

The Slow Life

Text
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Japanese designer Akira Minagawa has won a global following for his minä perhonen fashion label, but his recently completed hotel projects, one in Kyoto and the other on the remote and creative island of Teshima, are sure to draw a new crowd of admirers

‘I’ve been planting rice all morning,’ smiles Akira Minagawa. Dressed in top-to-toe white, the designer behind the fashion and textile brand minä perhonen fits in perfectly with the rural tableau of sea and rice fields that surround him. More precisely, he is on the shores of Teshima, a speck of a fishing island in the far-flung waters of Japan’s Seto Inland Sea, where he recently opened his first complete hotel project.

Welcome to Umitota, a small but immaculately formed one-bedroom hotel created by Minagawa with his long-time friend Shinichiro Ogata of Tokyo design firm SIMPLICITY. This was the first of two new hotel projects recently masterminded by the designer, with a separate venture in a wooden *machiya* townhouse in Kyoto also opening last summer.

Since launching more than 20 years ago, Tokyo-based minä perhonen has won a global following with its Scandinavian-inspired motifs, natural-hued textiles and quality Japanese craftsmanship. But the hotel projects mark something of a new direction. ‘Designing accommodation involves creating hospitality through the design of materials,’ he says. ‘Bringing together the work of various creators in these projects was also very fulfilling.’

Located almost 650 kilometres from Tokyo, the island of Teshima is as remote as its creative credentials are impressive. Just a short boat ride from famed art island Naoshima, it’s home to a raft of artworks created as part of the art festival Setouchi Triennial.

‘Teshima is a place where people can naturally understand art,’ explains Minagawa. Umitota — a converted house dating back more than 40 years — stands out on the seafront thanks to a facade covered in thousands of gently iridescent abalone shells, with smooth, round edges shaped using a button cutting machine.

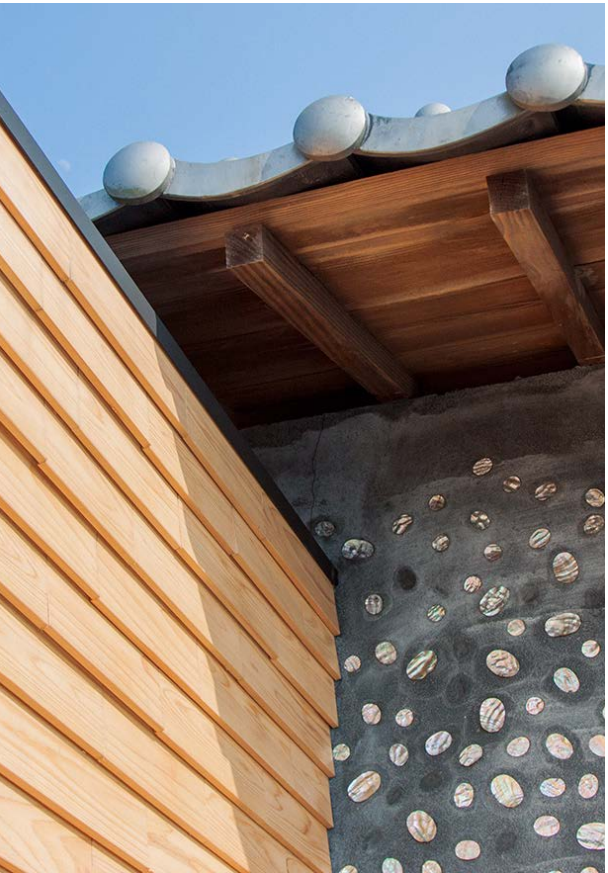
Guests enter via a tunnel-like walkway of light wood, which, on exit, frames the perfectly positioned sea views. Centre-stage is an airy, minimal living space, with a sunken curved-edge sofa (plus signature minä perhonen splashes of chartreuse yellow and butterfly motif textiles), a small kitchen, an alcove library with views onto the rice field, and an abstract botanical light sculpture by Morison Kobayashi hanging above a dining table. Other highlights include a serene tatami mat room, a bath made from Teshima stone, and an upstairs sleeping room with deep sea-blue carpets and cushions, plus a panoramic strip of window framing sea vistas. The minä perhonen textiles and natural materials are perfectly balanced by the clean-lined contemporary minimalism that has long defined the Japanese-inspired aesthetic of SIMPLICITY.

Meanwhile, the Kyoto hotel project — Kyo no Ondokoro KAMANZA-NIJO — involved renovating a 150-year-old *machiya* in collaboration with architect Yoshifumi Nakamura.

Behind a traditional dark wood exterior, the residence has an intimate, airy ambience, with expanses of light wood, an open curved staircase, a library and, of course, colourful splashes of minä perhonen textiles such as a striped wall panel in the modern kitchen. In true Kyoto style, the centre of the home is an inner courtyard garden, where a 100-year-old tree presides. Another highlight is a softly curved egg-shaped bath made from cypress.

Through his *machiya* project, Minagawa aims to show the possibilities of a new way of living in the structures, as the tradition is fading in Kyoto. Fortunately, these two projects are only the beginning: he is currently exploring the idea of creating a collection of inns across Japan. ‘They would be simple and beautiful places that allow visitors to experience local culture in the surrounding areas,’ he says.

Facing page
Image by takashi
okano



Facing page
Minagawa's design of Kyo no
Ondokoro KAMANZA-NIJO
highlights the importance of
keeping the city's *machiya* heritage
alive by offering new perceptions of
the traditional buildings
*Images courtesy of Kyo no
Ondokoro KAMANZA-NIJO*

This page
The thousands of glistening abalone
shells that cover the facade of
Umitota reflect Minagawa's interest
in material design and the ways
that material satisfaction can lead
to mental satisfaction
Images by Hua Wang