

All 1,500 square feet of the dramatic Tomiyama residence respond to the needs of the Tomiyamas and their guests: A wide-open, oak-floored living room encourages large late-night parties, and an eight-mat tatami room on the other side of a diagonal dividing wall awaits the sake-drinking part of the evening as well as futon-lounging guests.

"A shadow in the trees" is how Japanese architect

Satoshi Okada describes the vacation house he built at the base of Mount Fuji for a retired couple, Shunsuke and Hiroko Tomiyama, and Hiroko's 91-year-old mother, Sei Torii, a design-savvy orchid enthusiast. Standing tall and dark in the 200-year-old broadleaf forest that has developed since Fuji's last eruption, the structure lurks between the arboreal canopy and the deep turf, soft with fallen foliage.

The Tomiyamas gave Okada very few parameters—all having to do with how they and their guests could most comfortably enjoy weekends at the house, in the woods, and on the half-dozen prestigious golf courses in their resort community. "For our vacation house," Hiroko says, "we wanted something different—and some space." She had vacationed in this area as a child, but, she says, "Our former 'villa' was a typical Japanese cabin, with lots of tiny rooms and no view to speak of. We'd come all the way out here and then spend our meals looking around the kitchen!"

Despite its differences from the original house—which was demolished to make way for the Tomiyamas' new home—Okada explains that "while this solution seemed unusual at first, it doesn't stand out, because I base a building's geometry on the environment." The exterior is Japanese cedar, stained black, "because the surrounding forest is really dark." To further obscure

the structure, Okada matched the slope of part of the roof to that of the road.

Mount Fuji is an active volcano, and the undulating landscape of the Tomiyamas' 1,160-square-foot lot was formed by the flow of lava and water. When their three small grandchildren visit, the Tomiyamas take regular walks through the lush greenery, where they tramp through accumulations of the peculiar "Fuji sand," black lava pellets two to three millimeters in diameter.

"Besides costing a lot, leveling this rugged landscape would have destroyed the very element that makes it appealing," Okada says. The architect tucked the structure into a small hollow and followed the environmental protection regulations of the national park, where felling trees is not an option. He opened up the house to the forest and its dappled light through vast windows and a skylight.

The Tomiyamas have been using their Fuji vacation house for three years now, mostly on summer weekends, thoroughly enjoying the contrast to their "American-import house" in Tokyo, just an hour away. "Urban houses are all of a mold," Hiroko declares, exasperated. "There are no more good Japanese houses. But we come here with two or three families, and it's fun!"

"In the city," notes Okada, "the fire and building codes practically design the building. Here, nature allows an exploration of an architect's talents." ■

Set on a lava flow among the trees in a national park, this Japanese vacation home was inspired by its striking surroundings and unpredictable neighbor, Mount Fuji.

Shadow House

Project: Tomiyama Residence

Architect: Satoshi Okada Architects

Location: Mount Fuji, Japan



