

# JAPAN HOME

Inspirational Design Ideas



LISA PARRAMORE  
and CHADINE FLOOD GONG  
Photography by NOBORU MURATA



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TUTTLE PUBLISHING  
Tokyo • Rutland, Vermont • Singapore



Published by Tuttle Publishing, an imprint of Periplus Editions (HK) Ltd., with editorial offices at 364 Innovation Drive, North Clarendon, Vermont 05759, USA, and 61 Tai Seng Avenue, #02-12, Singapore 534167

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Photographs © 2009 Noboru Murata  
Photography coordinator: Kaoru Murata

ISBN 978-4-8053-1000-7

Distributed by:

**North America, Latin America & Europe**

Tuttle Publishing  
364 Innovation Drive  
North Clarendon, VT 05759-9436, U.S.A.  
Tel: 1 (802) 773-8930; Fax: 1 (802) 773-6993  
info@tuttlepublishing.com  
www.tuttlepublishing.com

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www.periplus.com

12 11 10 09 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in Singapore

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## CONTENTS

8	Designing A Japanese Dream Home	
16	FLEXIBLE SPACES IN A JAPANESE HOME	54 TATAMI AND TEA
18	Leaving the Outside World Behind	56 Creating a Japanese Tea Room
26	The Japanese Living Room	64 The Japanese Tea House
32	A Place for Dining	72 The Hearth
38	The Veranda	76 Tea Implements
44	An Elegant Sleeping Area	80 The Art of Ikebana
50	The Japanese Bath	





84 FURNISHINGS AND ACCENTS

86 Shoji Screens

90 Fabric and Bamboo Blinds

92 Decorative Screens and Partitions

98 Antique Tables and Chests

104 Handmade Japanese Lamps

108 Details

112 THE JAPANESE GARDEN

114 Fences and Gates

118 Pathways and Bridges

124 Stones, Gravel and Sand

130 Water Features

136 Garden Decorations

142 Bibliography

143 Acknowledgments

144 Japanese Terms and Glossary











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38	The Veranda	76 Tea Implements
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50	The Japanese Bath	



84 FURNISHINGS AND ACCENTS

- 86 Shoji Screens
- 90 Fabric and Bamboo Blinds
- 92 Decorative Screens and Partitions
- 98 Antique Tables and Chests
- 104 Handmade Japanese Lamps
- 108 Details

112 THE JAPANESE GARDEN

- 114 Fences and Gates
- 118 Pathways and Bridges
- 124 Stones, Gravel and Sand
- 130 Water Features
- 136 Garden Decorations
- 142 Bibliography
- 143 Acknowledgments
- 144 Japanese Terms and Glossary



# DESIGNING A JAPANESE DREAM HOME

It is raining. If you are inside a typical Western home, you might not even be aware of the rain.

In a traditional Japanese home, the window openings are wide and the sills, if there are any, are low. The solid roof above spreads its eaves protectively around the house and frames the garden for you to enjoy during the rain. Seeing the garden glisten in the rain, you feel peace and serenity. The rain, the garden, the outside—they are all a part of your living space. Indeed, the Japanese word for home, *katei*, is a combination of the characters for house (*ka*) and garden (*tei*), reminding us that the ideal living space in Japan includes both.

As designers, we are accustomed to clients asking us to create spaces that are tranquil yet dramatic, understated yet elegant, and we enjoy guiding their journey towards a deeper understanding of Japanese aesthetics. Indeed, the serene atmosphere of the Japanese home is what attracts many Westerners, and the rooms and gardens shown on these pages convey that mood. This book will help you understand the form and function of Japanese spaces and the aesthetic intent behind them so that you may better pursue your dream.

Whether you plan to build a dream home from scratch or create a single special room, it requires an appreciation for the uniquely Japanese approach to beauty. While many concepts exist to describe and interpret beauty from a Japanese perspective, we mention two terms here that will serve well as an introduction.

The first is *sukiya*, an architectural style dating back to the sixteenth century when the practice of the tea ceremony solidified into the

Wood and bamboo figure prominently in a Japanese room. The soothing colors of nature create a subdued and tranquil atmosphere. A Japanese room, with its reliance on vertical and horizontal lines arranged in asymmetrical fashion, is the picture of simplicity.







Light is managed with elegance in Japanese homes. Paper *shoji* screens diffuse harsh sunlight to softly bathe a room in natural light, while the gold-leaf folding screen at the rear reflects light.

ritualized custom it is today. The Katsura Detached Palace in Kyoto, characterized by elegant proportions and restrained ornamentation, is considered the classic example of this type of building. Rejecting opulence and extravagance, the indigenous style of *sukiya* influenced residential architecture as well.

While *sukiya* refers to an architectural style, *shibui* refers to beauty itself, specifically, the highest level of beauty one can realize. An object worthy of being called *shibui* implies a quiet luxury, something simple and useful yet elegant. Fifty years have passed since readers of the American magazine *House Beautiful* were introduced at length to the concept. “*Shibui* describes a profound, unassuming, quiet feeling,” wrote Elizabeth Gordon in the 1960 article. An object described as *shibui* “must have elements that make you want to examine it, study it, to look again and again. It must not reveal itself all at once.” A lacquered doorknob might depict part of a flower; a screen painting might show a section of a tree trunk: it is up to the viewer to use his imagination to complete the scene. The homes and interiors in this book reflect the influence of *sukiya*-style architecture and are decorated with objects that may be called *shibui*.

This book will introduce you first to the Japanese house, room by room, in Chapter One, “Spaces in a Japanese House.” Understanding the traditional blueprint will help you think about the aspects of the

Japanese lifestyle that you might wish to adapt, such as removing shoes and storing them in a cabinet in the foyer, sleeping on a *futon* close to the mild aroma of *tatami* mats of woven straw, or relaxing in a deep soaking tub up to your shoulders with a view of a garden at the end of a busy day. It will also help you think about floor plans differently. You might opt to omit one or more permanent walls in favor of sliding partitions or expand the view of the garden through larger windows or openings.

If you have only a single room to work with, consider the interiors shown in the second chapter, “Tatami and Tea.” Following the lead of the contemporary Japanese family whose post-war lifestyle resembles in many ways its Western counterpart, a single room may be all that is needed (or practical) to employ Japanese aesthetics. This room can function as a retreat from the hustle and bustle of the rest of the household, or a place to create an inviting experience for guests, whether for afternoon tea or an overnight stay.

Chapter Three discusses the use of accents and furnishings and how to make them work in any room, and the final chapter is devoted to the garden, the space that truly completes a Japanese home. Inherent in the Japanese philosophy of life is a keen sensitivity to nature and its rhythms, and the use of natural materials in our homes is part of what makes us feel connected to nature. The materials that





