

# An Oasis

For Isabel Marant, new Parisian design hotshots Ciguë converted an out-of-the-way Japanese house into a sanctuary-like retail space.

Words Billy Nolan  
Photos courtesy of Ciguë

# in Tokyo

Marant's boutique is intentionally tucked away on a quiet street off Omotesando.

Shop

Ciguë

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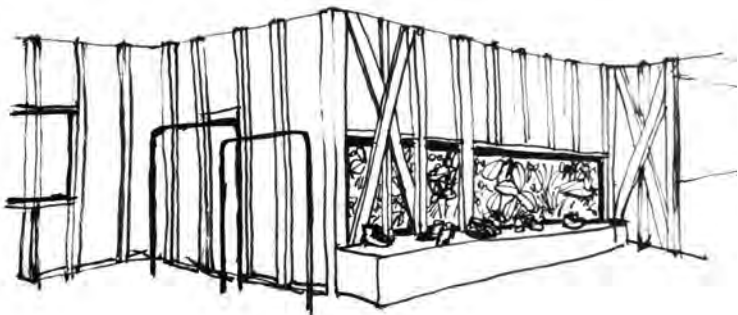
Shop

Ciguë

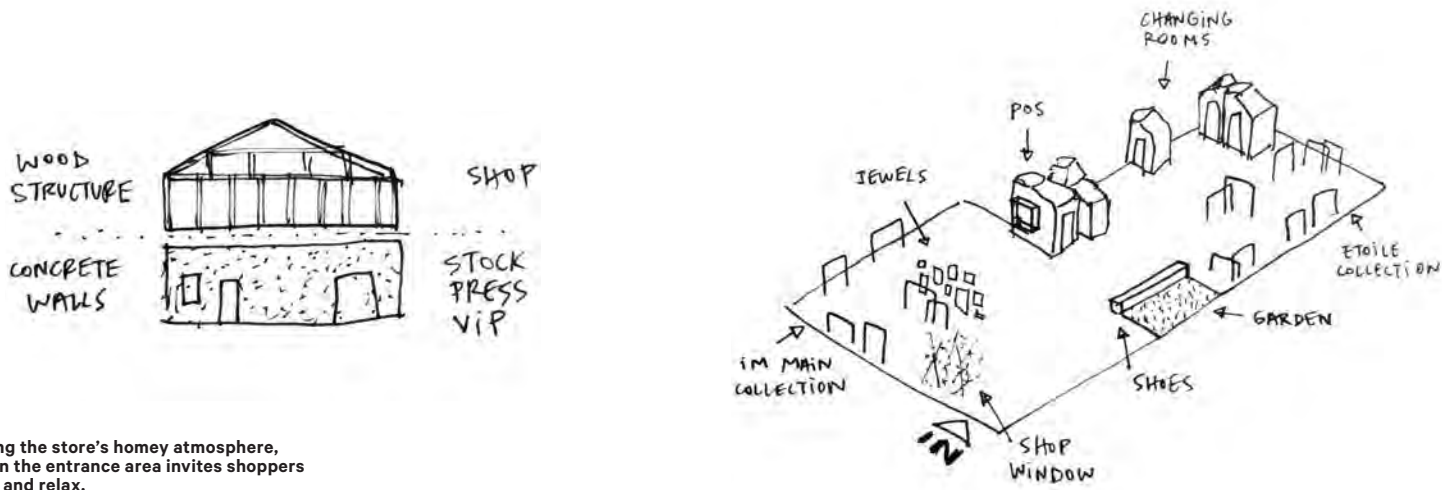
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‘We allowed the structure and materials to speak for themselves’



Shoes are displayed on a minimalist concrete counter against the backdrop of a mini jungle.



Enhancing the store's homey atmosphere, seating in the entrance area invites shoppers to pause and relax.

Shop

Ciguë

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Two years ago Ciguë was making home extensions and assorted items of furniture for family and friends in and around the French capital. Today its clients include big fashion players like Saint Laurent, Céline and fellow Parisian Isabel Marant, who commissioned Ciguë to design not only her Paris boutique but also her first outlets in Hong Kong, Tokyo and Seoul.

That upturn in fortunes hinged on a chance occurrence. A table by Ciguë at the Merci concept store in Paris caught the eye of the decision-makers at cosmetics label Aēsop. Soon Ciguë was designing the Aēsop corner inside the Merci store, then a stand-alone shop for Aēsop, both in the Marais, both in 2011. No sooner had the media caught on to these first forays into retail design than Ciguë was catapulted straight into the big time. The phone started ringing, and didn't stop.

'All of a sudden we were top of lots of lists,' says Hugo Haas, one of the six founders of Ciguë. 'Fashion labels are forever looking to update their image – through websites, graphics and, of course, retail spaces. When they started turning to us, we wondered whether they really understood what we do or just thought we were a hot ticket.'

Ciguë's way of working dates back almost a decade, when the six partners were studying architecture at Paris La Villette and teaming up on weekends and holidays to do small projects. Haas: 'We did lots of kitchens and bookshelves. Before we knew it, we were running a business. After graduating in 2008, we simply switched to full time.'

Two lunches with Marant were enough to clinch the deal, says Haas. 'At the first, she sized us up and reckoned we were right for the job. At the second, we defined the

Shop

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job: to design and build four shops – in Paris, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Seoul – at the same time. In hindsight, it might have been better not to work on all four simultaneously. Maybe we should have done one as a sort of prototype and then the others. At the time, we'd already done a couple of Aēsop shops in London and figured we could handle the international dimension.'

Asia was a different story, however. 'Three projects far away, new people, new cultures,' says Haas. 'In Hong Kong and Seoul, we worked with big corporations, while in Tokyo we established a much more personal relationship with Tomorrowland, the firm that partners Isabel Marant there.'

Even though Marant, in Paris, was constantly stressing about the next collection, she still wanted to be consulted about everything. 'For all her innovation, there's

a conventional side to her,' explains Haas. 'She told us she liked oak, grey concrete and black steel. And Charlotte Perriand, Jean Prouvé and Le Corbusier. That was more or less it.'

Marant's marketing team scouted the 350-m<sup>2</sup> residential property on a quiet street off Omotesando, Tokyo's main fashion drag. Haas: 'They are experts on the commercial *point de vue* and wanted something off the beaten track, away from the big brands but not so far away that nobody can find it. The Japanese love this idea of a "destination shop", a small, remote place that's really hard to find. The pilgrimage to get there and the thrill of finding it are part of the experience. Still, you can go too far. The 0044 brand was so successful in concealing its destination shop in northern Paris that nobody was able to find it, and the shop closed.' ...





Shop

Cigüe

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The main entrance area. On the right, a cash desk within a wooden enclosure. Ceiling lamps are made from fibreglass.

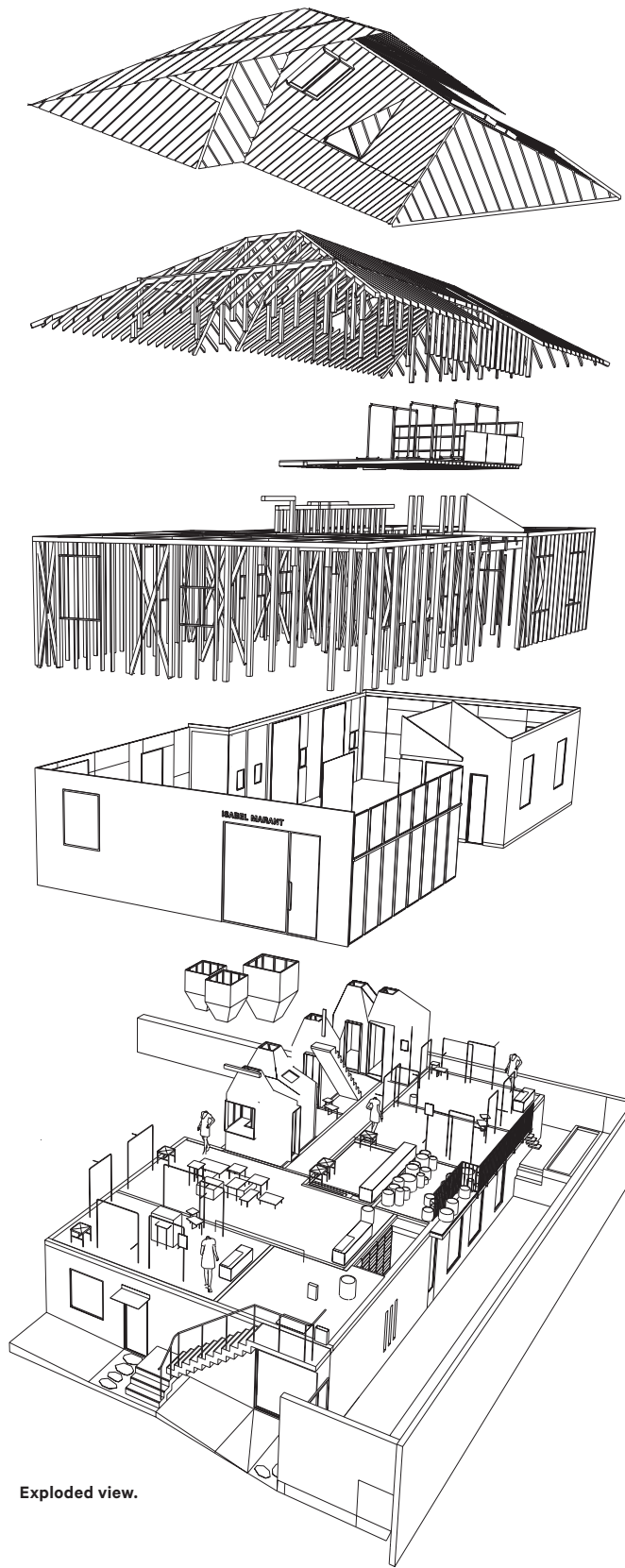


Shop

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Exploded view.

... No fear of that happening to the Omotesando venue. Built as a Japanese take on a Swedish house, the building looked like a home in Provence according to locals, while the French saw it more as a property on the island of Martinique. Everybody involved had a different association, none of them accurate. 'The exterior was painted in one of those sad '70s yellows,' recalls Haas. 'We didn't like it, but it had a visual impact that made sense. So we painted it in a fresher, more active yellow. That was our way of continuing "the story of the yellow house", as we dubbed the project.

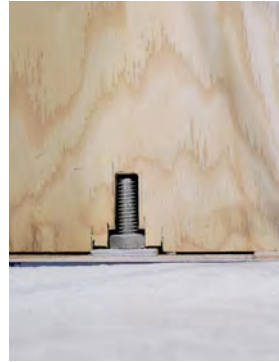
'Inside, we stripped out all the plasterboard, wallpaper, floors and everything else unnecessary – leaving only the bare bones: a concrete base topped by a timber-frame structure. Once we'd completed a survey, we were ready to start.

'As a kid,' he continues, 'I remember the thrill of entering a building site or abandoned industrial premises. The poetic beauty of something under construction, the infinite potential of space. Walking through the labyrinthine timber structure of the house had the same effect on me – the aesthetic strangeness of it, the possibilities. We kept that feeling in the shop by allowing the structure and materials to speak for themselves.'

The spatial arrangement of the house offered cues for organizing the space into a series of scenes in such way that all is not revealed at once. Each scene is a carefully composed moment featuring rails, clothes, shoes, plants, benches. Everything has room to breathe. Allusions to traditional Japanese rooms abound – timber beams set flush with the concrete floor, fibreglass-resin lamps that reference rice-paper partitions, black tatami mats in the



Poured-concrete floor detail: visible formwork highlights the basic construction.



A detail showing the finesse of Japanese craftsmanship.



Close-up of a window with a panoramic-glass pane. It was inserted into the wall without modification to existing timber components.  
Photos details Kozo Takayama

## 'She told us she liked oak, grey concrete and black steel'

### Isabel Marant

**Location** 4-3-6 Jingumae Shibuya-Ku, Tokyo, Japan  
**Designers** Ciguë, France (cigue.net) **Retail area** 150 m<sup>2</sup>  
**Materials** Pine, plywood, concrete, bent steel bars, black painted steel, fiberglass resin, grey felt, black tatami, clear and striped glass **Completion** August 2012



The room reserved for the Étoile collection. The colour of the resin floor harmonizes nicely with that of the timber elements.

fitting rooms. Threading everything together graphically are the slender black lines of table legs, rails, window frames and the pipework of the air-conditioning units overhead. The colour of the resin blends with that of the concrete, limiting the tonal palette. Plants dotted around recall the homey spirit of the Paris shop. Applied colour is almost absent, with Ciguë preferring to let the natural colours of the materials speak.

'The Japanese place a similar value on materials,' says Haas. 'The contractor studied every last project on our website and put together a vast array of timber samples for us. That degree of curiosity and collaboration from a contractor was totally new for us. It made it easy for us to do our diplomatic shuttling back and forth between Marant and the contractor. What struck me most was the realization that the Japanese have preserved the value of

craftsmanship, whereas we in the West have seen our appreciation of craftsmanship decline in recent generations. Our obsession with intellectual work and the service industries has almost killed off the culture of artisanal work. Japanese society hasn't experienced such a loss. People there shared our concern about where timber comes from and our desire to understand the story and the process. Our way of working harmonized with the Japanese way. Working there was like coming home.' \_