

Airi Isoda and Ryan Upton merge architecture and fashion design in wrk-shp, their practice known for garments and built projects that blend their Asian and American sensibilities

Text
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Images
Courtesy of wrk-shp

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The Built Form



In the beginning was dressing,' wrote that crusader against ornament, architect Adolf Loos, in 1898. Even Loos thought of clothing as shelter and that building garments could teach us something about building buildings. Many creative minds still do: Hussein Chalayan has dressed his models in furniture and fuselage, artist Do Ho Suh reconstructs memories of home in fabric, Comme des Garçons' Rei Kawakubo creates what she terms 'interventions in space' and Yohji Yamamoto designs structure instead of style. Since 2013, wrk-shp's Airi Isoda and Ryan Upton have also been stitching fashion design and architecture into a single practice. The Los Angeles-based duo is as well-known for its nine Blue Bottle Coffee shops as for the twice-yearly fashion collections that launched the studio.

The two collaborate across disciplines, with Isoda — trained as an architect but not licensed — taking the lead in clothing design and Upton, who is licensed in California, driving architectural projects ranging from private residences to retail space. The Blue Bottle shops feature natural materials like concrete, grey tile and various tones of wood. It is an alliance of Japanese culture with a Southern California ethos: subtle, textural, bathed in natural light, soothingly cohesive — and eminently approachable.

Isoda was born and raised in Tokyo until she was eight, meeting Upton (New Jersey-born, raised in Texas) at the University of Southern California in 2005. He worked at Lean Arch and MASS Architecture, while she was at Clive Wilkinson's office before moving to menswear label kzo, which sourced textiles from Japan. In 2011, Isoda initiated wrk-shp, launching her first collection of workwear-inspired garments in 2012, and in 2013 Upton joined the brand and the duo began producing small objects and architecture projects alongside the clothing collections.

They now source their textiles when visiting family in Tokyo, where Isoda appreciates Upton's fresh eyes. 'There's amazing cutting-edge or old-old or ho-hum architecture that's perfect but without ego,' Upton says. 'Asia has thousands of years of history. What we find there is a fabric of old and new woven together. LA is so new and has so much space that nothing is held so dear, which means there's more possibility of change.'

Unstructured, soft, organic, the clothes riff on a familiar set of forms: the loose long-sleeved maxi dress, boxy top and quilted vest, culottes and pinafore overalls in thick colour-sopping cotton, wool or linen. wrk-shp+oo Basics is a unisex capsule collection of everyday staples featuring signature details like a powder-coated white button, shirt hems printed with metric measuring tape and house-shaped dart pockets.

Each of the collections is inspired by the work of an architect. Spring/summer 2019's pink and blue collection references Mexican architect Luis Barragán's bold use of colour; other inspirations include the sea green of Danish architect Arne Jacobsen's Room 606, the pale curves and translucency in the work of Japanese office SANAA, Toyo Ito's cement archways and Le Corbusier's floor plans.

Between collections, the couple has just completed their tenth Blue Bottle Coffee shop, this time in Hong Kong. Despite their impressive roster of projects (which also spans lighting and furniture design), Isoda says they don't take themselves too seriously. 'There's architecture with a capital "A", and capital-A architects do their craft beautifully, but we're not that,' she says. 'We're more experimental and we like to have fun.'



Each wrk-shp collection is inspired by a different architect. The autumn/winter 2019 collection references the patterns and colours found in the work of Japanese landscape architect Mirei Shigemori



Shades and shapes in the 2016 spring/summer collection drew on the forms and nuances of Pritzker Prize winner Toyo Ito





For another annual autumn/winter collection, Isoda looked to Finnish architect Alvar Aalto's integration of natural materials and soft curves

The details in Arne Jacobsen's work — such as the famed Egg chair — inspired the autumn/winter 2018 collection, which came complete with pops of sea green in an homage to the Danish architect's Room 606 project

