



HOSPITALITY  
Kyoto

## Group dynamics

The expansion of a storied Kyoto building into Ace Hotel's first Japanese venture called for a dizzying collaboration of creatives.

By *Fiona Wilson*  
Photography *Kohei Take*

Although Kyoto is famous for its old wooden buildings and temples, the Shimpukan comes from a different part of the ancient city's architectural past. A handsome brick building on Karasuma Street in the centre of the city, it was designed in 1926 by Tetsuro Yoshida, a modernist who had studied in Germany. Originally the Kyoto Central Telephone Company Building, the Shimpukan has been renovated and extended by Japanese architect Kengo Kuma and forms part of a new 213-room Ace Hotel, the first opening in Japan for the Los Angeles-headquartered hotel brand.

"When we're looking for properties to house an Ace Hotel, we are always engaged by the history and lore that a potential site might hold," says Kelly Sawdon, Ace's chief brand officer. "Kengo Kuma is a longtime friend of Ace and has been sending us potential sites in Japan for years." The Shimpukan was just the property that the hotel group was looking for: an old building with history and a sympathetic modern addition. "[Kuma's] studio, KKA, designed an entirely new ground-up building crafted with local materials that create visual references to traditional ryokans and reside seamlessly alongside the historic portion of the property," says Sawdon. "KKA connected these two structures in an honest dialogue with one another, creating an expansive space where the future meets the past."

For the interiors, Ace worked with a regular collaborator, the Los Angeles-based Commune Design,

which has tapped in to its long-held love of Japanese craft to create a layered design that weaves Western and Japanese sensibilities. "It was a dream project for us," says the firm's Roman Alonso, who started working on the hotel more than five years ago. "It gave us the opportunity to work with so many people in Japan." The cast of artists and craftspeople from Japan and the US is extensive.

The key collaboration was with legendary Japanese designer Samiro Yunoki, whom Alonso describes as the godfather of the project. The now 98-year-old took some time to be convinced but once he was on board he went "above and beyond". His work is evident throughout the building, from the beautiful *noren* (door hanging) in the entrance to a series of printed works on the walls of the rooms. He even designed the hotel's logo.

There are craft and art pieces throughout the hotel: earthy ceramic pots by artist-fisherman Kazunori Hamana ("way out of our league but he wanted to participate," says Alonso); curtains and upholstery fabrics by Tokyo studio Minä Perhonen; tiles made in Shiga prefecture; a frieze in the main restaurant by Kyoto paper specialist Kamisoe; and spectacular spherical bamboo and paper lights by Kobishiya Chube, a 200-year-old Kyoto family business.

"We had to pull some of these makers out of their comfort zones and get them to think differently about their craft but every single one of them responded positively and came through," says Alonso. Many US artisans were commissioned too. For the Italian restaurant, Kori Girard – grandson of textile designer Alexander Girard – created a tiled floor and room-dividing screens that were printed by hand in Berkeley and then assembled in Japan.

The furniture is a mix of custom design with a vintage look and pieces from Japanese furniture-makers such as Tendo Mokko. Bedrooms have Commune-designed beds with Ace's signature Pendleton blankets and the



1



3

(1) Staff at the hotel's Piopiko cocktail bar and taco lounge (2) Tatami suite with artwork by Samiro Yunoki (3) Workspace in the entrance lobby



2



(1) Cocktail hour (2) General manager Nico Black (3) Taco at Piopiko (4) Terrace at Mr Maurice's Italian (5) Piopiko cocktail bar (6) Chairs by Isamu Kenmochi (7) Garden courtyard (8) Stumptown café's Andrew Curry (9) The Shimpukan building

bathrooms feature amenities from Tokyo skincare and nail brand Uka.

Instead of opening a Japanese restaurant – an impossibly competitive market in Kyoto – Ace has brought a US vibe via a cocktail bar and taco lounge by Wes Avila (the chef behind Guerrilla Tacos in Los Angeles), a cosy Italian from Philadelphia chef Marc Vetri and a third all-day restaurant due to open later this year. Stumptown Coffee Roasters has opened its first coffee shop in Japan here too.

These are clearly challenging times to be opening a hotel. Kyoto has suffered an almost complete drop in visitors from overseas but it should soon welcome the return of Japanese tourists, for whom the city has long been a favourite destination. “Obviously it’s not ideal,” says general manager Nico Black, who moved from LA to Kyoto last year. “But this time is giving us the chance to get to know the community and for locals to get to know us.” It’s an interesting area too, with a historic sweet shop just across the way, typical of the dense texture that characterises Kyoto’s tight streets. Visitors can explore on one of the hotel’s Tokyo Bikes: Nishiki Market is down the road and Nijo Castle and the Imperial Palace are within striking distance.

The rest of the Shimpukan, now known as Shin Puh Kan, houses shops such as Beams Japan, Bonjour Records and Pilgrim Surf + Supply (*see page 132*), plus an outlet of independent cinema chain Uplink. The development, which is directly connected to Kyoto’s subway, is a welcome addition to the city and it comes as a relief that the building has been restored rather than demolished – never guaranteed in Kyoto. A programme of cultural events and exhibitions should be up and running before the year is out. “Our vision was for this to be a place for everyone, offering different experiences depending on what you’re looking for,” says Kelly Sawdon. “We wanted to build Ace Hotel Kyoto as our love letter to Japan.” — (M) [acehotel.com/kyoto](http://acehotel.com/kyoto)



1



3



5



2



4



7



6

“We had to pull some of these makers out of their comfort zones and get them to think differently about their craft but every single one of them responded positively and came through”

#### Kyoto directory

- 1. Jiki Miyazawa**  
Ten-seat restaurant serving seasonal dishes presented to perfection; every detail is a pleasure. Punctuality essential. [jiki-miyazawa.com](http://jiki-miyazawa.com)
- 2. FIL Kyoto**  
Cult brand that combines founder Hiroki Nakamura’s love of Japanese craft and Americana; indigo shirts, jeans and shoes. [visvim.tv](http://visvim.tv)
- 3. Kyukyodo**  
Founded in 1663 as a pharmacy, Kyukoyodo now specialises in stationery, calligraphy brushes and incense. [kyukyodo.co.jp](http://kyukyodo.co.jp)



8



9