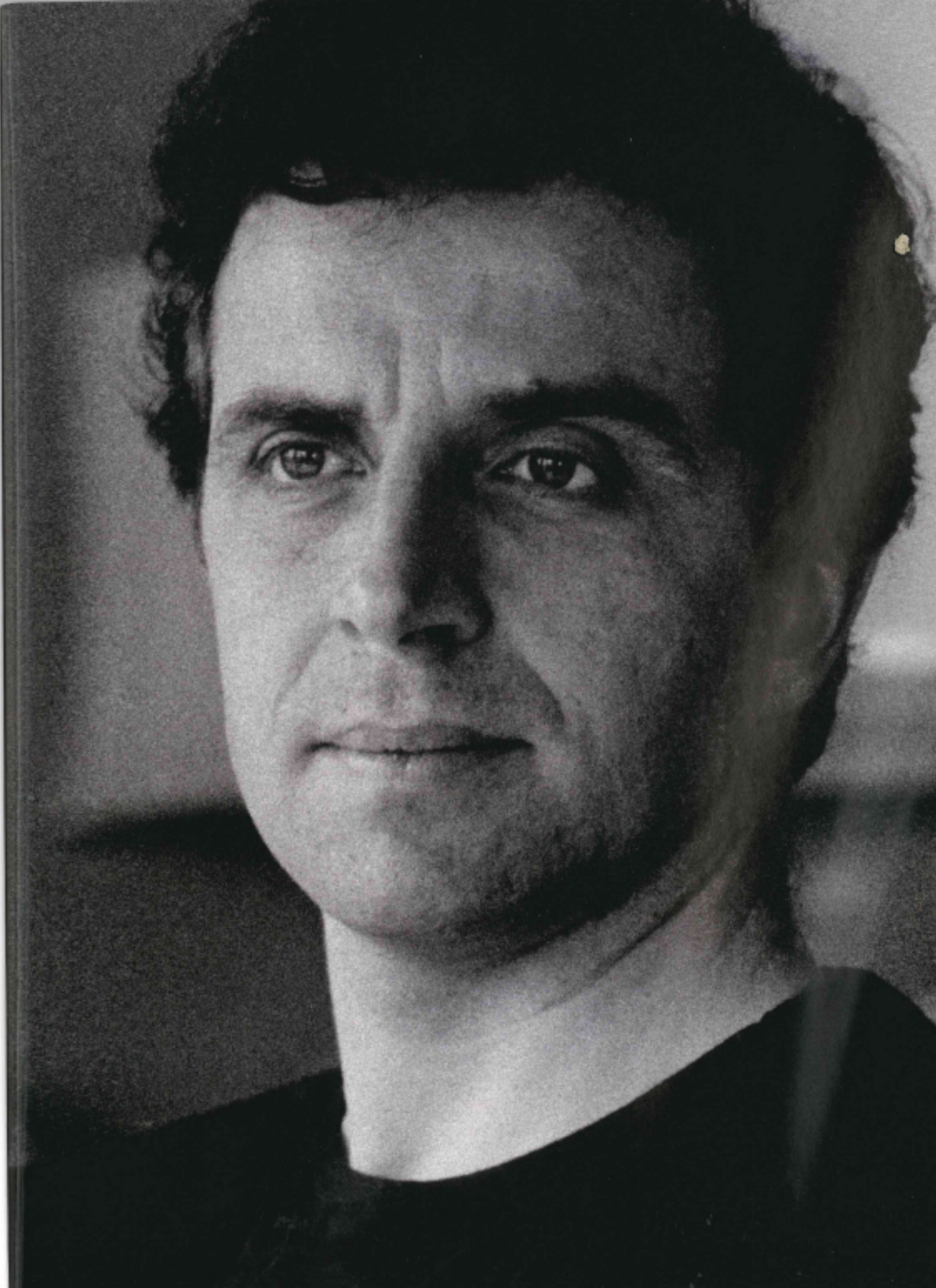


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WORDS // GABRIELLE KENNEDY
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the outsider

FRENCH ARCHITECT
HENRI GUEYDAN SPENT
HIS LIFE ON THE
OUTSIDE LOOKING IN –
UNTIL HE DISCOVERED
THE FREEDOM OF JAPAN.
MEET THE MAN WHO
PAINTS WALLS THE
COLOUR A BABY FIRST
“SEES” IN ITS MOTHER’S
WOMB AND CREATES
BUILDINGS REMINISCENT
OF A MOUNTAIN
RANGE’S SILHOUETTE.



TO THE AVERAGE THINKER,
JOGGING PROBABLY BEARS LITTLE
RESEMBLANCE TO ARCHITECTURE.

Not so though for Tokyo-based French architect and long distance runner, Henri Gueydan. "They are both mental exercises," he says. "When I run and when I design, I am filling a space with fresh air." To him, architecture is as much about the exchange between air and light and devising new ways to connect to the elements as it is about aesthetics. It's perhaps of no surprise that his perspective comes from 17 years spent in Japan. "For me the clash of ideas is tremendously creative," he explains.

Born in France to a Swedish mother and French father, Gueydan has always revelled in outsider status. "The south of France and Sweden are worlds away from one another," he says. His architecture offices, Ciel Rouge Création, commenced operation in Japan before expanding to Paris. His life partner, Fumiko Kaneko, is Japanese and he can chatter away comfortably in the local lingo. It is a cultural connection, therefore, that runs deeper than the more usual fascination the French have had with Japan since 19th-century Japonism. "Of course I am French at heart," he says, the statement unnecessary given his ubiquitous hand gestures and classic Gallie charm. "But something of the Orient is rooted inside of me ... I see it as a challenge."

And he has responded to that challenge. Most of Gueydan's buildings display echoes of what can loosely be termed an Asian sensibility. "Here the

concept of limits is different," he says, comparing what he sees in Tokyo – where lack of regulations makes anything possible – to the more rational and rigid world of French design. "I feel more comfortable with the fluidity and ambiguity."

Tokyo is one of the most exciting cities for architects and designers to work in. It's a city on the move and evolves daily, but with no expectation of completion. Construction is not about rapid development but an accepted way of life. "Buildings are not even supposed to be permanent here," Gueydan says. The result lends fragility and impermanence to the cityscape.

For a house he designed in Setagaya, a well-to-do district in the west of Tokyo, Gueydan indulged his desire for warmth and comfort by bathing a family home in the deepest shade of red. "Most reds are stark," he says of his choice, "but I worked with a scientist to find the exact shade that a baby would first perceive inside its mother's womb." With visions of soft and safe enclosures in mind, he created a space with the form of an egg, albeit a red one. "The house has round angles to create a soft space, a shell, an egg, a belly."

On the surface, the Seta House in Tokyo seems a stark contrast to Gueydan's Glass House in Mous, France, with its traditional stone exterior and unusual, glass-floored interior. But the two houses are both intended as spaces that provide refuge from the outside world.

OPPOSITE Seta House, Tokyo, Japan, 2003. Created for a young couple with two small children, the house exemplifies Gueydan's hallmark characteristics of comfort and safety. The architect makes reference to an egg or a "belly", both inherently protective structures, by rounding the edges of the house, while the distinctive red used on the exterior replicates the first colour an unborn baby is said to "see". Gueydan intended the house to be a retreat from the outside world, a place of warmth and security.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHELLE NELSON





"Surprisingly, the glass is not a cold material and the contact with it is very sensual," Geuydan says. "What is amazing as well is the reflection of the glass. When the sun rises in the morning it seems as though it has entered the house and you can hardly see through the glass because of the reflection. When the sun is overhead it reflects in the two glass floors, and it seems as though two suns are living in the house."

The concept for the glass house came from an experience Geuydan had while standing inside an ancient ruin with its "walls growing up to the sky". He looked upward, and "... suddenly the sky was amazingly focused and the clouds were gliding by. I thought about living in the light, in intimacy with the sky. The sensation was very strong." It appealed to Geuydan's fascination with ambiguous spaces: "No inside, no outside, no limits ... the feeling in this house is to live with the infinite."

SPIRITUAL CENTRE

Despite a portfolio packed with impressive projects based in France, Gueydan thinks his

Japanese work best captures his spirit. France, he says, and particularly Paris, imposes too many limits on aesthetics, which spell disaster for architects. "In Paris, when a new shop opens, it has a fresh interior and everyone is amazed," he says, "but actually it's just the same old building redone." And a static city does things to one's mind. "Of course urban environments condition people," he says. "A certain rigidity of perspective that is overly organised impacts on the way a mind works. In Paris you walk along and you know what to expect and you can be sure it will never change." It's the opposite in Tokyo. "I like the irrationality of the place," says Gueydan.

Last year he created a protestant church in Aoyama, a trendy Tokyo neighbourhood. Back in 1996 he won a design competition to construct the school behind the church, Harajuku Yochien (1999) and had to again compete against local architects to win the church assignment.

His modern metaphorical design reconstructs biblical imagery in concrete with a sheer finish. The challenge he faced was to avoid the cold and



OPPOSITE Harajuku Church, Tokyo, Japan, 2005. Gueydan wanted to make this church a physical representation of elements of the Bible. The bell tower is incised with crosses down its entire length, making the exterior clearly recognizable as a place of worship, while the 13m-high ceiling is carved into six structural segments, flooding the chapel with light. Including the bell tower, these elements add up to seven, symbolizing the days of creation in Genesis. **ABOVE** Glass House, Mons, France, 2004. Floors in the multi-level house are made of clear glass; the exterior of the old stone house is retained. Concerned at first that the glass would be cold, Gueydan was pleased to discover that it conducted heat well. He likens the feeling to tatami (traditional Japanese floor coverings).

OPPOSITE Shu Uemura Atelier, Tokyo, Japan, 2003. Working with make-up giant Shu Uemura, and the client's love of white and monochrome colour schemes, Gueydan searched for a different way to present white in an interior. By chance, he saw an image of snow-capped red-orange mountains in a newspaper and hit upon a colour scheme that utilised Uemura's preference for white while retaining a warm and welcoming atmosphere. **BELOW** Muroto Hotel and Thalassotherapy Centre, Muroto Misaki, Japan, expected completion 2006. The Hotel and Thalassotherapy Centre is a sinuous structure, with the main building 250 metres long by seven metres wide, poised between the sea and steep mountains, capturing the best of both natural environments.



overly intellectual design he thinks homogenises a lot of modern architecture.

The arched roof of the building parts into six sections, allowing sunlight to stream into the building. Parallel beams of sunlight refract from the floor, rising towards a massive and imposing white cross. "It was great fun to design," admits Gueydan, who read the Bible before coming up with the first sketches. "Everyone has a traditional image in their head about what a church should look like. I started with that and then moved completely away from it."

Japanese cosmetics giant, Shu Uemura, had been commissioning Gueydan to design his store interiors since 1996, from boutiques in Le Bon Marché in Paris to larger thematic boutiques in

Japan. Gueydan attributes their long working relationship to a shared sense of adventure. "I think Mr Uemura likes aesthetic adventures – and I do too. Every project is a new attempt at improving life, feelings, balance, weight..."

In 2004, Uemura gave Gueydan his first architectural commission: a private house in Nasu, along the Shikoku coast in Southern Japan. Initially sceptical of the city foreigner, the locals warmed to the project when they saw that rather than cut down trees to erect the building, Gueydan let the building move organically with the existing natural environment. It was a huge success, convincing Uemura that Gueydan was the right architect for his next big project: the Hotel and Thalassotherapy Centre in Muroto Misaki.

COURTESY ZIEL ROOSE CREATION

