A strange brown tower can be glimpsed over the tops of the trees of a thick Japanese beech forest up in the Matsuoyama mountains of the Niigata Prefecture in the east of Honshu. It is the symbol (actually look-out) of the local natural history museum, which writhes snake-like through a clearing in the woods. Its plan responding to a pattern of existing paths. Tower and snake are made of rusted steel, and the long building has pitched roofs that give the complex an air of both the local vernacular shades that protect crossroads from snow, or of a long abandoned industrial building.

Kyororo (the name comes from the cry of a local kingfisher) is intended to act as a centre of both scientific study and local interpretation for tourists. Perhaps the most strange quality of the place is that, although in summer, it seems warm and temperate, winters are very severe, with snowfalls of some 3m a year, and drifts up to 7m high. So in winter, the building (except for the tower) can be almost completely covered in snow. The seamless external skin of welded 6mm rusted steel plates is stiffened against snow loads by a very strong frame of steel I beams. Big panes of acrylic (up to 75mm thick) allow large transparent areas to be made in the skin, giving some internal spaces whole transparent walls.

In summer, they offer views out over the rice paddies fields to the buna forest. In winter, with drifts higher than the eaves, visitors can enter the building between high walls of snow to find a warm tunnel in which the acrylic panels allow them to look straight out into the structure of the snow and see the creatures that inhabit it. From the 34m high tower, the distant Three Mountains of Echigo, one of the most celebrated local landmarks, can be seen on the horizon over the snow-covered forests from a building that is already a landmark itself. A more extensive description of the building and its principles of construction and climate control is to be found in AR August 2004, p.60.

Architect
Tezuka Architects, Tokyo
Project team
Takaharu Tezuka, Yui Tezuka, Hironori Ikeda (Plus)

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SNOWSCAPE

A little museum responds to its region's often extreme climate.

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The tower in the forest.
Summer perspective.
Very thick acrylic allows large transparent panels, through which the snow and the lives of the creatures in it are displayed.

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ground floor (scale approx. 1:450)