

**PRIMITIVE RETREAT**

Not a Hotel - Yakushima, Japan

"Is nature so easily tamed? Is she not as primitive and vigorous here as anywhere..."<sup>1</sup>

Primitive Retreat begins with a simple question. What does it truly mean to rest. Recovery is a return, moving away from the noise and pressure of daily life toward a more original state of being. In seeking rest, people turn instinctively to nature, to places where the body slows and the mind loosens. Yakushima offers this through its density and persistence. The forest absorbs sound and time, shaped by water moving through the island and rain that rarely recedes. The retreat is shelter without withdrawal, offering protection while remaining attuned to the island's atmosphere. Drawing from the cave as an early refuge, the architecture follows a logic of carving. Enclosed and quiet, it recalls resting beside a fire, watching light move across stone within a primitive landscape. The large concrete roof unifies the building, housing programs from bathing to sleep, mediating the elements while sheltering occupants from nature and letting them comfortably witness Yakushima's wilderness.





#### Site : Moving up the Hill

The site sits on Yakushima's foothills, about a kilometre from the coast, where the land rises gently. From this position, the island unfolds in layers, with the sea in the distance and the mountains forming a protective backdrop. The forest and water on the site define the building's placement, anchoring it to the landscape. The retreat occupies higher ground, repositioned from the base of the site to capture previously unavailable views of the sea and mountains. The retreat is purposefully positioned over the existing pond, preserving this natural feature. The building's orientation and setbacks are calibrated to preserve sightlines, maintain privacy, and ensure sunlight penetrates key interior spaces throughout the day.

#### Organising the Retreat

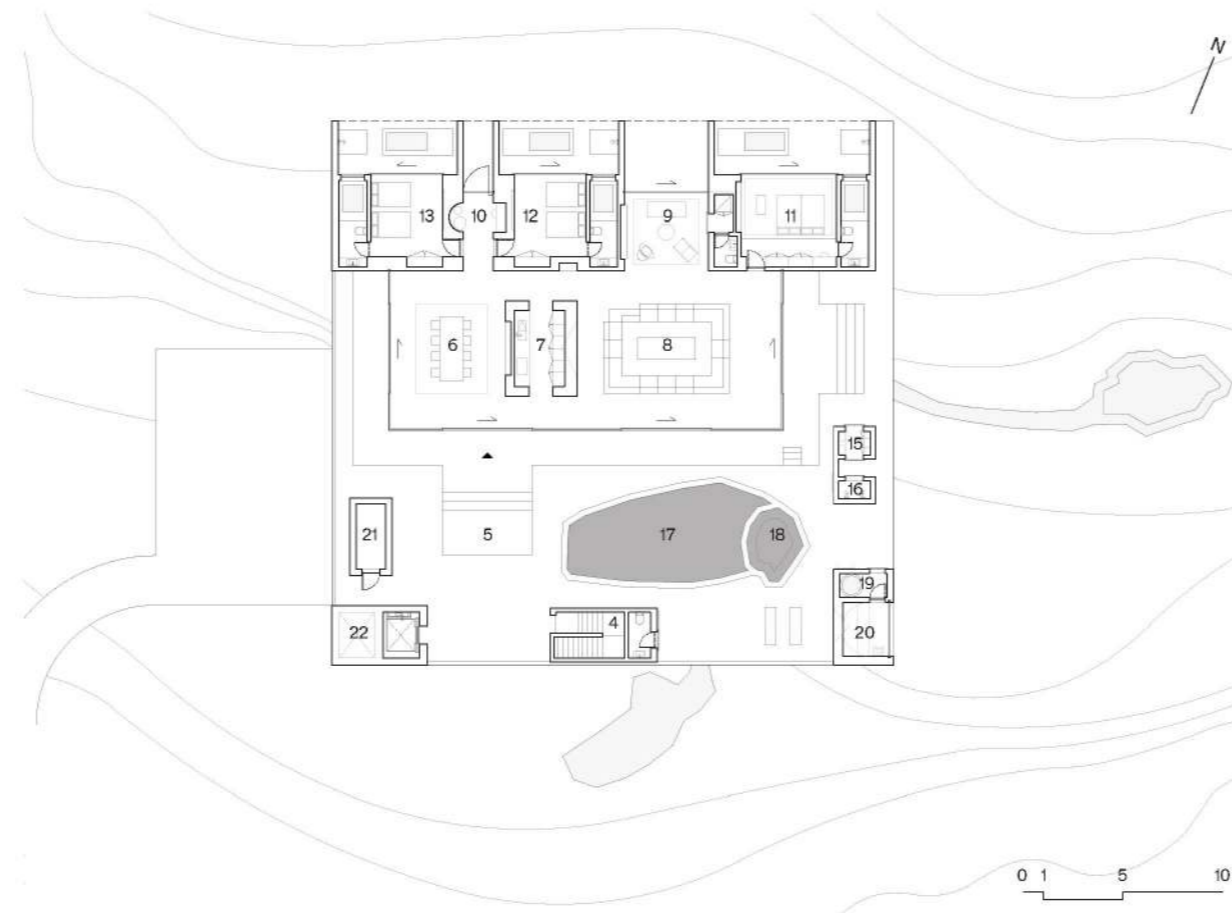
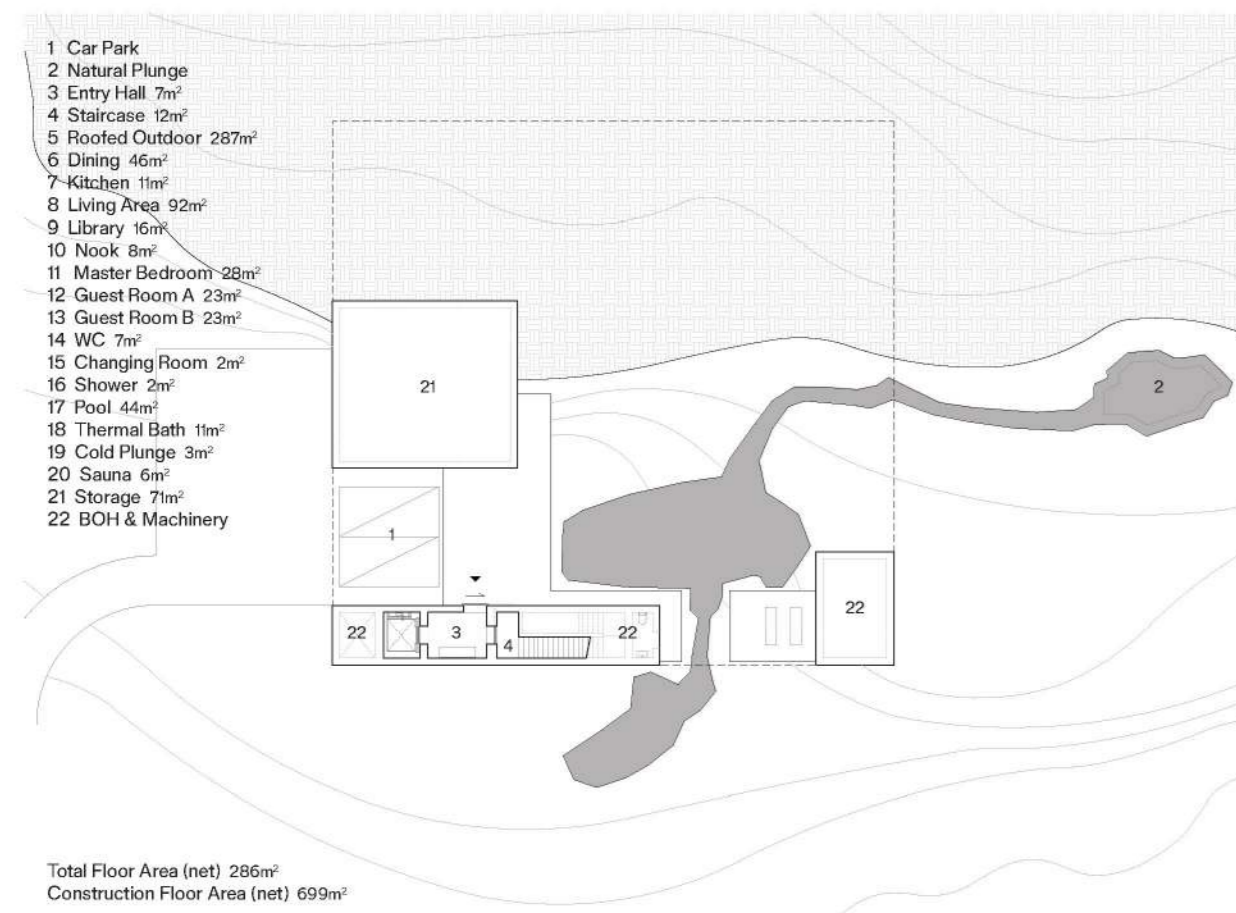
The layout follows the natural slope, allowing the landscape to remain dominant. Shared areas and communal functions sit at the edges of the site to maximise light, views, and the mountain, while private rooms are set deeper, oriented toward the forest for privacy. Bathing areas occupy the lower level, transitioning upward into the glazed living space housing the kitchen, dining, and lounge, with bedrooms and showers forming a quieter, elongated volume at the rear. The plan is structured around a clear grid, with room widths tailored to function, and volumes carefully oriented to topography and vegetation. At the perimeter, a roofed outdoor area sits over water, while bedrooms include outdoor baths and showers, integrating natural surroundings.

#### Channelling Water

Water defines the retreat's relationship with its environment. Bathing water and rain that enters the bathing areas drain through slot channels around the perimeter of the concrete volumes. All drained water is filtered by machinery located in the basement before being returned to the natural pond, maintaining a continuous, symbiotic relationship with the site. A natural plunge, located to the east of the retreat at a higher point than the pond, offers a bath within the landscape itself, fully immersed in nature. Water and stone provide grounding, while the gentle sound of rainfall on the roofed spaces can be experienced in comfort, highlighting the presence of Yakushima's climate and weather as an integral part of the retreat.

#### Movement in Space

Arrival begins at the base of the retreat, where the pond is revealed beneath a protective concrete structure, softly lit from above through a cut-out. Entering the concrete body, the visitor ascends to a roofed outdoor space where the architecture and sea horizon appear, sheltered beneath the deep concrete roof. Tall columns define the semi-outdoor area, guiding movement and framing the space, before leading into the openable glazed volume that houses the kitchen, dining, and living spaces. From here, circulation continues toward the rear bedrooms, library, and showers, while descending east leads to changing rooms, the sauna, and the cold plunge, defining a carefully choreographed sequence from arrival to retreat, repose, and ritual use of space.





Shakkei : Borrowed Scenery

Shakkei, or borrowed scenery, shapes the retreat not only through what it frames but through how it structures space. The architecture is oriented and organised so that each volume responds to the surrounding landscape, allowing light, sound, and weather to enter the space as part of the experience. The roofed water area on the plinth aligns to distant mountains and the sea, while the living and dining areas open to both the horizon and nearby forest, creating a balance of scale and intimacy. Bedrooms turn toward the immediate environment, where rain-soaked plants, stones, and trees become perceptible in close detail. Thresholds and transitions between spaces are carefully considered to reveal or obscure aspects of the landscape, guiding movement and perception as one progresses through the retreat. Borrowed scenery becomes a spatial logic that guides how each room is positioned and experienced, immersing occupants in the textures, movement, and atmosphere of Yakushima.

Vernacular Material

The material palette reinforces the architecture's quiet, grounded presence. Concrete, enriched with local volcanic ash, forms structure and surface, cast in Yakusugi formwork to leave the timber grain imprinted, evoking a cave-like texture. Granite, sourced locally, runs through bathing areas, living spaces, and bedrooms, unifying interior and exterior. Wavy glass is used for joinery and bespoke furniture, including the dining table, reflecting light and the motion of the sea. Corduroy concrete defines rooflight openings, enhancing light and shadow, while anodised aluminium frames openable glazed panels, connecting inside and outside. Black leather marks the conversation pit and external curtains, creating tactile contrast, while urushi furniture reflects the forest's movement. Together, these materials interact with light and framed views to create a cohesive atmosphere of shadow, reflection, and calm, unifying the retreat with Yakushima. Each is chosen not only for its literal and conceptual connection to the site but also to be experienced as it is, true to its qualities, reflecting an intention to let materials exist fully.

Primitive Retreat

Yakushima is an island which is shaped by time and nature. To respect these characteristics, the Primitive Retreat offers a sense of place to return to something essential. Through the spaces between heavy concrete forms and the wild landscape, one can slowly reconnect with the cadence of nature. The elements of rain, light, wind and silence become fully present again, which it is at this moment that one realises they are not separate from nature, but a part of it. This is where true rest begins.

"Seeing the moon, he becomes the moon, the moon seen by him becomes him. He sinks into nature, becomes one with nature."<sup>2</sup>

