

The image shows the interior of the MORIMOTO restaurant. The most striking feature is the ceiling, which is covered in a series of parallel, wavy, corrugated panels made of canvas frozen in place with fiberglass spray. Several track lights are mounted on the ceiling, casting a warm glow. Below the ceiling, the dining area is furnished with long, rectangular wooden tables and simple wooden chairs. In the background, a kitchen area is visible, featuring stainless steel surfaces and a circular light fixture. The overall atmosphere is minimalist and modern, with a focus on natural materials and unique architectural details.

The overhead "drapes" are actually a hard material: canvas frozen into place with a fiberglass spray on the upper, unexposed surface. The restaurant offers a variety of dining options, including long communal tables.

Tadao **Ando** serves up rich visual fare with silky concrete and glowing water bottles at New York's **MORIMOTO** restaurant

By Sarah Amelar

Flaps of persimmon-red cloth over the entrance of Manhattan's Morimoto restaurant flicker wildly in the breeze, animating the industrial brick-and-blackened-steel facade. A curiosity to passersby, the flame-bright scrims turn out to be a playful twist on a traditional *noren*, the curtain that hangs outside shops in Japan, signifying "open for business." Unlike a typical *noren*, this one is not of cotton, but of woven PVC weighted at the bottom, and it spans not a modest commercial doorway, but an almost theatrical 50-foot-wide arch. This supesize gesture offers a first taste of the space's inventive and, in many cases, oblique allusions to Japanese culture. Just as chef Masaharu Morimoto—a star of TV's *Iron Chef*—fuses Japanese sushi with such flourishes as *fois gras* and *crème fraîche*, the restaurant design borrows seasonings from eclectic sources.

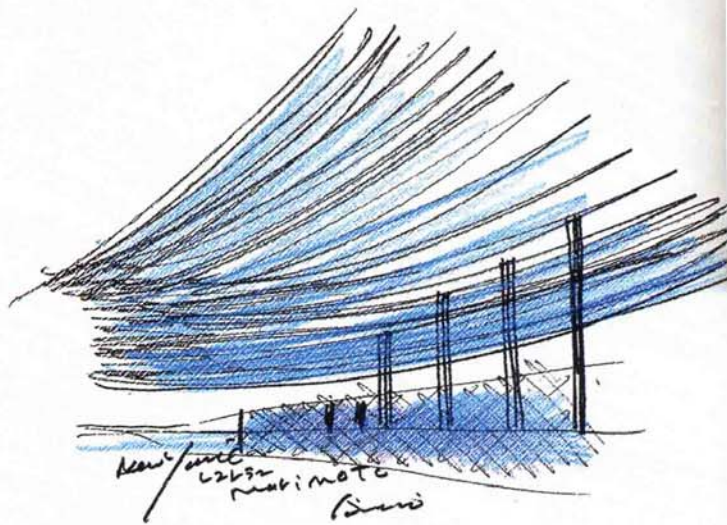
Right behind the *noren*, automatic doors glide open, revealing that this is not your classically sober, ultraserene Tadao Ando project. Certainly, concrete, his signature material, is present—notably in the stair descending from the 160-seat dining area, at grade, to the bar and lounge below. But beyond that cool, quiet gray, the 13,000-square-foot interior conveys a sense of spectacle in its dynamic convergence of angles, multiple contrasting surfaces, and overhead ripples coursing across a luminous, tentlike ceiling.

A nearly two-story-high water wall, angled off of the plan's orthogonal lines, plunges down the center of the space alongside the stair. Not the gently trickling waterfall of Japanese gardens nor the country's almost glacially still fountains, this freestanding wall is composed of 17,400 half-liter plastic bottles, filled with mineral water and screwed into electric-socketlike couplers. While vertical stainless-steel rods hold the couplers, horizontal bracing carries LED point lighting, producing a backlit shimmering effect.

But is this whimsical (though literally splashless) exuberance really the work of the typically rather subdued Ando? "Restaurants are different from more 'serious,' architecture," he explains. "I recognize them as places for entertainment." His client, Stephen Starr, a self-described "longtime fan of Ando's" and "design-driven restaurateur," who had commissioned Karim Rashid for his Morimoto restaurant in Philadelphia [RECORD, November 2002, page 164], convinced the Japanese architect to take on this \$6.5 million project in what was once the Nabisco Baking Company's gritty loading dock and basement. The space now borders Manhattan's Chelsea Market, a hip, quasi-industrial food arcade. Starr was initially concerned, he confesses, that the project might turn out "museumlike and all concrete," so he "respectfully let Ando know early on that the restaurant would need warmth." And, it seems, a lively spark.

Playful experiments with plastic water bottles are not, however, new to Ando's work. In recent years, he used empty ones in his traveling sets for an opera, conducted by Seiji Ozawa, and for temporary exhibition walls at the Suntory Museum, a 1994 building in Osaka of his own design. (Early in his career, he even built several modest restaurants—though apparently none with plastic bottles.) "I'm interested in bottles," the architect says, "because they're very basic household items that can become something else entirely different, depending on how you use them."

At Morimoto, as Ando readily acknowledges, the outcome—for the water vessels and the entire interior—evolved through a true collaboration of talents. To orchestrate the project, he chose Stephanie Goto, a young Japanese-American architect who heads Goto Design Group, a



The *noren* (hanging cloth, left) spans a 50-foot-long arch at the restaurant's entrance. Ando superimposed blackened-steel cladding over the existing facade. A huge, cracked Douglas fir log forms a counter (below).



Project: Morimoto New York, N.Y.C.

Architect: Tadao Ando Architects and Associates—Tadao Ando, principal; Masataka Yano, project architect

Associate architect: Stephanie Goto

Design Group—Stephanie Goto, principal, New York project architect

Engineers: Leslie Robertson and Associates (structural); Thomas Polise (m/e/p); Langan (geotechnical)



The stair descends from the dining area, at street level, to the bar below. LED point lights of two different color temperatures illuminate the bottle wall.

Ross Lovegrove, who masterminded all the furniture, had also, years before, designed the Ty Nant water bottles that screw into the wall's structure like light bulbs in a coupler.

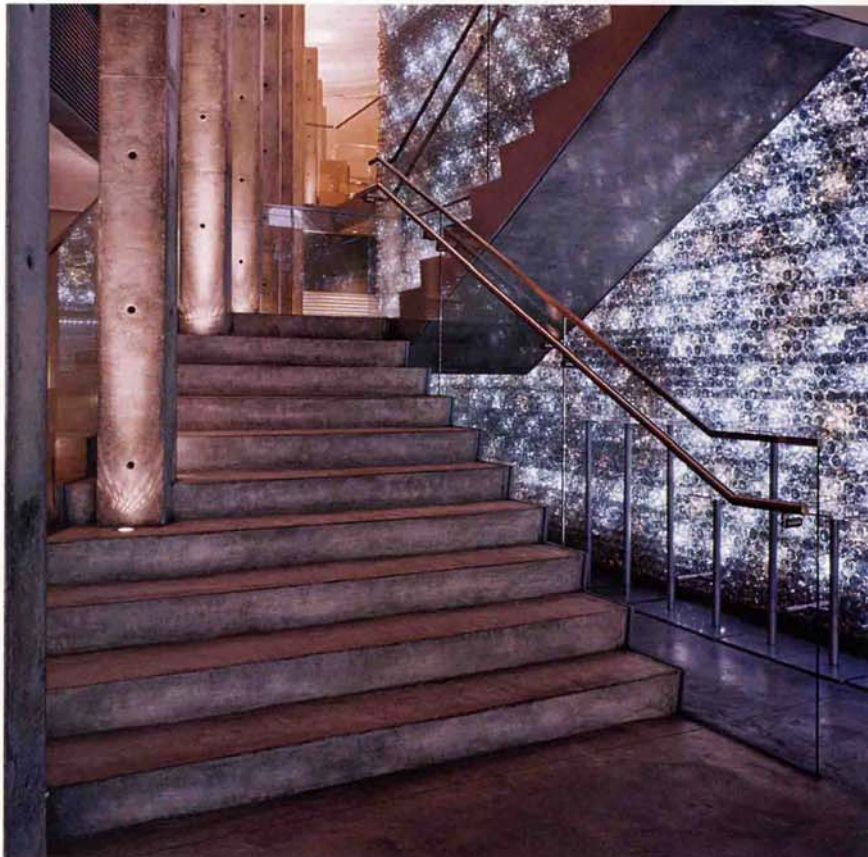


Uplights cast "X"s on a rice-papered wall (opposite). Glass partitions, with a denser frit pattern toward the bottom, provide some privacy (opposite, at left). The cantilevered,

poured-concrete stair, pinned at top and bottom, hangs from four of the square concrete columns, none of which actually touches the ceiling (this page, top and bottom).



- | | |
|-------------------------|-------------------|
| 1. Host/coat check | 10. Manager |
| 2. Dining | 11. Lounge |
| 3. Bottle wall | 12. Bar |
| 4. Private dining | 13. Main kitchen |
| 5. Storage | 14. Dish washing |
| 6. Walk-in refrigerator | 15. Prep kitchen |
| 7. Exposition kitchen | 16. Chef's office |
| 8. Omakase bar | 17. Staff only |
| 9. Sushi bar | 18. Mechanical |





Ghostly leaf skeletons appear to float in the resin bar top (far left and opposite). Each bathroom stall offers views into an "infinity wall," containing silk flowers that the staff changes seasonally (near left). The lounge chairs look like concrete but are actually soft milled foam of varying densities (below).





small New York firm. She credits her earlier work as a project architect for David Rockwell with teaching her how to produce or, as she puts it, “creative-direct” an ambitious restaurant interior. “This is definitely Mr. Ando’s vision and design, but if I had not been involved with every aspect,” she admits, “the end result might have looked quite different.”

Hand-selecting materials, processes, and skills from often unconventional sources, she hired Showmotion, a theatrical “theming” contractor for Broadway sets, to fabricate the dining area’s rippled ceiling. Ando wanted the gently undulating surface to have a light, breezy quality, balancing the darkness of the oak floors he stained charcoal gray. And, says Goto, he also saw the overhead treatment as a metaphor for the raked stones in a Japanese garden. Though the ceiling’s 44 panels appear as soft drapery, they are actually folds of cotton canvas frozen in place with fiberglass sprayed inch-deep on the unexposed surfaces. (Strong as a boat’s hull, the suspended panels were designed to carry the weight of workers standing on them.) Then, lighting designer Arnold Chan, of Isometrix, gave this ceiling and the entire space a soft glow—in most places without visible light sources.

For the furnishings, Goto suggested London-based industrial/furniture designer Ross Lovegrove. “Ando and I might seem an unlikely combo: I tend to maximize organic form, while his work is more Minimalist and linear,” Lovegrove says. But as he had noticed, Ando chose this “organic” work for several earlier projects, providing a successful foil for rectilinear concrete. To create furniture that would “fit elegantly and noninvasively” into Morimoto, Lovegrove says he started each piece as a cube and then eroded it from the inside. “Externally, the forms relate to Ando’s work,” he notes, “while internally, where they touch the body, they’re more mine.” One version of that cubic model, Lovegrove’s chairs for the lounge downstairs, look like concrete (in homage to the architect), but are actually

squishy, combining several densities of milled foam with a specially treated surface. So just as the dining area’s ceiling, upstairs, appears soft but is, in fact, hard, these seats appear hard but turn out to be soft. “A sense of material discovery,” says Lovegrove, “is very Japanese.”

And there are many materials to discover here. The dining level includes a textured wall of rice paper and a huge, cracked Douglas fir log that serves as a counter. The water wall’s bottles, evoking glistening chunks of ice, were designed by Lovegrove, years ago, for Ty Nant, a Welsh mineral water. And Chinese-made fritted-glass partitions, with a dot pattern growing dense toward the bottom, veil intimate dining enclaves within the larger room.

The lounge level, which took significant engineering to strengthen the foundations and keep a high water table at bay, has a low-key nightclub feel. Here, cedar wall panels, stained bright red, send a vibrant glow through crystal-clear, cast-acrylic barstools and a long resin bar top, embedded with delicate leaf skeletons. Even in the pure white bathrooms, a small spectacle awaits: A mirror trick behind each toilet presents endlessly multiplied views of flowers, receding into infinity. And beyond the bar is a variation on the central water wall, this one with bottles mounted end-to-end vertically.

Throughout the two floors, Morimoto serves up a rich mix of visual ingredients. But the muted palette of natural concrete, cotton canvas, and wood—like precisely prepared sushi rice—is what allows the space’s more intense flavors to stand out. ■

Sources

Furniture: *Poltrona Frau* (custom designs by Ross Lovegrove)

Lighting: *National Cathode; Lightolier; ALM; LitLab; Lucifer; Exterior Vert; IO;*

Phillips; Times Square; B-Light; Ardee

For more information on this project, go to Projects at www.archrecord.com.