

Blending Tradition with the Modern in Architectural Design

New York-born architect **Geoffrey P. Moussas** has worked to restore and redesign traditional Japanese structures for over ten years now from his base in Kyoto. The Japan Journal's Ames Pomeroy interviewed him.

We understand you have been working in Japan now for nearly two decades, but how did you happen to come to Japan?

Geoffrey Moussas: Born and raised near New York City, after graduating high school, I entered a university in northern New York State and majored in engineering. Becoming more interested in architecture, I entered the Gradu-

ate School of Architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1989. When I was a student there, Japan was garnering much attention from around the world in the field of technology including architecture; I therefore decided to go to Tokyo after graduation. I first worked for the renowned Japanese architect Fumihiko Maki, and gradually after four to five years, I found myself attracted to the long history of architecture and of design, not to mention the culture to be found in Kyoto. After working in Tokyo for about five years, I moved to Kyoto. In Kyoto, I became involved in reviving old structures like *machiya* (townhouses), *kura* (storehouses), as well as designing many modern structures.

Now I work not only in Kyoto but also in other regions of Japan as well as in the United States and around the globe. For example, I am currently involved in the renovation of a 400-year-old Buddhist temple in Aichi Prefecture. The renovation will improve accessibility by reducing marked gradations within the temple complex, including Universal Design toilets that can accommodate handicapped and elderly visitors.

What do Japanese traditional dwellings look like? What do you find attractive about them?



Geoffrey Moussas poses on the second floor of the sword and armor shop TOZANDO (near Kyoto Budo Center) which he helped redesign

BOTH PHOTOS TADASHI AIZAWA

Japanese traditional dwellings were commonly built until the 1960s, consisting of a roof laden with tiles, wooden floors and pillars, walls made of wood and soil, and glass pane for the window [before the Meiji period (1868–1912) it was paper screen.]

I am attracted to the continuous development of Japanese architecture, especially the *machiya*, which has continued for over 1,200 years and has carried over to this day and to life in general throughout Japan. For example, traditional houses in Japan oftentimes utilize the “indirect approach” of reflecting light entering from windows near the floor, this being an approach I have adopted. I would highly recommend an essay written by Jun-ichiro Tanizaki entitled “In praise of shadows” (*In Ei Rai San*) for those interested in the profundity of Japanese architecture and Japanese culture in general.

How do you renovate traditional Japanese structures?

In Japan, especially Kyoto, most traditional buildings did not have built-in kitchens or baths, and if they are to be found they tend to be clustered to one side of the room. With regards to heating, I have found floor heating to be the most effective method of dealing with cold rooms, as the radiant heat resulting from floor heating enters the walls, floor, ceiling and so on, and could help to counteract any drafts. For additional light, removing some roof tiles to be replaced by glass tiles enables outside light to be brought in.

Could you expound upon lighting in these houses?

Recently, many Japanese traditional houses have adopted fluorescent lights due to lower power consumption. I find such fixtures are not conducive to living in Japanese houses as these structures seem to benefit from the warm glowing light such as incandescent lamps or, these days, certain types of LEDs. A prime example of this would be Kappo Bar Doi, in Gion near



The frontage of a *machiya*; Geoffrey Moussas renovated the interior here as well as at Kappo Bar Doi, reviving the in-house gardens therein

the Yasui-Higashiyama intersection, where I was able to use incandescent lighting fixtures in many different ways. I believe in retaining traditional aspects of Japanese culture while incorporating innovations in technology to suit our present lifestyle.

