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This page: The New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York by SANAA features seven stacked boxes forming fluid, light-filled spaces

Opposite page, clockwise from top: Sporting a dark finish, Shishi-Iwa House No.04 will be "muted" among its surroundings but its windows will "appear like lanterns in the trees" come nightfall, says the architect; Kazuyo Sejima; a rendering of the House's serene, wood-clad interior



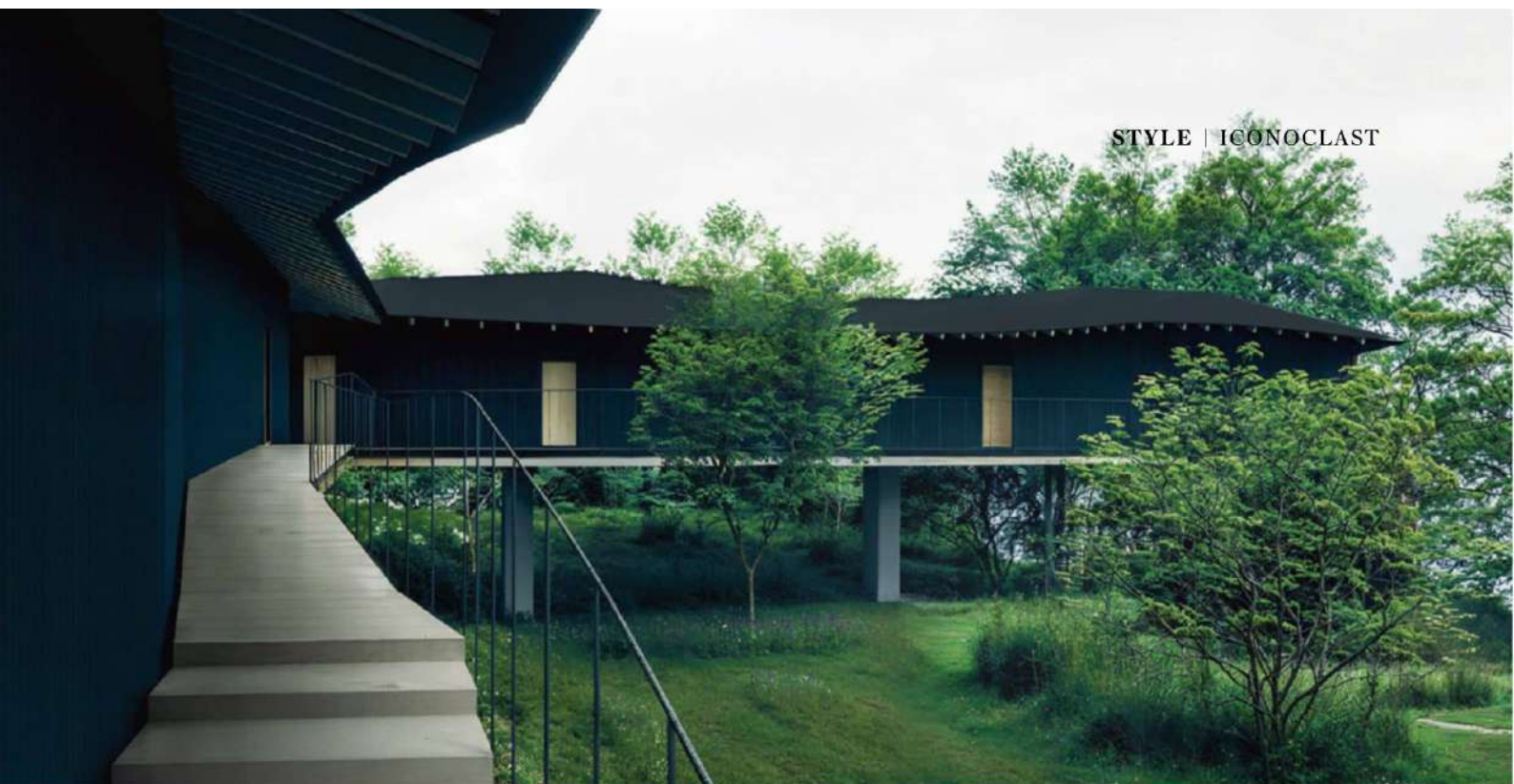
Modernist Maverick

Kazuyo Sejima—the Pritzker Prize-winning architect who has liberalised architectural definitions and creates microcosms shaped by strong material sensibility, human connection and lightness *By Luo Jingmei*

"The first time I visited the Hakone site was a day in late summer a few years ago. The leaves were dense but after a few steps, I reached a clearing where I was surrounded by nature and a beautiful sky. It was calm and quiet, and I felt very comfortable," says Kazuyo Sejima. "I hope guests can experience this nature when they visit SSH No.04."

The Japanese architect who runs her eponymous firm, Kazuyo Sejima & Associates (KSA), as well as SANAA (Sejima and Nishizawa and Associates) with business partner Ryue Nishizawa, was describing her observations of the first time she visited the plot for Shishi-Iwa House (SSH) No.04. The 18-room retreat, slated to open in 2027, is located in Hakone National Park on the outskirts of Tokyo. It will also have a restaurant and bar, a natural hot spring onsen, and wellness spaces including a gym.

The project is the next iteration in a string of retreats designed by



reputed Japanese architects under the Shishi-Iwa House brand, which fuses contemporary architecture with culinary and nature experiences—a concept that was conceived by founder Huy Hoang.

Architects Shigeru Ban and Ryue Nishizawa designed the first three “Houses”, which are located in Karuizawa. After Sejima’s SSH No.04, Junya Ishigami—architect of Osaka Expo 2025’s The Grand Ring—will open a wellness and event centre in Karuizawa, which will be SSH No.05, and Bijoy Jain will complete a villa residence, SSH No.06, in 2028.

SSH No.4 is a snaking construct poised at the foot of Mount Fuji. “The guest rooms are lifted so the ground level flows through and remains connected to the mountains. The interior is natural Hinoki wood, which is a kind of soft and light-coloured wood,” Sejima describes. There will be wonderful views as the site climbs 20 metres up the mountain. It was important for the architect to capture Hakone’s magic, which has long inspired artists, writers and travellers “seeking tranquillity from the city”.

Sejima elaborates: “I wanted to create a place that feels as if it is part

of the forest; a building that gently coexists with nature and invites people to experience time slowly. My hope is that this retreat will offer a quiet presence, where the architecture becomes a backdrop for human connection and for personal reflection.”

These attributes have long defined her oeuvre, regardless of typology. They are expressed through tectonic lightness and transparency, material creativity and the conception of original plans.

Born on 29 October 1956 in Mito, Ibaraki, Sejima completed both her Bachelor and Master’s degree in architecture at Japan’s Women’s University. She started her career at Toyo Ito and Associates and in 1987, left to establish KSA. In 1995, Sejima went on to co-establish SANAA with Nishizawa.





It is not far-fetched to say that Sejima has contributed greatly to shaping the modernist architectural canon. Her achievements are abundant; she was the first woman director in the Venice Biennale's architecture sector in 2010, and only the second female to receive the Pritzker Prize (alongside Nishizawa), also in 2010.

SANAA won the Royal Institute of British Architects' (RIBA) Royal Gold Medal this year. The jury cited the firm's poignant work as helping to establish "a universal language of architecture that resonates with people everywhere". These range from the organically formed Rolex

Learning Centre in Lausanne and Grace Farms in the US, to the striking Dior Omotesando store in Tokyo and the La Samaritaine in France department store with its shimmery glass skin, which is pleated like a dress.

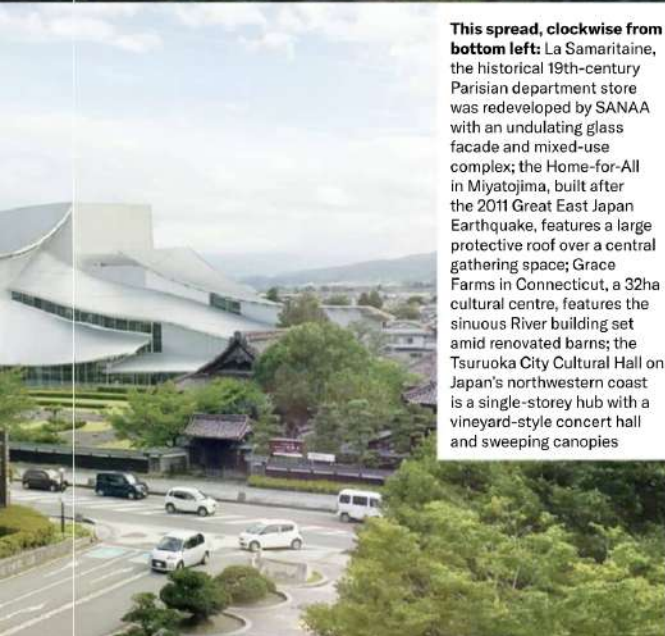
Even humble housing projects present opportunities to create optimistic architecture. For the Gifu Kitagata Apartment Building's design, Sejima gave her block version lightness by reducing its depth and puncturing terraces through the section for each unit. Rooms are connected to a sunroom clad in a light screen so the building's skin dematerialises both

in sunlight as well as the darkness of the night.

Architecture is a long and drawn-out profession and oftentimes, lessons are gleaned long after buildings have been completed, such as with the 21st Century Museum of Art in Kanazawa. Says Sejima: "Many years ago, when I visited the [museum], morning glory plants had grown tall and covered the glass facade. It was [like] an art project. From the inside, the glass completely disappeared, and I felt like I was surrounded by the beautiful green and light. This was a nice surprise for me, and I often think about this."



This spread, clockwise from bottom left: La Samaritaine, the historical 19th-century Parisian department store was redeveloped by SANAA with an undulating glass facade and mixed-use complex; the Home-for-All in Miyatojima, built after the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, features a large protective roof over a central gathering space; Grace Farms in Connecticut, a 32ha cultural centre, features the sinuous River building set amid renovated barns; the Tsuruoka City Cultural Hall on Japan's northwestern coast is a single-storey hub with a vineyard-style concert hall and sweeping canopies



Despite their seemingly minimalist visages, Sejima's works are often highly sensory, allied with the organic beauty of natural elements such as shifting light and growing landscape. Thus, they are best understood in person. For example, the Sumida Hokusai Museum in Tokyo beguiles with its origami-like architecture, like a silver-clad mountain in a nondescript neighbourhood. But within, one not only encounters the juxtaposed spatial volumes, but also observes the neighbourhood through the slivers of window in the "mountain's" slits; thus, the building is at once a monument to culture as

well as a vital apparatus of collective memory.

One needs only to hear about Sejima's childhood memories to realise why she embraces nature so intuitively in her work. "I remember playing in a field of tall grass near my childhood home. I pushed aside the tall blades with my hands to make a path to walk through. The exploration was exciting," she replies when I ask her about some favourite spaces growing up.

Sejima is a virtuoso in building plans, programming, and redefining the relationship between thresholds. One architect that inspired her to an architectural career also exhibits such exploration.

"When I was young, I was so shocked when I saw a photo of the Sky House by Kiyonori Kikutake. It was so different from my home and any other houses I had known up to that point. Sky House is a floating house with one room that has a verandah all around, and sliding

panels in between. I still think that it is an interesting house," Sejima recalls, adding that "freedom in programme and connection to the environment are concepts that are still relevant today."

Another upcoming project that embodies Sejima's philosophies in built form will open in December this year. The Taichung Green Museumbrary in Taiwan combines two community-centric typologies into one structure.

"This is a new programme, so the use is not entirely defined and people will need to discover their own way of using the building," explains the architect.

All esoteric and grand schemes fade into the background, however, when it comes to Sejima's personal life, and experimentation takes on a more domestic slant.

"Right now, I am interested in cooking," the architect muses when I ask what other passions intrigue her. "I would like to cook more!"

"Freedom in programme and connection to the environment are concepts that are still relevant today"