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# THE WORLD OF INTERIORS





# antennae roundup



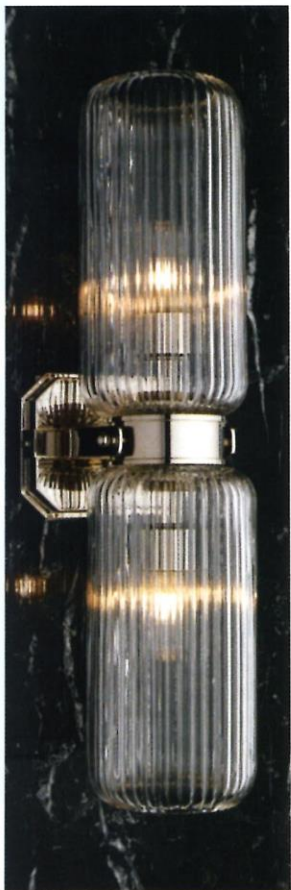
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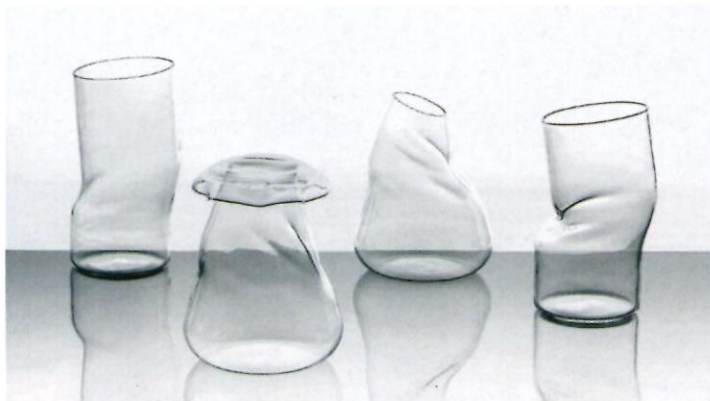
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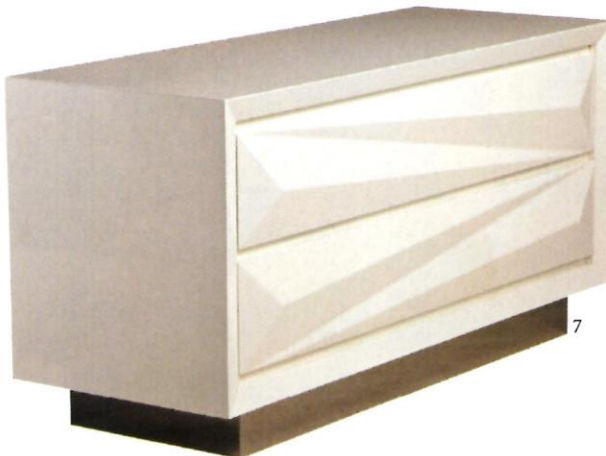
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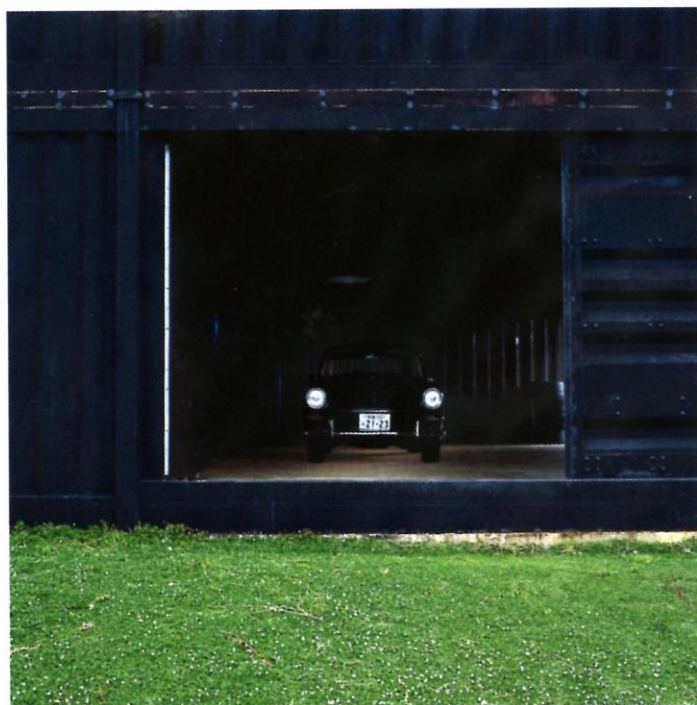
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1 'Fossil' armchair, £2,650, Paolo Moschino for Nicholas Haslam. 2 'Arca' bed with quilted headboard, from £3,560, Poliform. 3 Marble 'Tivoli' bath, £6,000, Hurlingham Baths. 4 Double 'Derwent' light, by Martin Brudnizki, £570, Drummonds. 5 'Transformer' vases, by Glas Italia, from £229 each, Interior Supply. 6 'Alto' pendant, £5,470, Wired Custom Lighting. 7 'A Standard' lacquered commode, by Talisman Bespoke, £6,480, Talisman. 8 Silk-and-wool 'Pathways' carpet, £620 per sq m, Stark Carpet. All prices include VAT. For suppliers' details see Address Book >









# C U B E R O O T S

After 20 years in Tokyo, Tomoaki Koga dreamed of an island retreat where he could nurture both his growing family and his businesses. The solution was simple: build a four-square fortress of stacked steel containers to live, work and grow old in. With bespoke baths, a crow's nest of a kitchen and custom doors that can reconfigure whole layouts, it's the perfect formula, says Augusta Pownall. Photography: Simon Upton

Left: the container house, glimpsed from a neighbour's house to the southeast. The white ISO container is a garage, though Tomoaki's beloved vintage Volkswagen Type 3 (above) lives on the ground floor of the main building itself. Like the house, it's black, which Tomoaki says is in part down to his interest in Zen, Taoism and black-and-white photography





Top: the Japanese-cedar floor in the third-level dining room was stained with oil by Shunsuke Sakanishi at LAD Works. He designed the table and chairs too. Above: the metal caging on the first floor conceals a bedroom and living area. Tomoaki made the mounted light switches himself. Right: the low sink in the large family kitchen was designed for washing hands







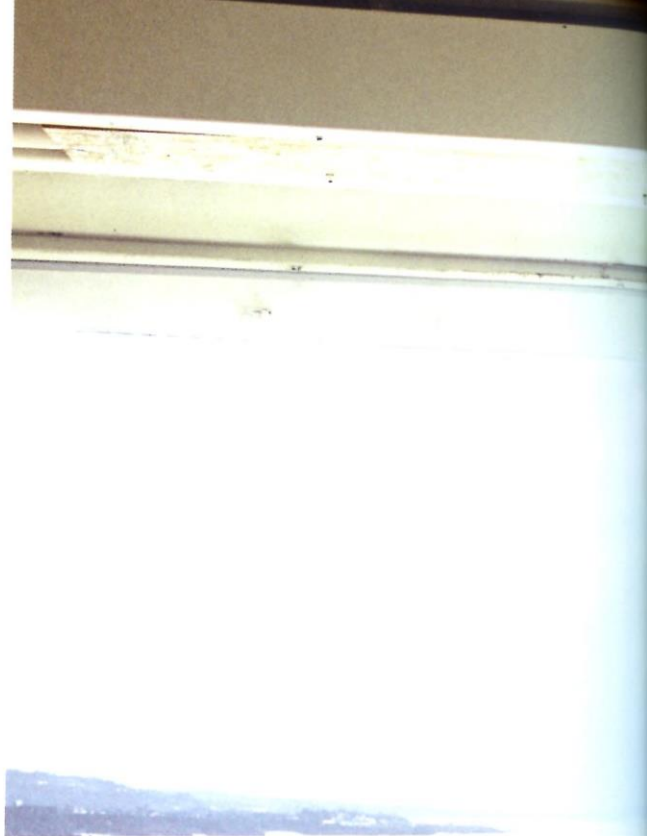
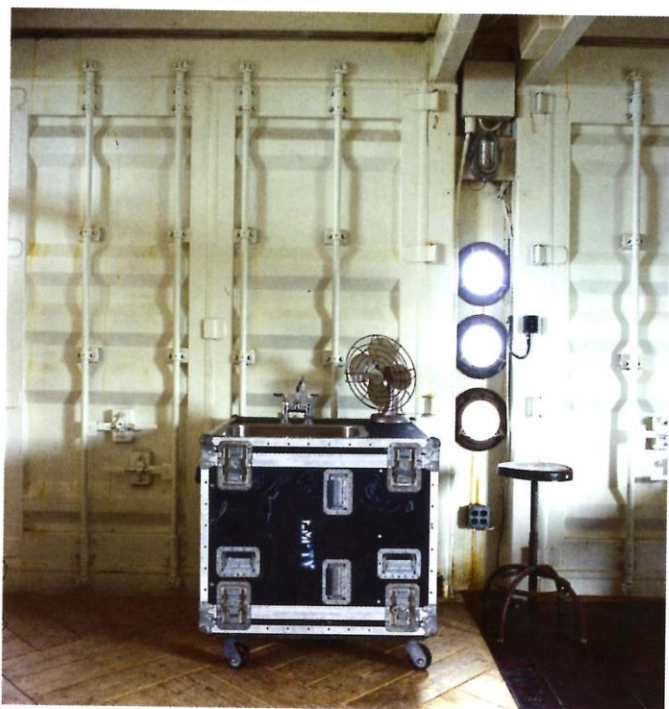


This page, clockwise from top left: the owner hopes to plant the drive with kurapia and St Augustine grass. The green tufts are test patches; the stairs in the house were made in the same factory as the containers. Tomoaki plans to cover them with wood at some point; he bought his 'beautiful and strong' American appliances, including the chunky Tappan stove, from online auctioneers such as Ebay and Ruby Lane; a Texas longhorn cow's skull hangs on a pair of inwards-opening doors on the second floor. Opposite: the framed Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition poster in the second-floor bedroom was a present from a friend. Like all the floors on the second level, these dark, stained squares of plywood were finished by LAD Works







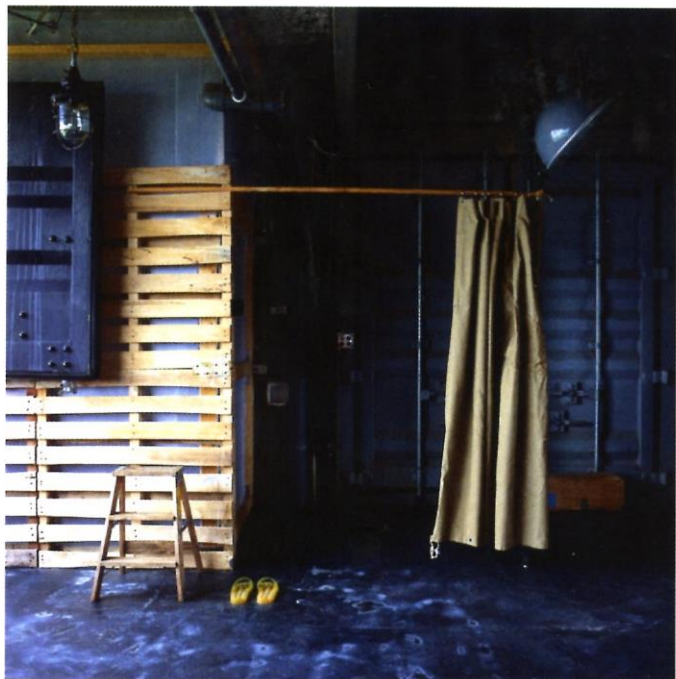


Top: hidden inside a packing crate is a sink, which Tomoaki designed himself, though it isn't plumbed in yet. Above: the wood-and-canvas screen can be pulled around the second-floor bathroom for privacy. Right: in the panoramic bathroom is Drummonds' unpolished 'Spey' bath, from which you can see the 'clouds move, the sunset, the moon and the stars'









**HOW SURPRISED** the sugarcane farmers of Kouri Island must have been to see sixteen 12m-long shipping containers winched into place to form the steel Rubik's Cube that now dominates this stretch of sleepy coastline. A perfect dot on the Okinawa archipelago, geographically Kouri is nearer to Taiwan than to Tokyo, but is more akin to the laidback Pacific islands in spirit. It hardly seems the natural setting for an architectural statement. Yet as its owner, Tomoaki Koga, who designed every detail of the house without any architectural training, explains: 'I didn't set out to build an unusual home.' With an eye on the purse strings and a plan to create an adaptable family home with studio space, practical considerations informed his choices, rather than a desire to startle for startling's sake. Nonetheless, the result is thrilling.

At first glance, the building appears to be a stack of repurposed shipping containers. In fact, strict Japanese planning regulations are such that each unit was specially made from Japanese steel in a Chinese container factory. Tomoaki's painstaking plans were refined by Archimetal, a design agency that specialises in container houses. Each 12 x 2.4 x 2.7m unit (the same size as a standard shipping container) has a steel chassis, to each edge of which are welded corrugated panels and inwards-opening doors, forming walls, ceilings and floors. Some faces are left bare to allow open space inside.

The doors are a masterstroke, being identical to those on seafaring containers but for the fact that they open from within. In the third-floor kitchen, where the family spend much of their time, floor-to-ceiling doors on both sides can be swung open on a sunny day. Low railings keep children safely inside. Here the family eat suspended in the sky, high above verdant farmland and tidal pools beyond. In what is currently a bedroom and bathroom on the floor below, half-height doors pull back to reveal a blazing strip of sunlight. The budget wouldn't stretch to glazing this size but, inspired by neighbouring farmhouses, the Kogas now use the gentle sea air to cool the house in the heat of high summer. 'It never gets too hot to touch the walls, even in direct sunlight, and you can even walk around barefoot on the roof,' Tomoaki assures me.

Come typhoon season it's a different story, but Tomoaki insists that the house feels completely stable when the doors are shut. Still, he recalls a violent storm in which the top floor shook for a full day – 'a bit like a grade-one earthquake' – forcing a retreat below. Winds of 160mph hit and the corrugated walls warped. 'Not a great moment,' he admits with breezy nonchalance. Yet another reason to do without glazed windows.

A former lads'-mag art director in his fifties, Tomoaki moved to Kouri with his Okinawan wife and young son five years ago. After more than two decades in Tokyo, his first stop was Naha, the prefectural capital on Okinawa's main island (there are more than 150 islands in total), but the bland, mid-rise blocks were still too close. A few years later he spent six months scouring the north of the island looking for a spot to build a run-of-the-mill steel-framed house before crossing two sea bridges to a neighbouring island and chancing on the plot where this house now stands.

Online research led him to Archimetal and containers, the industrial feel of which he had long admired. A polymath of broad but defined tastes that range from the photography of Jun Morinaga and Joel-Peter Witkin to American movie memorabilia, Tomoaki enthusiastically cites influences from Derek Jarman's visionary Prospect Cottage (*WoI* Nov 1989) to Schiller's Liquor Bar in New York and Paris's Maison de Verre in his dogged pursuit of a look that he likes. He admires how these buildings represent their materials honestly and have a certain otherness that his house shares.

Both Tomoaki and Archimetal's founder, Kazuhiko Oya, are evangelical in their enthusiasm for container-house living. As the units are uniform in size, they can be transported on standard ships and trailers, keeping costs low. Once on site, the boxes are laid side by side, stacked up and bolted together to form the structure of the building. Without the need for pillars or joists, they are very quick to erect, and with biannual maintenance it's easy to stave off rust, even by the sea. Four storeys high, the Kogas' house took six months to construct, but for a simpler structure Kazuhiko insists that as little as two weeks would suffice, hence their use in disaster relief – notably after the Fukushima nuclear meltdown in 2011.

All the same, not every mother would jump at the chance to move to a metal edifice on a remote island, however majestic. Since arriving, the couple have had two more children (their youngest is just two). Ingeniously, the metal stairs are modelled on primary-school steps – a boon for both the baby and for the couple later in life. Other aspects of the house – the outdoor shower on the third-floor balcony, the kitchen's low basin, the proximity to the sea – might have been designed for children's enjoyment, but it's also a workplace. All the floors can be reconfigured, which is helpful when, as Sundowners Studio, they're let for photo shoots and Tomoaki uses the house as a base for importing furniture, lighting and appliances. He also consults for Archimetal in Okinawa and works as a graphic designer under the name Argonauts.

Plans are afoot to open a coffee shop and juice bar, forcing the family to relocate to the first floor, a slate-grey space that feels like a rock star's lair. (Luckily there's a bathroom on every level, the best of which has a magnificent Drummonds bath.) Tomoaki may soon be the island's most over-qualified tea-boy, but he won't find managing the dockets a challenge. 'A steel house is very handy if you need to pin anything to the wall with a magnet!' ■  
Sundowners Studio, 2278-1 Kouri, Nakijin-Son, Kunigami-Gun, Okinawa 905-0406, Japan ([p-csh.com](http://p-csh.com))

Top: the bathroom on the first floor is made from old wooden crates. Behind the screen is a shower, loo and basin, while the curtained area is a dressing room. Opposite: Tomoaki uses this galvanised-tin horse trough as a bath. He bought it as it reminded him of Patricia Urquiola's 'Vieques' tub