



Contemporary  
Japanese  
creatives  
aim to use  
Kyoto's  
traditional  
heritage  
to inspire  
modern design

# AN OLD CITY

# TELLS A NEW TALE

*Words by Danielle Demetriou Photography by Nico Perez*



**T**he setting is pure Kyoto. On a quiet residential lane, a latticed door with a simple white *noren* (fabric curtain) slides open to reveal a stone entrance to a small store. Inside are neat rows of smooth, shiny and circular tea caddies, made of brass, tin and copper, sitting on clean-lined, light-wood shelves alongside green plants, seasonal flower arrangements and hanging lanterns.

What happens next pierces the serene and old-time atmosphere. Takahiro Yagi – known by most as Taka-san and the sixth-generation owner of his family’s 143-year-old tea caddy business, Kaikado – places a single brass tea caddy onto a central table. Then, with a sense of ceremony, he slowly lifts the rounded lid off the tin. Suddenly, the space is filled with the stark sounds of 21st-century pop music.

“It’s a speaker!” smiles Taka-san, clearly delighted by the incongruous ingenuity of encasing modern technology inside a traditional tea tin, with sound controlled remotely by his iPhone located nearby. “It has Bluetooth connections and we’ve created it for Panasonic. Only 100 will go on sale next year.”

Perhaps one of the most evocative names in the travel lexicon, Kyoto has long been associated with all things traditional. Japan’s ancient capital is famed as the birthplace of a raft of Japanese cultural cornerstones, from the tea ceremony and *ikebana* (flower arranging) to calligraphy and incense-making. Today, Kyoto continues to offer a glimpse into Japan’s rich cultural heritage, as home to more than 1,000 Buddhist temples, 400 shrines and countless generations-old artisan businesses.

But what is perhaps less obvious to the city’s identity is its strong innovative streak. It’s no coincidence that some of Japan’s most high-profile tech companies

are headquartered here. Nintendo’s original Art Deco-style building sits just a short walk away from Kaikado. Kyocera, a leading solar power and electronics company, has a big presence here too. Kyoto is also home to Panasonic’s Kyoto Kaden Lab, which brings together artisans to reimagine the future of traditional skills and their application in new household objects.

And then there are the family businesses that are modernising at the hands of next-generation owners – a move required not only to keep the traditional crafts alive in today’s fast-paced, digital-driven age, but also because innovation is often second nature for the city’s creatives.

Among them is Taka-san, warm and friendly in his stylish T-shirt, cardigan and glasses. Over the past decade, the CEO of Kaikado has firmly steered his family’s business into the global contemporary design spotlight. “People have this [mental] image of Kyoto residents liking very



“[Kyoto] has inherited the strict traditions and techniques of the past, but... it also has a capacity for accepting new things”

**From top**  
Kaikado’s various brass, tin and copper tea caddies on display; Takahiro Yagi, the sixth-generation owner of Kaikado

old things,” he explains. “But people in Kyoto are actually very innovative – they like new things and they also like to keep things original. So, we need to balance the old and the new.”

The tea caddies at Kaikado are a testament to this. Today, they are still painstakingly crafted according to tradition. Taka-san is among around 10 craftsmen who make roughly 40 caddies a day between them in the old-school atelier at the rear of the shop. Here, shoes are slipped off at the entrance and the sound of tapping tin fills the air, as artisans sit hunched over their tools on the floor, surrounded by boxes of raw materials and products piled high.

The production process may be traditional, but the uses are clearly more modern: While once upon a time, Kyotans would not have dreamt of using the tins for anything other than storing green tea, today they have evolved into speakers, vases and lampshades. One highlight is Kaikado’s Objects Collection, a clean-lined contemporary homeware range created in collaboration with the Copenhagen design studio Oeo.

Today, Kaikado’s products are sold in 10 countries, with fans – Taka-san reveals with an incredulous laugh – like musician John Legend, who apparently has a large-sized tin in his kitchen. The company exhibits regularly at events such as Salone del Mobile in Milan, New York Design Week and Maison & Objet in Paris; collaborates with high-profile artists such as Hiroshi Sugimoto (Kaikado co-created a vast water-filled tea tin lamp for a Sugimoto installation at Pace Gallery in London); and their products even feature in the permanent design collection of London’s Victoria & Albert Museum.

Just around the corner from the shop is the sunlight-filled Kaikado Café in a 90-year-old former government building. Renovated with Oeo, it has concrete walls offset by blonde wood furniture, plants and copper lighting; the latter matching the Kaikado tins on display.

The café is the embodiment of Taka-san’s ultimate goal: that these artfully created tea



**Previous spread**  
A man entering Issey Miyake’s new Kyoto flagship store, housed in a renovated 132-year-old *machiya* (wooden townhouse)





**This spread**  
Scenes from  
Kamisoie, Ko  
Kado's (pictured,  
right) traditional  
decorative paper  
atelier and store

caddies should be used – and enjoyed – as much as possible, rather than simply displayed on a shelf and admired for their beauty. “Traditional handi-crafts should be kept close to daily life,” he says. “That’s how you keep the [craft] alive.”

Other pockets of contemporary design overlapping with traditional culture are peppered throughout Kyoto, and one such spot worth traipsing off the tourist trail for is Kamisoie. Situated in a small 90-year-old former barbershop in the quiet Nishijin area – located in the northwest part of central Kyoto and traditionally home to kimono craftsmen and weavers – Kamisoie showcases the work of Ko Kado, a Kyoto native and next-generation pioneer of the art of *kyo-karakami*, a traditional form of decorative paper.

Kado is one of less than 10 *karakami* craftsmen working in Kyoto today, and clearly among the most modern; perhaps a legacy of five years of intense training in a *karakami* workshop mixed with a former career as a graphic designer.

His work involves creating patterns for woodblock prints before imprinting them on *washi* (decorative paper). But while traditional *karakami* artisans confine their motifs to old patterns, Kado’s work departs from convention.

Instead, he creates his own original contemporary designs – clean-lined, abstract, minimal and geometric motifs among them – which often end up in seemingly incongruous locations. In addition to its use in temple

restoration work, his papers might be found on the walls of design hotels and Michelin-starred restaurants or used as party invitations for fashion houses such as Chanel.

Beyond bespoke commissions, a small selection of his papers and envelopes can be perused at his ground-floor Kamisoie store (his atelier, where he normally works alone, is just upstairs). Dressed in a denim apron, white shirt and glasses, Kado, who also stages exhibitions once a year in his shop, says: “Kyoto is a stimulating place for creatives. This is partly because there are a lot of good art schools and many students based here. Kyoto also has a strong experimental music scene and a growing number of small design studios opening up.”

He adds: “Of course the city has old architecture – the temples, and the old *machiya* merchant townhouses – but often, when you step inside, the spaces have a very contemporary feeling and modern texture.”

This dichotomy is something that’s also understood by Sosuke Nakabo, an award-winning industrial designer whose work ranges from Jasper Morrison collaborations to minimalist household products for Muji. Sitting in KissaMaster café, which overlooks a serene garden at the back of an apparel store, Nakabo, who also lectures at Kyoto Design Lab at the Kyoto Institute of Technology, explains: “Kyoto may have a reputation for being conservative, but historically it has been very open. This is partly because it has a lot of students from outside the city.”





After modestly disclosing that he designed the café's cups and coffee drippers, Nakabo opens his bag and places something on the table: footwear in the shape of *zori*, a type of Japanese sandal. But instead of being made from traditional materials such as straw or lacquered wood, Nakabo has given them a futuristic makeover with a streamlined silhouette complemented by high-tech materials including white rubber and silicon.

Designed by Nakabo for the distinguished Kyoto sandal maker Gion Naito, the JoJo flip-flops are currently on sale in high-end boutiques around the world, from Opening Ceremony in New York to Maxfield in Los Angeles. "These sandals are a symbol of contemporary design in Kyoto," says Nakabo. "They perfectly sum up the mix of old and new. And this is the Kyoto way."

Nakabo's sandals aren't the only thing that's shaking up Kyoto's fashion scene. Situated on a quiet lane in the Sanjo district, the new Issey Miyake Kyoto flagship store is housed in a 132-year-old machiya with a narrow wooden façade, a jigsaw puzzle of interior timber beams and a small gallery. The colourful products on display range from billowing pleated trousers to reversible tailored jackets to the gallery-like installation of Bao Bao bags on the wall. Other high-lights include *itajime* (Japanese

**From left**  
A Sosuke Nakabo creation – the JoJo sandal; garments on display at Issey Miyake's shop



hand-dyed) scarves made by local artisans and only available at the brand's Kyoto boutique.

But the scene-stealer is undoubtedly the space itself: with its elegantly exposed wooden timber-work towering into a double-height ceiling, the serene courtyard garden and the expanse of muted greys offering a timelessly contemporary take on a machiya interior. For its creator Naoto Fukasawa, the cult Japanese industrial designer famed for his minimalist aesthetic, a key source of inspiration was *sumi*, a shade of black used in traditional Japanese ink paintings. And so, behind the noren at the entrance, the store showcases a symphony of greys, from the matte walls and concrete to the pebbles in the courtyard.

"Our idea was to create a calming space where you feel the spirit and layers of time that the building has lived. I see it as a special place where the experimental spirit of Issey Miyake is well integrated into the traditional elements of Kyoto's machiya," explains Fukasawa. "Kyoto has attracted people for centuries because it is a source of Japanese culture, and this allure continues to the present day," he continues. "On one hand, it has inherited the strict traditions and techniques of the past, but on the other, it also has a capacity for accepting new things. This paradox is, I think, the reason why people are attracted to Kyoto."

Indeed, it is perhaps this paradox, so deeply embodied by the city's design culture, that will continue to lure people to Kyoto for many years to come – be it in the form of a bright pair of sandals, a beautiful, delicate sheet of paper or maybe even a music-playing tea tin.



Singapore Airlines flies to Osaka twice daily. Passengers can take a short train ride from Osaka to Kyoto. To book a flight, visit [singaporeair.com](http://singaporeair.com)

IMAGE: YUNA YAGI (KYOMACHIYA HOTEL SHIKI JURAKU)



## HOUSE SPECIALTIES

Some of Kyoto's wooden machiya townhouses are being restored and transformed into unique places to visit



**Shop**  
Pass the Baton – a shop inspired by upcycling – is worth a visit for its setting alone. A stone bridge over a river leads to the entrance of the former machiya, which has undergone a makeover by cult Tokyo-based interior designer Masamichi Katayama. [pass-the-baton.com](http://pass-the-baton.com)



**Sip**  
A sleek renovation of a 100-year-old machiya – designed by Jo Nagasaka of Schemata Architects – recently opened its doors in the heart of Kyoto as the city's first Blue Bottle Coffee. The café offers single-origin coffee in a minimal, modern setting. [bluebottlecoffee.com](http://bluebottlecoffee.com)



**Sleep**  
Kyomachiya Hotel Shiki Juraku is made up of 10 historic machiya. Here, you'll find original design features and curated Mid-Century furniture balanced by modern Japanese design touches – from wooden sandals by Drill Design to textiles by Kyoto artist Haruka Nomura. [shikijuraku.com](http://shikijuraku.com)