and apparently more structurally efficient Japanese knock-off of the Eiffel Tower. The idea of streamlining something iconic and Western is nothing new in Tokyo, the capital of reinvention. From Tokyo Disney to white, yogurt-flavored Pepsi, Tokyo is all about branding, and when it comes to design and architecture, novelty rules.

Canadian architect William Galloway, 38, and Dutch architect Koen Klinkers, 35, formed Front Office Tokyo in 2005, formalizing an ongoing collaboration that began when they met at Tokyo University. "Literally, Koen was going out the door as I was walking in to start studies as a doctoral candidate," recalls Galloway. They've been friends ever since. Klinkers began working as a developer, looking to Galloway as an architect, and their collaboration began enthusiastically. One of their first projects was refurbishing a development property in Akasaka, Tokyo, which entailed the liberation of several small, Japanese-style rooms into a grand, open space and the creation of a new kitchen and bathroom. Klinkers got to be the architect and client for the project, a role he found both

challenging and frustrating, but ultimately rewarding because of the renovated building's increased value. "Because of Koen's background in financing and real estate, I think we are taking a different approach to getting an office running than most, and in that sense we are on our own," says Galloway. "That makes things very exciting—and scary, too—because we usually are working out things as we go along. Especially recently."

But it's a calculated risk. Klinkers has experience at architecture offices in Rotterdam and in Tokyo at noted architect Fumihiko Maki's office. Galloway is also experienced in Tokyo architecture offices, and despite the long hours—"It felt like ten years in three"—Galloway's work on schools and hospitals has prepared Front Office Tokyo to imagine projects beyond the residential sector. His recently completed doctorate in planning makes him acutely aware of larger urban issues, yet he manages to come across more as a designer than an academic.

As Front Office architects, the duo are making a name for themselves through experimentation and their mutual goal of improving urban living in Tokyo, their adopted home. "It's about how people will put potted plants well out into the road, quietly claiming extra space in front of their homes; the way that shops and homes can be stacked one on top of the other without apparent rhyme or reason. Small things like that are very hard to measure but, taken together, create a kind of ad-hoc urbanism here that is very lively," says Galloway.

This young design duo—as architects go, anyone under 40 is adolescent—is taking in Japanese building methods, culture and expectations and then reinterpreting them with their quirky design approach. While they have a tiny portfolio of built work, a few small refurbishments, and a stunning new build, they have garnered

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international media attention nonetheless. *Wallpaper* magazine just dubbed them one of their top 50 hot young practices in the world, and, the day I visited, we flipped through the just-published, Russian-language version of *Interni* magazine to find a lengthy, illustrated feature on the duo that neither can read.

However, their big break came when they were commissioned to build the Yoyogi House on a compact urban site in the Shibuya ward of Tokyo. "Next door is a typical house here, 12 meters high, a concrete bunker lit only from the front, back and skylight," says Galloway. In Tokyo, building to the maximum allowed footprint is the norm, and houses typically seek to shut out the street life to create a tranquil interior. Galloway and Klinkers took a totally different approach with Yoyogi House, embracing the urban environment rather than barricading against it, and the result was a small, efficient, brightly-lit, open-plan home for their clients. Realizing there was no room for grand gestures in this 80-square-meter home, they incorporated clever spatial organization to make the space seem light and airy.

"I think we did about 20 different model versions of the roofscape," says Klinkers. "We started with a box, and then moved it in a crazy way, and then back again. We use whatever technology is at hand—sometimes computers for the perspectives and staircases and then physical models for the form, and we go back and forth between them."

They collaborated on the house with noted structural engineer Alan Burden, who has worked on many of Tokyo's most impressive buildings, including Yokohama Ferry Terminal (by Foreign Office Architects) and the Tokyo International Forum (by Raphael Vinoly). According to Galloway, "It was Alan's idea to mix concrete and wooden structural systems. It was also his idea to reverse the direction of the beams holding up the living room area of the house, so that on one side the beam is below the slab, while on the other side it is above (and hidden in the wall). We thought that effect was intriguing, so we went with it. The entire process was pretty straightforward, based on a series of sketch-filled conversations."

The spaces inside the house seem airy and naturally lit, with a large bathroom and bedroom at ground level and stairs leading up along a glass wall to the upper level. The living room and kitchen are cantilevered over the parking garage, where the client parks his candy-apple red Mini. "In Tokyo, people seem to forget the garden," says Galloway. "We created a pocket garden instead—a space inside



the site. The clients were thrilled." The resulting "vertical" garden is a patch of south-facing timber decking and a sloping garden along the narrow site that the clients now use for planting strawberries.

"Tokyo is in a constant state of flux. People tear down and rebuild all the time. Nothing is permanent," reflects Galloway, which means there should be plenty of new projects for Front Office Tokyo in the future. Presently, they have two new house projects in design development, and are shortlisted for two local housing project competitions. They are also assisting a client in finding a site for a new-build house in Tokyo, as well as developing a conceptual project in Thailand that seems to blend into the horizon. But they have their sights set on even larger endeavors. Recently, the duo submitted a proposal for a master plan for a development in Singapore, and they are searching globally for exciting new work. In closing, Galloway remarks, "I suppose this is a way to keep on learning new things, and to keep ourselves just outside our comfort zone in terms of the kind of work we will pursue. Once things become 'old hat,' I think it will be time to quit."

