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# sustainable japan

## Architect Brooks reshapes offices to new world of work

### Roundtable

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CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Christopher Brooks is the executive officer and design director of Garde, an international branding and interior design company based in Tokyo. With more than 20 years' experience in Japan and several design awards under his belt, Brooks talked about his journey in the world of architecture and shared his insights on contemporary office design.

### Early encounters

Growing up in the Los Angeles, Brooks developed an eye for the aesthetic from a young age and recounts one episode as an 8-year-old in elementary school. "There was a teaching assistant who taught me how to draw a simple perspective of a box — how you can draw it in 3D. I fell in love with this concept of how you can look at something and replicate it," he recalled.

Brooks went on to take part in an art contest, and had an early taste of success when his design was chosen for the cover of a school publication that year. "From that moment I knew I wanted to do something with architecture."

Ten years down the line, one of his first



Christopher Brooks, executive officer and design director of Garde. YUICO TAIYA FOR PHOTOMATE

encounters with Japanese design was while studying at architecture school in New Orleans. Browsing in the campus library, he came upon a monograph of a modern abstraction of a samurai sword by well-known architect Shin Takamatsu. Inspired by Takamatsu's work, Brooks began researching other Japanese architects.

With his architect's license in hand, Brooks decided to check out things for himself and headed to Japan — not to the bright lights of Tokyo, but to Matsue, a provincial city in Shimane Prefecture. Matsue and New Orleans are sister cities, primarily through their connection with writer Lafcadio Hearn, who wrote about both places in the 19th century.

Brooks was "blown away" by the traditional aspects of life he found in Matsue, which was totally counter to his perception of a futuristic, technology-driven Japan. One of his most memorable experiences was visiting Izumo Grand Shrine. "There was a certain heaviness and emotional feeling when you see it and experience it. This is something that I think a lot of architects seek — an emotional connection they are trying to recreate," he said.

### Learning from a design master

While working part time in Tottori at an architectural firm, a stroke of serendipity lead to an introduction to none other than Shin Takamatsu, who happens to be from



Christopher Brooks and Roundtable host Ross Rowbury discuss the major changes COVID-19 has brought to the office environment. YUICO TAIYA FOR PHOTOMATE

Shimane. After a mutual friend set up an interview, Takamatsu offered to sponsor Brooks' work visa and invited the young American to join his firm in Kyoto.

Brooks feels very fortunate to have had this opportunity to work alongside Takamatsu. "He was so prolific! He could literally sit down and sketch out 50 ideas in 50 minutes," he recalled with awe. "What I took away is that you have to explore your ideas to the fullest extent."

After working on Takamatsu's projects for clients in the USA and Europe, Brooks eventually made his way to Tokyo, where he is now designing for both domestic and international clients at Garde. Established in 1985 to help luxury brands set up their businesses in Japan during the bubble years, Garde has since branched out into other areas, such as hospitality and office design.

In terms of what clients are looking for with work spaces, Brooks says that expectations are definitely higher recently. "A lot of

this comes from people wanting an experience, not just functionality. They want some emotional connection."

Another major trend is "activity-based working" (ABW). While offices traditionally had specific sections for certain roles, and people mainly worked in cubicles, Brooks says that now lines of division are being blurred. "We realized it made sense to 'un-gether' people from their desk. ABW is simply designing your office based on the activities you have to do, so you can be 100% mobile and work more efficiently."

### A harbinger of change

It goes without saying that COVID-19 has had a major impact on office design and function. According to Brooks, the office will come to be a place for collaboration and interaction, while focus work is more likely to be done at home or outside the office. Despite this, he notes that the importance of "physical presence" should not be underestimated and that

people must feel that they are part of a larger whole. To mitigate feelings of isolation, it is necessary for people to have frequent touchpoints with their colleagues.

Many people have become used to working from home, and some have even moved out to areas where they can enjoy cheaper rents and a more relaxed lifestyle. However, since Japanese dwellings are generally quite small, they still may want to physically take their work outside the home.

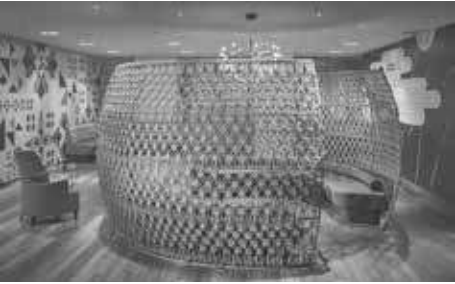
In line with this, coworking spaces have become something of a buzzword, such as those operated by WeWork. Brooks says that a high volume and scale is needed to make this business model work and noted that some companies are exploring the idea of setting up satellite office spaces to which their staff can easily commute to.

Offering a sanitary and safe work environment is also of paramount importance when considering office design. "COVID-19 has caused us to think more deeply about this, for sure," Brooks said. "There is more of a concern for fresh air exchange and air filtration in the mechanical systems, bacteria-free finishes and safe distancing."

### Office Design 101

Moving forward, Brooks offers three important pointers for companies in terms of planning their new office space:

Working from home is here to stay, and so you need to figure out a way to tie your



A patterned rustic rope communication kiosk sits at the center of a social space inspired by the blooming of Iris flowers during the rainy season. NACASA & PARTNERS

remote staff members into activities at the office.

It is important to have a flexible office space. We still don't know how things will play out with COVID-19 in the future. You need to be able to accommodate different scenarios.

You also have to look at how you manage people. Until now, Japan was about having your staff show up and sit in front of you, but now you need to manage them based on work performance.

Brooks says his profession is all about learning from experience: "Most people don't understand that design is very much a trial-and-error type profession. I think that is what drives us: having a problem and trying to solve it."

He has come a long way from that bright-eyed 8-year-old who drew the box, but one thing hasn't changed: "In 10 years' time, I'll still be in Japan!" he said with a laugh. "I still have the same curiosity as that of the first day when I arrived."

**GARDE**

Roundtable is a monthly series of English-language events organized by The Japan Times Cube. For more information visit <https://sustainable.japantimes.com/roundtable>



## Cuisine régionale L'évo

The Destination Restaurant of the Year 2021

Regional dining redefined at newly opened gastronomic auberge in the Toyama mountains



ROBBIE SWINNERTON  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

If you are among those who believe that anticipation is half the enjoyment, then you will love the journey to L'évo. Chef Eiji Taniguchi's remarkable new restaurant lies high in the mountains, a two-hour-plus drive from the city of Toyama through forests, past lakes and up narrow winding roads.

For guests, it is the ideal setting for a quiet gastronomic getaway. But for Taniguchi it's the culmination of a long-held dream. Although his first restaurant in the foothills of the mountains won him plaudits, awards and a Michelin star, he was already planning his next step — a new location along with an auberge where guests can immerse themselves in nature.

Opened in December 2020, his new iteration of L'évo, includes three "cottages" of varying size and degree of luxury, plus a separate sauna, all built in a unified architectural style. Although only three groups (of a maximum four people) can stay at the auberge each night, the dining room has seating for up to 26. It also boasts the finest views on the property, looking up a narrow canyon toward the massive rock wall of the Hida Mountains.

Taniguchi draws from the full gamut of local seasonal ingredients. The mountain forests offer game meats, wild plants and mushrooms; the waters of Toyama Bay are among the most fertile fishing grounds in all Japan; the rivers offer freshwater fish; and the lowland plains provide produce and noodles,



**Address**  
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<https://levo.toyama.jp>

sake and condiments. From the opening "prologue" of finger foods and light bites to the final dessert, all are beautifully represented on an intricate 13-course menu studied with standout dishes.

Among the standouts from his spring menu are sashimi *gando* (young yellowtail) served with generous scoops of sturgeon caviar that Taniguchi prepares himself; slivers of meat from a *tsukinowa* brown bear, lean at the end of its hibernation, encased in a *nikogori* gelee prepared from a consommé of the same meat; firefly squid quickly seared over a wood fire and served in their own juices; and fresh *sōmen* noodles in a thick broth made with local goat's cheese and seasoned with *fukinoto* (wild butterbur) oil.

One of the most brilliant offerings is the L'évo chicken. The fowl are raised according to Taniguchi's specifications at a farm deep in the hills, on a special feed of rice mixed

with sake lees from the nearby Masuzumi brewery. Taniguchi takes the breast and leg meat, mixes it with glutinous rice, moistens it with bear fat, then wraps it back onto the leg inside its skin. Grilled over his wood fire, it develops a wonderfully deep flavor to match the smoky aroma — the high point of a meal with numerous peaks.

Taniguchi calls his approach at L'évo "avant-garde regional cuisine." And certainly in this part of Japan, there is no one cooking with similar breadth of skill and imagination — and least of all in such a pristine location. But his influence and impact extend beyond the culinary field. He is championing local artisans, setting higher standards of agricultural practice and commissioning local artists and architects while drawing visitors into the mountains. In short, he is breathing new life into an area that has been losing its direction and population in recent decades.

**HACHIRO NITTA**  
GOVERNOR OF TOYAMA PREF.



Mr. Taniguchi offers avant-garde regional cuisine with a particular focus on local ingredients and table settings, surrounded by the rich natural bounty of Toga.

It is a great honor for his restaurant to be selected as the best in Japan, and we hope it will continue to grow as a world-class inn.

**MIKIO TANAKA**  
MAYOR OF NANTO



We would like to express our greatest pleasure at being selected as part of Destination Restaurant of the Year 2021. We hope that the chef's world-class cuisine will form the basis for Nanto to become a global brand as a food sanctuary, and that through his food, people from all around the world will be able to interact with Nanto.

### ESG / SDGs

MAIKO MURAOKA  
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CDP (formerly the Carbon Disclosure Project) Japan conducted an online session on April 6 to present its latest reports about climate change and deforestation and discuss these closely related issues with stakeholders from Japan and abroad.

"All sectors are starting to address climate change, but not the issue of deforestation. Whether they use timber or not, many sectors are actually related to forest resources in one way or another," said Michiyo Morisawa, director of CDP Japan and the Japan head of the Principles for Responsible Investment network, in the opening remark, encouraging companies to ensure that resources they use do not contribute to deforestation.

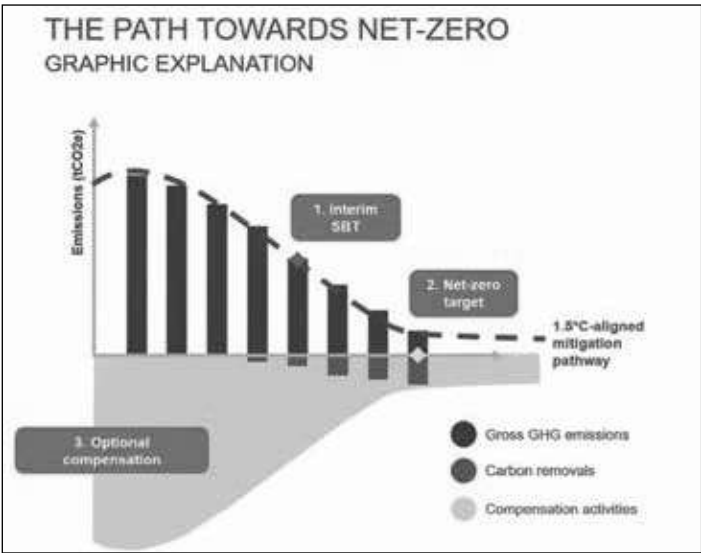
Tohru Nakashizuka, president of the Forest Research and Management Organization, a national institute, stated in his keynote speech that corporate and financial activities established on nature-based principles will be further incorporated into national socio-environmental goals and strategies.

He described nature-based solutions advocated by the International Union for Conservation of Nature as solving social issues and increasing biodiversity at the same time by preserving, restoring and managing the natural environment sustainably. "Infrastructures that utilize ecosystems have multifaceted functions," he said.

Nicolette Bartlett, executive director of CDP, explained that nature-based solutions can bring companies reputational gains, reduce costs and risks, and stimulate innovation. However, "to stop and reverse deforestation" and "to halve the emissions by 2030," Bartlett said, "there is still a significant amount of work to be done."

### Science-based targets increase

But the good news is that awareness in the private sector is increasing. According to the latest CDP report on climate change, 65% of the 500 Japanese companies that received the CDP's climate change questionnaire in 2020 submitted answers. "The ratio is higher than the EU's 49% and North America's 54%," said an official at SOCOTEC Certification Japan, which was one of the report's writers. Increasing numbers of companies have



A graphic used in one of the presentations at the online session explains the trajectory leading to net-zero carbon emissions. CDP

set science-based targets complying with the Paris Agreement's standards on emissions reductions, use renewable energy or have received external verification of their data on emissions, according to SOCOTEC and SGS Japan Inc., the other writer of the report.

The compiler of the CDP 2020 Forest Report, Quick Corp., revealed that about 70% of the respondents to a CDP questionnaire on the disclosure of information about four forest commodities — palm oil, cattle products, soybeans and timber — are collaborating with primary suppliers to enhance the supply capacity of sustainable raw materials.

Fuji Oil Holdings Inc., which develops and makes food products such as vegetable oils, industrial chocolate and soy-based ingredients, is one such company. The chief ESG officer of Fuji Oil, Takashi Kadota, explained that the company is working with NGOs, local governments, farms and communities in producing countries to educate suppliers to avoid problems that result mainly from a lack of knowledge or poverty and to make the whole supply chain sustainable.

### Getting help on strategies

For companies wishing to do something about climate change and the environment, various international organizations provide guidelines, standards and frameworks. The World Resources Institute is one of them.

Research analyst Jessica Zionts and research associate Matt Ramlow explained about WRI's contribution to the Greenhouse Gas Protocol Land Sector and Removals Ini-

tiative. The initiative crafted guidance to help companies in the land sector "set targets, track performance and select mitigation strategies in line with the goals of the Paris Agreement," said Ramlow. Zionts encouraged companies that are interested in doing pilot tests of the guidance to contact them.

Science Based Targets Network, a coalition of more than 45 NGO partners, offers a consolidated approach for companies to set targets based on climate science. Executive Director Erin Billman stated that emissions by companies that had worked with the network on setting targets decreased by 25% between 2015 and 2019.

The Climate Disclosure Standards Board offers "a framework for reporting environmental and climate information in the mainstream report," said Managing Director Mardi McBrien. She emphasized that international standardization and a comprehensive system for reporting climate-related information will allow Japanese companies to streamline ESG reporting, ensure that their voices will be heard in the process of creating and updating a global standard, and attract a global audience more easily.

"There truly is no time to waste — we must act now," she said in concluding the session.

This section highlights the environment and a sustainable society. For more information on ESG and SDG issues, see [www.sustainable.japantimes.com/esg](http://www.sustainable.japantimes.com/esg)



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