

# A PEACE OF OUR OWN



A central fireplace anchors the sparse and serene living space at Josie Natori's Westchester home

Amid tranquil woods in Pound Ridge, New York State, fashion designer Josie Natori has carved out an oasis of calm that is the embodiment of the 'East meets West' ethos of her brand

WORDS GRACE CAIN



"I'LL TELL YOU ALL THE CALAMITIES. Just when we were supposed to move in, two evergreens toppled right through the roof and destroyed it. So that was another six months' work. What else...?" Fashion designer Josie Natori (*above*) talks quickly, flitting from sentence to sentence and topic to topic with few pauses and plenty of good humour. She makes trees hurtling through her newly built weekend home in Westchester's Pound Ridge sound like a minor inconvenience. "One time, the rain got in and destroyed the entire heating and AC systems," she continues. "The house does have its challenges in terms of the natural surroundings, and obviously Calvin pushed the envelope in terms of design – it's maybe not the most practical." >





“THEY’VE TAKEN SOMETHING AS MUNDANE AS RAIN AND CREATED ART”



This page, from top: A reflecting pool and ‘rain chains’ are just two features of the gardens; a sculpture sits at one end of a veranda; the light-filled rooms are designed with a flow from one to the next, courtesy of a timber-beam structure that reduces the need for internal walls. Opposite page: Eschewing the traditional mirror, a picture window above the twin bathroom sinks delivers views across a verdant landscape



Natori is referring here to Calvin Tsao – one half of New York architect firm Tsao & McKown – whom she first met while searching for someone to design a new showroom for her eponymous fashion label. Founded in 1977, after Natori swapped a successful Wall Street career for more creative ambitions, the brand has since expanded from its original sleepwear offering into lingerie, ready-to-wear and accessories. Today, it has a fiercely loyal following around the world (particularly in Natori’s native Philippines) and is also now stocked in Harrods’ new lingerie rooms. “I’m so excited to hear that people are talking about this space,” she says. “I can’t wait to visit. Harrods is like the centre of the world.”

When it came to that original showroom, Natori was hoping to reflect what she calls “the East-meets-West” sensibility of her brand. “I wanted someone who would understand that and how it could be expressed. So I did some research and that’s how I met Calvin. He loves fashion and we had a lot of mutual friends, so we immediately felt a connection. Now, it’s like he can finish my sentences – I always joke that we are addicted to each other.”

Tsao went on to design the New York City apartment that Natori shares with her husband and chairman of her brand, Ken Natori. “It was a seven-year ordeal,” Natori remembers. “Just because of the building and getting all the permits.” Evidently, it was worth it. When it came to the couple’s weekend home, Natori gave Tsao total freedom – almost. “Of course, there were boundaries on cost,” she says. “But I didn’t really get involved at all. I trusted him completely. All I said was that I wanted something where the inside felt like outside. And very serene with a Japanese influence – because my husband is third-generation Japanese American, and I have such an admiration of the culture.”

That influence is hard to miss. It’s there in the wooden structures, the emphasis on purity, and the details: the panels behind the bed that came from a Japanese monastery, for example. There are bonsai trees and a reflecting pool in the Japanese-style landscaped gardens. And then there’s the rain chain. “When I first saw it, I said what is that?” Natori remembers. “Basically, when it rains, the water collects and starts pouring down these big chains. It’s like art; they’ve taken something as mundane as rain and created art. It’s beautiful in the snow, too.”

A harmonious relationship with nature is often a defining characteristic of Japanese architecture, and the same philosophy was so important to Natori that it became one



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of the few pointers she gave Tsao and his design partner, Zack McKown. After all, the natural landscape first drew the Natoris to this property more than 40 years ago, long before their current home existed. “I am not a country person, I am a city person,” Natori admits. “But there was something magical about this. It’s like a park. We have trees that are 250 years old, a large pond and beautiful views.”

On the flip side, the original dwelling – the 1741 farmhouse that still stands down the hill from the Natoris’ newer home – didn’t chime. “I can’t tell you that I liked the house, because I didn’t,” says Natori. Despite that, back in 1984, they bought the pre-American Revolution cottage with everything inside, right down to the sheets on the bed. “It’s all very charming and traditional, but it’s not my look,” the designer explains – though she does have a soft spot for the tradition established by the previous owners (just four of them since the house’s construction): “Each would pass on information, [so] they call this the Singing Hills. I love that.”

The cluttered old house (regularly used for getaways by Natori’s son and his family) stands in direct opposition to Tsao and McKown’s design, where each light-filled room flows into the next. “It’s all on one line, with one bedroom,” says Natori. “It makes you realise that life can be simpler.” She saves her self-confessed hoarder tendencies for her other properties, insisting that Pound Ridge is all about peace. “I have a beautiful sculpture in the library, and in Japanese it is called ‘Gratitude’. How fitting is that?”

“Of course, Calvin always says that simple designs are the hardest,” she continues. “And there’s nothing simple about the construction – he really did not miss a trick. For example, if you want, you can face the sun at any >





*Above: The indoor/outdoor bath area includes an alfresco tub; right: The house's one bedroom features a headboard made of sliding panels that came from a Japanese monastery*

time of the day because the house looks out in so many directions. I think Calvin's approach is almost intimate, the way he gets into your psyche. He understands what will make you happy."

And what does make Natori happy, here in the Singing Hills? "Honestly, I just like to chill out," she says. "I am addicted to my iPhone, and I like to read and catch up on phone calls. I play my piano. But when I'm here, I can do nothing. Last weekend we had wonderful weather, so I got my iPad and my speakers – I love classical music – and I just sat there from 7am to 8pm. It was so therapeutic."

As for Tsao, he often tells Natori that her weekend home is his best work. "Because I let him free," she reflects. "But I know it was also a challenge, and now we have the challenges of maintenance! Of course, when anything goes wrong, the construction company blames the designer, and Calvin [Tsao] blames the construction company. And guess who pays? The client." She laughs good-naturedly. "There's a price for everything, right? And when something brings you this much joy..." she shrugs. "So, anyway, I know that it's divine. And I love it." □

Simon Upton/Tsao & McKown



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