



PHOTOS: HOSHINO RESORTS, HYATT REGENCY KYOTO, BEN RICHARDS/BLINK DESIGN GROUP, HOTEL THE MITSUI KYOTO

HERITAGE, REFINED

Kyoto's artisanal roots and the push to evolve traditional Japanese aesthetics find voice in the city's luxury hotels.

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The meticulously restored Hoshinoya Kyoto is resplendent and tranquil. Opposite: Intricate motifs reimaged from old Japanese fabrics and lattices make for a dramatic entrance at Hyatt Regency Kyoto.



Contemporary fixtures and old accents are harmoniously integrated in the Presidential Suite of Hotel The Mitsui Kyoto.

Once in a while over the long centuries, a remarkable deviation might occur within the artisanal realms of Japan, usually owing to the political and social climate of differing epochs, like when the Nara (AD 710 to 784) preference for monolithic bronze statues was passed over for the Heian (AD 794 to 1185) penchant for enigmatic wooden figures. Historically Japanese aesthetics have remained distinct and immovably set for remarkably long stretches, perpetuated by a system that involves a lengthy apprenticeship with the master from one generation to the next. This system called *dento* survived largely intact into modernity, extending a lifeline to many of

Japan's cherished crafts, from paper making to wood block printing, into the present day.

Enter the modern era and naturally a remarkable thirst for change within Japan's design zeitgeist emerges. Avant-gardism entered the mainstream consciousness over the Showa period (AD 1926 to 1989) and experimentations with traditional forms became an expressive outlet from the '60s until today.

Exacerbated by the success of Japan's branding around the world, creative forces from fashion designers to architects progressively and ingeniously imbued old forms into the modern frame, leading to the proliferation of mass production methods to meet rising demands. This squarely led to

the demise of many old *métiers* in Japan but traditional crafts and craftsmanship in Kyoto escaped total annihilation because discerning entrepreneurs and hoteliers, buoyed by tourism prospects and faith in local artistry, had very specific ideas about what truly defines a quintessentially Japanese – and luxurious – experience in Kyoto. And at the very forefront of that discernment is the city's deep artisanal roots.

OLD GLORIES RESTORED

Hoshinoya Kyoto is one of the luxury chain's most cherished properties and a fine example of a restored treasure. The alluring 25-room riverside ryokan in Arashiyama was converted from a century-old Meiji era inn

in 2009 and architect Rie Azuma was tasked not only with the restoration of a historical edifice but also to breathe new life into a relic that would pay homage to the cultural richness of Kyoto.

Employing a technique called *arai* where old methods and materials were reused, the renovated buildings were amalgamated with repurposed footpaths and imaginative gardens raised in part with repurposed remnants. The refurbishment took a mini battalion of local craftsmen to materialise, from the lighting artisans of Miura Shomei, a 120 year old Kyoto company specialising in Japanese lights, to the paper specialists at Kyo-Karakami Marani, one of only two places left in Kyoto still producing the



Extremely rare and difficult to produce karakami paper adorn the bedroom walls of Hoshinoya Kyoto. Below: Apothecary drawers provide a vintage accent at the Nine Tails cocktail lounge at Six Senses Kyoto.

traditional decorative paper today.

Azuma recounted the challenges faced in the process: "I feel a sense of crisis about how certain materials are beginning to disappear because they are mismatched with the times. Kyoto karakami paper is one such example. When we were designing Hoshinoya Kyoto, there was only one person left who could print large sheets of paper. The printer judges the temperature and humidity against his own skin and formulates the dye accordingly. And all of the karakami to be used in a given room must be printed all at once, on the same day, because it is affected by subtle changes in conditions. It was a lengthy and exacting process but the results are worth it."

FINDING BALANCE

Restoration remains an exacting and expensive venture, inevitably forcing many in the business to find a middle ground that

showcases Japanese artistry without the crippling bills. In 1998, Takashi Sugimoto had completed Mezzanine at Grand Hyatt Singapore with an eclectic style and the project was widely lauded. Riding on that success, his design outfit Super Potato was soon tasked with the conception of a Hyatt Regency within the hallowed cultural precincts of Kyoto, right next to the 860-year-old Sanjusangendo temple and across from the Kyoto National Museum designed by legendary architect Katayama Tokuma. Sugimoto's response to the geographical context wasn't overtly cultural. Launched in 2006, this very understated yet audacious Hyatt incarnation (rooms are thoroughly modern and tastefully imbued with measured Japanese accents like fabric panels and paper lamps with dry and lush gardens beckoning from back-of-house) opens to a lobby with ceilings that are capped with LED-lit openwork screens

The new Six Senses Kyoto incorporated many of Japan's old concepts and sensibilities into its design philosophy, continuing the intimate link between city and hotel.



featuring intricate motifs inspired by old Japanese fabrics and lattices. Simple yet spell-binding, this classical yet abstract looking hall remains arresting till today.

The late Sugimoto enigmatically noted that his work at Hyatt Regency Kyoto is an “act of creation that must be advanced”. The design firm continues to parlay the seminal successes of yesteryear into later projects like Muji stores and designer hotels in Japan and beyond.

NOW AND BEYOND

Six Senses Kyoto is one of the newest luxury hotels to raise its flag within the imperial city. This freshly minted urban retreat within the Higashiyama ward was launched in March this year. Tasked with its ID conceptualisation is Blink Design Group, a Bangkok-based architectural outfit that had already found earlier success with Roku Kyoto, Hilton's LXR brand's first opening in Asia.

Sharing his creative direction on the project, the firm's founder Clint Nagata said, “We applied our ‘place making’ ethos in our design process by taking a deep dive into the heyday of the Heian era, where the philosophy was the concept of *miyabi*, a heightened refinement and appreciation of nature. Six Senses Kyoto's lobby showcases local arts and artisans because it not only

helps guests support local arts but also encourages a continuation of these traditions. We have incorporated a sense of *asobi gokoro* – a playfulness that references elements of Japanese culture, including *wabi-sabi*, the awareness of simplicity and natural beauty, into our designs.”

The property looks into an inner courtyard; the ambience is calm. Sublime touches include artwork panels featuring *hikihaku*, a weaving technique using gold and silver thread on Japanese paper; *raku-yaki* ceramic tile artwork inspired by Kyoto's mountains, natural stone flooring, and art inspired by animal-person caricatures from 12th century temple scrolls. Enigmatic fox masks made from recycled *washi* paper line the corridors.

Then, there's the four-year-old Hotel The Mitsui Kyoto, a Luxury Collection establishment designed by Andre Fu situated next to the resplendent Nijo Castle. The site has been owned by the Mitsui family since the 17th century and features the meticulously restored Kajiimiya Gate at its entrance. Fu purportedly drew his inspiration for the site's modern incarnate from three words: authentic, mystical and artisanal. The lobby is strewn with Fu's bespoke contemporary furniture and features ceiling installations inspired by

kimono fabrics and a library with a collection of books on Japanese art, history and culture. The hotel's most inspired feature, however, is its modern garden by academic/landscape artist Shunsaku Miyagi. Embodying the Japanese principle of *teitoku ichinyo*, or the absolute harmony between building and garden, carefully placed stone lanterns and decorative rocks and entrancing water features complete a serene landscape that is abundantly contemporary to the eye yet deeply grounded in the entrenched mores of a classical Japanese garden.

“Water serves as a form of gradation, providing an abstract fusion of tradition and modernity,” explained Miyagi. Indeed, the “pond” is an expansive feature of a shallow layer of water on stone slabs. “Kyoto has an embarrassment of riches when it comes to traditional Japanese gardens, so it takes a certain amount of bravery to design a new garden in this city.”

Kyoto's impetus for growth is still on an upwards trajectory where old and new forms will evolve, innovate and meld. The artistry of yore has doubtlessly found a lifeline within the luxury tourism sector of Kyoto where these splendid hospitality establishments will continue to showcase the city's rich cultural and artisanal refinements to the world. 