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Q & A with Riccardo Tossani

Interview by Lorne Calhoun



Architect Riccardo Tossani has a broad education in architectural design from schools in the United States, Italy and Australia, and two decades of international design and design management experience. *Powderlife* had a chance to catch up with him and get his thoughts on the Escarpment Estate, the future of the Niseko area and his new office in Hirafu.



What words would you use to describe your current project?

Meandering through a lush Silver Birch forest, Hirafu Escarpment is a private estate that nestles premium quality, custom designed residences against the picturesque Hirafu hillside. Through careful planning and house design we have ensured outstanding views of Mt. Yotei, as well as glimpses of rice paddies through lush Silver Birch forests to the dramatic Niseko Mountains beyond. Hirafu Escarpment is a beautiful master-planned resort community that inspires a sense of belonging. It is as place where nature and the unspoiled character of Hirafu's forested landscape will always dominate.

How do you feel about this project?

This project holds enormous potential as a model for controlled, high-quality architecture and planning, organised to integrate responsibly with the natural environment, employing principles of sustainability and enhancing Hirafu's scenic beauty. This project also contributes recreational and cultural amenities back to the community, such as pocket parks,

sculpture and even a public piazza at the heart of this new village precinct. The opportunity to create an ideal world where planning and architecture are woven into a seamless, cultivated whole is rare. I am thrilled to be a part of this vision, and am confident that the Escarpment Estate will lead the way for further high-quality development in Niseko and the region.

What separates this project from others out there? As an architect and master planner, I have the privilege of designing the residences, as well as the environment in which they are placed. Each residence is a unique interpretation of Japanese alpine traditions brought forward to the 21st century. They are a contemporary architecture tailored to fit each individual site, preserving views and embellishing the natural ecology through careful landscape design and extensive tree replanting. Power lines are underground, and infrastructure including storm water drains, kerosene and gas tanks are concealed from view. This attention to detail and investment in quality is the first of its kind in the region.

Where did you get the inspiration from for these designs?

Watching development trends in Niseko over the years, I could not help but notice the slow erosion of scenic beauty and architectural integrity in the mad rush to build. The region lacks a clear indigenous architectural style, and the invention of new paradigms has been exciting to watch but not always successful. Having designed and visited resort communities all over the world, it became abundantly clear that simple principles are the ones that add the most value to buildings and communities. These include a thoughtful consideration of architectural traditions and cultural history, a responsible relationship with the indigenous natural environment, view protection, community identity and strategic integration with neighbouring communities so as to share amenities without losing identity. These principles are seemingly obvious, but rarely adhered to. Hirafu's unique natural and built environment, its visual relationship with Mt. Yotei, the vibrant nature of the village in winter and even the roar of the Shiribeshi River, audible from parts of the estate, combined like a lantern of inspiration to show the way forwards for the design of the Escarpment community.



What other projects have you been involved with in the Niseko region?

Our first commission was as master architects and planners for the Hanazono Village project for Harmony Resorts. We have recently completed Forest Estate - five luxury residences clustered on the edge of a hill in Hirafu Middle Village, and have just received the building permit for a large and architecturally significant private residence at the foot of Mt Yotei, which will be completed in 2009. This residence exploits sustainable design principles and employs geothermal heating and photo-voltaic power generation. We are master planning a new 18ha resort in Rusutsu, and have been asked to master plan the Niseko Moiwa ski resort by its new owner. We are also about to commence the Hirafu Upper Village master plan for the NPB (Niseko Promotion Board) starting with the main street. We are the architects for Shibisey, an exciting new condominium project in Furano for Hokkaido Tracks, and have recently completed the concept design for a very large mixed-use managed condominium and retail project in upper Hirafu Village. Obviously we have built up a considerable knowledge base in the region over the years, and have worked for many of the area's pioneers, providing them with services ranging from due diligence studies of land parcels to full blown architecture and master planning.

How long do you plan on keeping the office in Niseko?

Niseko is an all-season resort destination with world-class potential. While current financial conditions are troubling, my profession must also responsibly take a long-term view. Buildings might take only one or two years to construct, but towns and resort communities take decades to build. Niseko is only part way there, and now more than ever the stakeholders around the mountain need to pull together to empower the area with a synchronicity of common purpose - to make this place the most desirable destination in the region. One needs to think well ahead, which is the

definition of visionary. We must all look beyond our individual ambitions, and recognise that by working together to define and create opportunities, by providing visitors with an ever-expanding range of choices, we prop each other up and benefit ourselves in the process.

I see Niseko as an embryonic Aspen of Asia. As a place-maker and habitat creator, I hope to play a proactive role in this evolution. To that end I have built a home in Hirafu and opened an office in the village, which will provide my clients and staff with real-time support. We are on the cusp of something grand, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to make a difference, and all of us can participate.



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Q&A with Eyal Agmoni



Interview by Lorne Calhoun

Earlier this month Moria mountain holding GK purchased the Moiwa ski resort. *Powderlife* Magazine caught up with the fund representative Mr. Eyal Agmoni to find out a bit more about their company and their plans for the future of Moiwa.



Photo: Niseko Photography

Tell me a about Moria mountain holding GK?

Moria mountain holding is a Japanese company based in Tokyo created solely for the purpose of holding the Moiwa ski resort. It is part of a group of companies owned by a private equity fund. I am the representative in Japan for the fund.

Is this the first ski resort your company has taken on?

Absolutely.

What are you planning as your target market for the resort?

Moiwa being the most traditionally famous resort as it is the oldest place in the region we would really like to target a lot of Japanese. At the same time we would also like to see more foreigners come to this very cozy and nice part of the mountain, which right now is untapped because of many difficulties with the previous owners. We would like to be more integrated into the mountain and the other operators to try and get more people exposed to this side of the mountain.

What differences will we see in Moiwa this season?

This season won't see great changes. We just took over the resort in the first week of December. Our first mission was to make sure the lifts opened on time for the season, but there are many ideas that people are talking to us about that we are looking forward to. In General we wish Moiwa to be the natural choice for kids and families as well as beginner skiers to choose, we will work towards that goal but with room to allow more advance skiers to enjoy our slopes.

The Moiwa towers were not part of you purchase. How do you think the towers and Kanronomori will play into future of the resort?

Kanronomori is a vital part of the future. From our understanding there has some bad air with the previous players. We want to bring them in and we would like to hopefully connect. Regarding the towers we are not sure, they are still in the bankruptcy court so there are some issues there. However, we definitely would like to develop the existing facilities which of course include everything that is already there.

What are some of your long term goals for the resort?

We are very lucky to have Riccardo Tossani of Riccardo Tossani Architecture to develop a masterplan for us. One of the key points is that Moiwa is very attractive in the summer which is why Kanronomori is full all of the time; it has both seasons attraction, so the idea is to develop here a high class, top notch resort with maybe a famous operator who will help us to maintain it. The idea is definitely to grow the whole area to a world class resort.

I understand that you will be trying to link Moiwa with the Niseko United. What steps have already been taken to make this happen?

Right now we are doing what is called an Isatsu visit, just exchanging name cards. We know that there have been attempts in the past for previous owners to connect; we hope that this time we will be lucky enough to join the pack. We met with Niseko town council today and clearly stated that we want to see Niseko growing. We hope that with their help and others; there have been many good people here to help us put everything together. We hope we will be able to achieve our goal which is to connect with the Niseko united, or/and other resorts.

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Hirafu master plan

RICCARDO Tossani Architecture has been commissioned to initiate a Master Plan study with a focus on the main street in Hirafu.

Hirafu-Zaka Street, from the Welcome Center to the Downtown Café, is Hirafu's principal gateway to the mountain and to many people the first impression of the resort.

"We have been commissioned by the NPB (Niseko Promotions Board), as part of their long range vision to enhance the character and substance of the entire Niseko mountain resort area, but we are also performing a lot of our work pro-bono," master architect Riccardo Tossani said.

"The plan will initially focus on the signage and image issues with respect to the main street, and we will make a preliminary presentation in March.

"For the moment I can say that we will propose underground power lines, cables and hide unsightly infrastructure, as well as make sense of the cacophony of signs and visual clutter dominating the streetscape."



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Geothermal: heating of the future

By Matthew Thomas

MANY parts of Japan are considered to be 'geothermal hotspots'. And one of these hotspots is Niseko.

This snowy little village may be chilly above-ground in winter, but below the Earth's surface it is blessed with shallow, easily harvestable resources. This means sustainable energies systems like geothermal heating can be installed and used without many problems. Niseko sits atop active soils, and is home to many an Earth-heated onsen (thermal baths).

Many believe that because geothermal heating doesn't rely heavily on the burning of fossil fuels, it produces a smaller carbon footprint. This means less of a contribution towards global warming – something of concern to snow-loving skiers and snowboarders.

In Layman's terms, geothermal heating is defined as the use of the Earth's thermal energy for space and water heating. It is a concept that has been utilised since the time of the Roman Empire, as a way of heating buildings and spas by using sources of steam and hot water that exists near the Earth's surface. The geothermal heat pump system exploits the temperature differential between below and above-ground environmental conditions, converting that differential into carbon emission-free energy used for heating or cooling. Temperatures in this area of the Earth remain at 10 to 16 degrees Celsius year-round.

Niseko has many commercial and private residencies that utilise geothermal heating to maintain temperatures on a property's floors, panels, roofs and roads, for example.

"You don't need to feel guilty – economically, environmentally or otherwise – for leaving the heater on all day and night."

One of the most experienced development and project management companies in the field of geothermals is West Canada Homes. WCH has been involved with five Niseko projects that implement geothermal heating – Asahi, Mangetsu, Setsugen, Zekkei and the Tancho Centre, which was WCH's first geothermal project. President of WCH, Paul Nikel, sights the positive environmental factors of geothermal

heating. "Compared to burning petroleum fuels, there are zero emissions with geothermal heating, besides a little electricity to run the pumps," he says. "Imagine a typical year, where most houses go through around 2000L of kerosene each ski season. You go through zero of that kerosene with geo-thermal heating." Paul says the only negatives are a larger initial set-up cost, and a slightly more complex and slower operating system, when compared to the basic immediacy of kerosene heating.

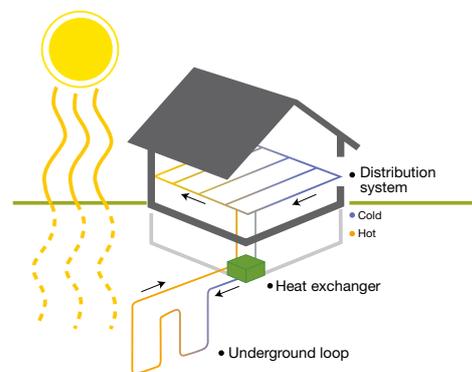
Paul also mentions a problem is that most developers aren't interested in geothermal heating due to the costs. "Geothermal heating is especially practical for those interested in the long-term payback, such as governments or commercial properties. It's perfect for governments who want to heat roads, for example, and for property owners who want to come here and enjoy the lifestyle for a number of years and are happy with that long-term payback." Paul says geothermal heating usually pays for itself in between six to 20 years. "For an average property, geothermal heating usually costs around ¥8 million to ¥20 million to set up," he says.

Experienced architect of more than 20 years, Tokyo-based Riccardo Tossani, of Riccardo Tossani Architecture, has much experience and a strong belief in environmentally sustainable design. He is currently building a private residence between Hirafu and Mount Yotei that will employ geothermal heating. "The system offers significantly reduced costs for heating rooms, floors, driveways and walkways over conventional systems," says Riccardo.

He says the positives of geothermal heating are 'substantial'. "With this technology we can supplement or even replace conventional heat exchangers and air-conditioners with a non-polluting, inexhaustible alternative, which can be run at very low cost," he says. "Coupled with radiators such as the PS variety, commonly used in Niseko and Hokkaido, it is quiet and non-allergenic, safe and compact."

Riccardo says this local residential project was conceived from the outset with thermal performance principles, to reduce demand on artificial energy and the emission of greenhouse gases. "For areas as environmentally sensitive and beautiful as Niseko, this is no small concern," he says.

Riccardo also agrees that initial installation costs for the system will be higher. "However, costs are coming down as



How does geothermal heating work?

The heating process starts when a pressurized, bio-degradable refrigerant gas – usually anti-freeze – is expanded and circulated within a closed, underground loop. As the temperature of the non-toxic gas drops as it expands within in the loop, it concurrently gets reheated by the Earth's warmth. After exiting the loop, the heated refrigerant gas is made hotter by recompression, and then transferred to a heat exchanger where it cools off, in turn warming the house. When reversed, geothermal heating can have a cooling effect.

the system becomes more popular in residential construction," Riccardo argues. "These added costs are subsidised in some communities, and should be considered in terms of life-cycle to assess the financial, if not environmental, viability."

Rett Anderson, from Niseko Resort Design and Construction, is a builder responsible for Hirafu's Ezo Views development in Izumiyko 1 – to be finished by November this year. Moving away from the obvious environmental, cost and durability pluses of geothermal heating, he mentioned several 'everyday' positives. "You can't really distinguish any difference between geothermal and conventional heating, besides a lower power bill," he says. "But there are no unsightly vents on the wall, no forced air as well, so the air in the house will not be dried out either because geothermal heating is radiant heating, which is also much cleaner than fuel heating. Geothermal is very maintenance-free – once you have done the pipe work, there is little to nothing to do. You don't need to feel guilty – economically, environmentally or otherwise – for leaving the heater on all day and night."

INTERVIEW - october 2008

Riccardo Tossani and partner Atsuko Itoda are the principals of architectural firm Riccardo Tossani Architecture, a Tokyo based firm whose work spans luxury residential, commercial and town planning. Recently engaged by Hokkaido Tracks to design new



projects including Shibisey Furano and the Escarpment Estate, the firm has also been recently appointed to assist with master planning for Niseko Hirafu. Riccardo Tossani and partner Atsuko Itoda bring a unique vision that is a synergy of cross-cultural ideas, luxury lifestyle living and sustainable resort development.

James: Riccardo, would you describe your association with Niseko, please?

Riccardo: I've been coming to Niseko for six or seven years now, not just for pleasure and because I like the environment and the skiing here, but also for professional reasons. I have been associated with a number of projects in the Niseko area with several clients — projects ranging from master planned resorts to individual residences — and that professional association has grown into a very strong affection for the location, for Niseko, and the social culture of Niseko through the development of friendships with a variety of people in the area.

James: How would you describe your architectural and design approach?

Riccardo: Our architecture is drawn primarily from an understanding of the essence of each individual site — the location and environment that our buildings are constructed in and the unique features of those particular environments. I refer to environmental features, historical features, regional cultural features — the elements of a place that make it truly unique. So clearly a site in Tokyo will be very different than one in Hokkaido, or on the island of Guam or the Town of Bergamo in Italy. Each place has its own cultural and historical as well as ecological or environmental characteristics. We draw from that as

inspiration for the architectural mission. The architectural mission is also driven by our client's needs — the functional brief — but also our client's aspirations — their sense of how they see themselves and where they want to be in terms of image and character and culture going forwards. We take all those things and throw them into a creative pot, stir it up, and interpret it all from our own perspective, our own view of the world. Our world view encompasses the way we visualize the future, and the way we aspire for the physical world to be. All of that comes together in the form of an architecture that eventually resonates with its site, with the host culture of the locality, with our clients' functional needs and aspirations, and with directions in creative development that we continue to investigate and explore as creative individuals.

James: What qualities do you believe make Niseko special?

Riccardo: Niseko is such an extraordinary place primarily for the physical landscape — the dramatic character of Mt Youtei, the most beautiful volcano in Japan, so perfect in its shape that it rivals Mt Fuji. The landscape is a beautiful blend of wilderness and agriculture. The



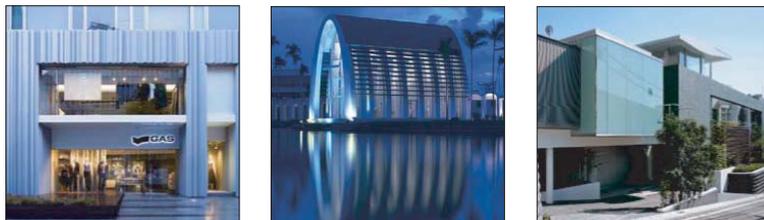
agriculture — the fields, farms and so forth — add a poignant character to an otherwise wild landscape. So the environment is unique and of course it changes dramatically with each passing week. The four seasons are an exquisite experience — something that many Australians like myself find to be quite exotic, such distinctive differences reflected in the landscape between one season and another. The winters are spectacular, with the deep powder snow, roads and village streets that become canyons, walls of powder snow two meters high — it's just an exquisite, extraordinary experience to be in a landscape like that. And then at a social level Niseko has accumulated so many interesting people from different countries and different cultures, all excited about the future of this place and all participating and contributing to the development of this nascent culture, this nascent place. We're at the beginning of something extraordinary — that implicit understanding that we're

all making a difference in the embryonic stages of a truly remarkable place makes us all feel special, and I feel quite privileged to be a part of a very important period in this community's history. That, I believe, is part of the force that energizes people in Niseko,

and we find that force at its most energetic levels in Hirafu around the village through the disparate development projects happening around the village, the interesting individuals that are behind those development projects, and the interaction between private stakeholders and the local community and authorities. All of this makes for an extraordinary mix of cultures and points of view, and it's a growing experience for everybody involved. There are many things to be excited about with regard to Niseko.

“...Niseko has accumulated so many interesting people from different countries and different cultures, all excited about the future of this place and all participating and contributing to the development of this nascent culture...”

Atsuko: From a Japanese point of view, what makes Niseko special compared to other parts of rural Japan is that so many foreigners visit here and truly appreciate the local area, the culture, local produce and local crafts. Foreigners' happiness is a great source of encouragement to the local people whose economy has been stagnating for a long time. And this happiness is reflected in a growing sense of hospitality of the local Japanese people. As you know, Japan is not a strong tourist country like Italy or France. Local Niseko or Hokkaido people, have never had to think about hospitality to foreigners before, but now they receive encouragement and are proud of themselves, and they are so happy and they want to do much more. I think this combination is very important, and will build Niseko into a bigger, world class resort. I think that's the hint, just a small thing, but that's the hint about what makes Niseko special.



James: A question about the design – do you think it's exciting that foreigners are coming to Japan and building residences here and insisting on a Japanese dimension to the design? Is this an exciting challenge for you?

Riccardo: I think it's absolutely terrific that foreigners come here with the intention of integrating elements of Japanese tradition or lifestyle into their new homes or projects. It shows an open-

mind attitude towards this host culture – the inverse of that would be terrible, totally insensitive. But it presents a number of very difficult challenges for the designer, namely how to do it in a meaningful way, not in a superficial or tactless way. How to do it in a way that doesn't demean the character of Japanese tradition, craftsmanship, history, and aesthetics, and how to do it in a way that incorporates that Japaneseness into an environment that is functional and liveable for a western mentality. Japanese traditional architecture, lifestyle, products, ways of living and design are based on a very, very different set of living principles – the tatami mat, the futon on the floor, the lack of furniture in a typical traditional Japanese domestic setting. You can't take a Japanese house and add a dining table, chairs, a bed on legs, a desk, etc. and expect it to still work as a Japanese house. There has to be a transformation and a fusion of these two very different cultures, and this has to happen in a sensible way that doesn't diminish the functionality or character of either culture. It's a very difficult task to do well, but I think it's a challenge that's definitely worth pursuing rather than to give up on altogether and just adopt a model that's completely imported from a foreign culture – that doesn't make much sense.



Atsuko: Personally, I believe that if we can use local crafts or local carpenters that maintain the Japanese traditions, techniques and quality, Niseko can develop into a solid, organic, meaningful resort. We want foreign developers to appreciate those things that connect to Japanese culture and tradition.

James: What do you think is needed in Niseko most of all and do you think it's achievable?

Atsuko: Love and respect! Because as long as foreigners respect Japanese culture and Japanese people, and Japanese have great hospitality and attitude and love to outsiders, economically and culturally it will become very interesting. For example, the little details that Japanese carpenters use, even if it's not a traditional Japanese house, Australians say "Wow, this is amazing." Even getting excited about Hokkaido seafood and vegetables is a positive thing. And when foreign developers use Japanese products and equipment, and Japanese companies act with a spirit of hospitality and work to achieve high product quality, then through this kind of

development everyone becomes excited about creating something special . So respect for each other, and love for each other is very important.

Riccardo: I like Atsuko's answer, but mine would be maybe a little bit more technical, that is, we love Hokkaido and we love Hirafu in particular because it is the rustic product of multiple visions



that are coalescing by chance into something quite unpredictable, and that rustic charm and that craziness is what has attracted us to this place and what keeps us here. It's likely to become gentrified as the area evolves, however, in order for it not to lose that character or in order for it to have something of value to replace the character that it may lose, what Niseko needs most of all in my opinion is some sort of unified vision of what it should be going forwards. That unified vision means clarity of understanding of what the townscape could be like, what the greenscape could be, and the nature of sidewalks, avenues and pocket parks. It means saving gardens and replanting trees that are lost through development — basically a master plan that brings together everyone's interests in a way that can be passed on from generation to generation and can be supported by all stakeholders. As far as the mountain is concerned, better unification of the mountain and the ski amenities, and rationalization of

those amenities together with improvement or beautification of the mountain as well as the villages; all of these things are inevitable but they'll happen faster if there is some sort of leadership and collective vision to enable them to happen.

“...I believe that if we can use local crafts or local carpenters that maintain the Japanese traditions, techniques and quality, Niseko can develop into a solid, organic, meaningful resort.”

Atsuko: I want to add – I think Hokkaido people, foreigners and local people together, should think they are the leaders of a new Japanese culture that includes an understanding of Japanese tradition and spirit. Kyoto is a tourist town because it's very historical, so they are trying to keep it very traditional, but here we are creating a new culture and new hospitality systems, and are encouraging and respecting each other, and Niseko people are the leaders — they must understand this.

Riccardo Tossani Architecture



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