Sneakerbox House, Ramdane Touhami's home in Tokyo. Opposite: the spiral staircase at the centre of the building

Photography by *Edvinas Bruzas*

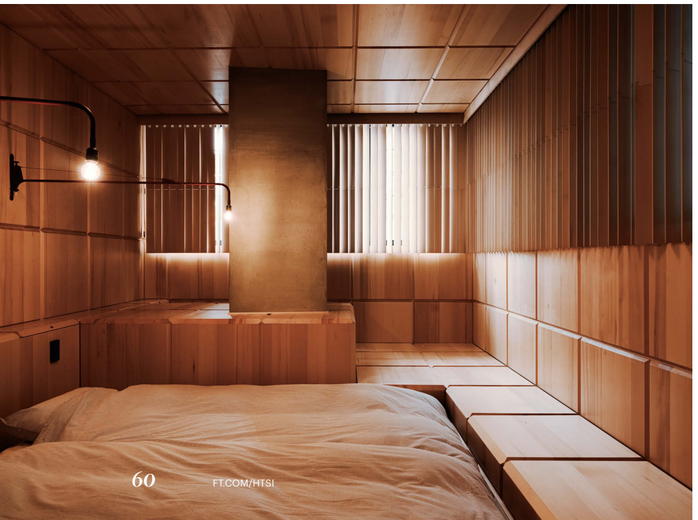
ALL STACKING UP

In Tokyo, Ramdane Touhami has built an outlandish Sneakerbox House. *Leo Lewis* steps inside





“THE HOUSE, IT’S ME. THE WHOLE PROJECT IS PASSION”



Top left: Touhami in the study. Top centre: seating designed by Touhami in the living room. Left: 1950 Jean Prouvé Potence wall lamps in the hiba wood-clad bedroom. Opposite: a solid boulder supports the stainless-steel surface in the kitchen

Ramdane Touhami has woken up for the first time at Sneakerbox House, his new home in central Tokyo. At 10am he is managing a series of micro-calamities whose severity only he can possibly appreciate. The Bakelite wheels of a battered 1930s office chair, designed and once owned by his great hero Gio Ponti, are digging fractionally too deeply into a mountain-themed rug of Touhami’s own design. The turquoise switch for the 1960s Italian wall lamps in the office is, he has now decided, sitting at a faintly unnatural distance from the lights themselves. A trio of hardback books, angled to resemble the house itself, have found their way to the wrong end of an immense dining table that, rather like Odysseus’s bed, has been built into a foundation pillar of the building. A sense of obsession, in the fundamental structure of the house, in the microscopic detail of every interior and in the day-to-day life it invites, is everywhere.

“The house, it’s me,” says Touhami, minutely adjusting cylindrical cushions on an L-shaped daybed – a bright explosion of colour partially shaded by Californian wooden curtains. “The whole project is passion.” It’s a house that the French multi-hyphenate – designer, retailer, restaurateur, entrepreneur, connoisseur – envisioned as a tower of shoeboxes. On a small hill between the green of Setagaya Park and the riverside district of Nakameguro, it comprises four jarringly distinct architectural themes stacked atop one another.

On the ground level, the garage and staircase have been left as bare concrete, which, when accented with playful neon signs, represents contemporary Japan. The first floor, clad in red brick, evokes his hometown roots in the brick-built French city of Toulouse. The second is composed of small glass bricks, an ode to Paris’s Maison de Verre, designed by Pierre Chareau and Bernard Bijvoet, where Touhami lived when he was first building his empire. On the top, unusually for Tokyo, a huge open terrace made of Japanese black wood crowns the whole enterprise – a reminder of the traditional materials of Japanese construction and of the craftsmanship of Kyoto.

Sneakerbox House represents a great many things to Touhami, the French-Moroccan polymath best-known as the creative force behind Officine Universelle Buly, the historic French perfume house that he and his wife, Victoire de Taillac-Touhami, took over in 2014, and sold to LVMH in 2021. He runs Paris-based creative studio Art



Recherche Industrie, experimental printing press Société Parisienne d'Impression Typographique, clothing label Die Drei Berge and publishes a magazine "about mountains, nature and travel" called *Useless Fighters*.

Most of all, he says, this new house is a tribute to his relationship with Tokyo. It is his conviction, made solid, that Japan offers a unique canvas on which to experiment and innovate; it is his thank-you gift to Japan after decades of welcome and inspiration. "I love how Japan has changed over all the years I've been here – we used to come for the new thing, now we go for the old thing," says Touhami, a red woollen hat upon his head, his ultra-baggy jeans covered in flecks of coloured paint.

The 52-year-old has been visiting Japan for more than 30 years. When he first arrived, he says, he hated it. But that soon changed. In 2000, he relaunched the Japanese lifestyle brand And.A. He's since worked with numerous Japanese brands and opened dozens of Buly stores across the country. In the process, he has experienced a gamut of Tokyo life – from nights in the cheapest capsule hotels to the embrace of Japan's creative elite and its most exclusive districts. His Japanophilia is now a love of great depth, nuance and history, but it is not, he makes clear at several key moments, unconditional. Particularly after the experience of building Sneakerbox.

Five years ago, in a state of Covid-19 boredom, Touhami bought the property where Sneakerbox now stands on the advice of a Japanese friend. The seller, a major importer of cowboy hats, attempted to show Touhami around the existing house but was told that the whole place would be torn down. In Tokyo terms, there is nothing surprising in that. Almost no buildings are legally protected from demolition, and new ones are under almost no obligation to fit in, architecturally or visually, with those around them. Tokyo, pre-eminently among Japanese cities, has evolved through a frenetic process of unsentimental erasure and boundary-pushing renewal.

"The only country where you can design really everything in a house is Japan," says Touhami. "In Europe, you have the exact regulations, the exact spaces, the neighbourhood, the heights of everything, but in Japan you can even build something that looks like a big dick and nobody cares, right?"

Not quite. As Touhami now acknowledges, the creative freedoms seemingly granted by Japan's freewheeling, raze-and-rebuild approach hide a formidable straitjacket of regulation, refined through disaster in one of the world's most quake-prone countries. Having revered and admired Japan's sui generis flair so deeply, the Frenchman found himself committing to its greatest concentrations of fiddliness and frustration.

"The project was supposed to be done two years ago," he says. Deep foundations were needed, obstacles were discovered. Regulations about how much shade can be cast over neighbours' houses forced changes to the profile. The assumed floor spaces were all much smaller than expected. Japan, Touhami has decided from the experience, is not good at improvising. "The Italians are really good improvisers. The English, a little bit. Japan, zero," he says. It is also, he says, a massive relief to have finished.

"I mean, I am very happy about the project. But absolutely, it was a nightmare. Sometimes it was a pleasure..." he says, his eyebrows consulting two of his team members – Ryosuke Maeda and Ikue Yamamoto – whose devotion to the cause helped make it all happen. "Actually, no. It was not a pleasure. Let's be honest. It was not. But it was an interesting experience."

Conceptually, Touhami's idea for Sneakerbox was both beautiful and ambitious in the extreme: to embody his passion for Japan and to reflect the country's "phantasma" through his eyes. The architect Shigeru Kubota of Degins JP helped to execute the project, "but everything was designed by me, with my studio, Art Recherche Industrie", he says. "I designed everything myself. This project meant a great deal to me, and I'm not the kind of person who delegates that sort of thing. I'm well known for working alone."

Of all the design features – from the granite bathroom to a compact hiba wood-clad bedroom – Touhami is most proud of the kitchen. "It was the most complicated thing to make, and in a way the whole project started with it. I have almost the same one at my home in Paris," he says of the gleaming all-metal room, its mirrored cabinetry finished with graphic cut-out circles as handles, a giant boulder from the German Alps intersecting the kitchen island.

The terrace, meanwhile, is still a work in progress. When Touhami visited the original structure, he realised that the roof afforded an "insane" view of Tokyo, but that nothing had been made of it. "When we went to the top, I couldn't believe it," he recalls. He's yet to furnish the space. "Right now I'm quite taken up by other projects, but I'll come back to it."

Clearly a great deal of the delay in bringing Touhami's vision to life arose from his own perfectionism and the need to create the "flux" that he so often refers to. Shortly before completion, for example, he decided that the magnificent (and somewhat perilous) spiral staircase at the centre of the house should no longer be white but virulent orange. But he seems, temporarily perhaps, content.

"Everyone does houses without colour right now – I call them pastel-beige houses, like super brown, grey everything," he says. "But I wanted it super-weird."

It is weird – and also wonderful. "When you have the light and the colour here it makes you happy," he says. "It makes you more beautiful. My obsession was for this to be a Japanese house, not a global house. I wanted a house that was all about the flux, and this is it." ■**HTSI**



"EVERYONE DOES PASTEL-BEIGE HOUSES. I WANTED IT SUPER-WEIRD"



Top: the house's garage entrance. Left: Zazzeri taps in the crimson-granite bathroom. Opposite: *Tribute to Donald Judd*, c1990, by Toni Cordero on the living room wall