

# DESIGN DESTINATION TOKYO

Navigating the megalopolis that is Tokyo can be daunting. We are here to clue you in.

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Kisho Kurokawa's soaring architecture for the National Art Centre Tokyo (NACT). **Opposite page** Façade and 'Room 701' of design hotel Claska, following a refurbishment by Tei Shuwa. **Previous page** Stacks of glimmering neon signs light up a downtown Tokyo nightscape.



It would be trite to say that Tokyo, being the world's most populous metropolis, is rife with paradoxes, that being one of the world's premier cities for fashion, design, architecture and the arts, it is so crammed with places to see, things to do, that one would easily get lost in the noise if no assistance is rendered. So we will simply leave you to take in the plethora of recommended spots below and judge thereafter what suits you best.

#### THE ARTS

The largest of the museum in Japan has no permanent collection of its own but focuses on staging world-class exhibitions showcasing the best of modern and contemporary art. The National Art Center Tokyo (NACT) ([www.nact.jp/english/](http://www.nact.jp/english/)), is an architectural landmark with a jaw-dropping iron and glass curtain façade—a transcendental vision designed by Kisho Kurokawa, arguably Japan's most famous eco-friendly architect. Kurokawa, who passed away the same year his masterpiece was officially opened, lent his name to the Green Institute at Anaheim University in California, USA for the study of global sustainable management, acknowledging his lifetime effort in sustainable

architecture study. The building's many green credentials include serving as a seismic isolator, and having an eco-system that recycles rainwater. And if you habitually ignore museum shops, make an exception and visit NACT's gift shop Souvenir From Tokyo. Designed by Torafu Architects, it has interesting gifts presented in hut-like structures made out of cedar wood.

NACT is commonly regarded as the epicentre of the Art Triangle Roppongi, which also includes the very Japanese Suntory Museum of Art ([www.suntory.com/sma/](http://www.suntory.com/sma/)), the contemporary cousin that is the Mori Art Museum ([www.mori.art.museum/eng/](http://www.mori.art.museum/eng/)), and the cool hipster sibling of 21\_21 Design Sight ([www.2121designsight.jp/en/](http://www.2121designsight.jp/en/)). In 21\_21 Design Sight, Tadao Ando transformed the former Defence Agency of Japan into a visceral experience by drawing inspiration from Issey Miyake's sartorial designs. The latter still serves as the centre's director and offers Tokyo its first arts venue that defies categorisation by inviting creative industry professionals to curate and showcase their works in this dramatic space. Design masters Ikko Tanaka, Irving Penn collaborating with Issey Miyake, and, presently, a retrospective on Frank Gehry have been hosted here.



#### HOTELS

We start with the real slim shady of design boutique hotels in Tokyo, the prime mover of Tokyo's design hotel trend. The Claska ([www.claska.com/en/](http://www.claska.com/en/)), loosely translated as 'How best to live', was recently refurbished to its current quirky splendour by Tei Shuwa. Most of the 21 rooms have each a unique personality, thanks to local creatives or artists, like Kayo Sato, who inject their individual tastes to each small space, aka DIY Concept Rooms. Although a little of a schlep from the neon centre in Meguro, its design-crazed setting is sure to provide a unique experience that will eclipse other destinations, and just explore the second-hand furniture shops that Meguro-dori is renowned for. Gift shop Claska Gallery Shop & "Do" sells artworks, handicrafts and innovative products by Japanese creators. It also rents out a gallery space at well below market rates to encourage young Japanese artists to hold exhibitions.

Another bastion for art and design is the Park Hotel Tokyo ([en.parkhoteltokyo.com](http://en.parkhoteltokyo.com)) on the top 10 floors of the Shiodome Media Tower. [Thought the greenery arrangement satisfies the "green" memo you wanted.] Ask for a room on the 31st 'Art' floor where each room is decorated by a Japanese visual artist. A menu on their website shows available options, including the Bamboo room, the Sumo room by Hiroyuki Kimura, or the Washi room with 108 demi-gods carved out of wooden printing blocks by Naoki Takenouchi. The hotel also offers Art Colours that engages guests through art seamlessly paired with seasonal gastronomic offerings in a single conversation.







The lobby of Kerry Hill-designed Aman Tokyo. **Opposite page** 'Dragon' and 'Cherry Blossom' rooms at Park Hotel Tokyo. **Following pages** Herzog & de Meuron's Prada store in Aoyama; textured façade on Louis Vuitton in Ginza. A Postcard marker in Shibuya. The pristine interior of Kolor. Code Kurkku, the anchor establishment in eco-conscious retail outpost Yoyogi Village.

Tokyo also hosts several luxury hotel players with some serious art and architecture credentials. The Shangri-La houses more than 2,000 pieces of artworks, and has three restaurants and the lounge designed by Andre Fu of the Upper House fame; the Peninsula has a carefully curated collection of over 1,000 art pieces including a soaring sculpture by Ben Jakober and Yannick Vu in the atrium; and when the Mandarin Oriental hosted Noma, a whole team of craftsmen and artists came onboard to curate a visually-arresting dining experience. However, the most recent entrant has stolen the limelight from the peak of Otemachi Tower. Aman's ([www.aman.com/resorts/aman-tokyo](http://www.aman.com/resorts/aman-tokyo)) first urban resort sees it teaming up with long-time collaborator Kerry Hill who

works his magic again after projects in Sri Lanka, Bali and Bhutan, and does a glorious job with suffusing intricate local details—classic Japanese camphor wood, washi paper, and rough-hewn stone—matched with modern fabrics and textures in the lobby and suites. The relentless embrace of nature is a nod to the hotel's proximity to the Otemachi Forest. The inner garden and the two karesansui, or dry gardens, showcase traditional Japanese architecture enclosed by an engawa, a raised strip of flooring that allows guests to walk around the gardens and water ponds. The signature Resident's Library stacks a vast collection of books on Japanese art and culture, and some artefacts to boot. Zen has never looked this chic.





#### RETAIL

Even architecture geeks will find it difficult to resist retail temptation in Tokyo. A jaunt from Omotesandō to Aoyama yields a plethora of luxury flagship stores housed in architectural landmarks – from Toyo Ito's TOD's Omotesandō Building, Herzog & de Meuron's Prada and Miu Miu on the other side of the road, the SANAA-designed Dior building, Aoki Jun's Louis Vuitton masterpiece, and Omotesandō Hills by Tadao Ando. That already represents three out of seven Japanese architects who were awarded the Pritzker Prize. [need this sentence to tie in with the next] An iconic building from the mid-80s, tucked slightly behind the luxury marques, represents the last. Spiral ([www.spiral.co.jp/en/](http://www.spiral.co.jp/en/)) is designed by the post-modernist Fumihiko Maki and named after its Brobdingnagian ramp. Wacoal Corporation commissioned the project for its art and culture programme. Its central mantra of 'fusion of art and everyday life' sees it hosting a variety of 'relatable' contemporary art and design exhibitions and performances. Spiral Market is worth a visit for one-of-a-kind gifts and houseware. The eccentric Spiral Records offers an eclectic range of music in formats. This could be an alternative to the possibly bank-breaking shopping on the main Omotesandō-Aoyama strip.

More unique finds are at Postalco ([www.postalco.net](http://www.postalco.net)) in Shibuya, especially for leather goods. Conceptualised in Brooklyn and born in Japan, Postalco proves that well-made things never go out of fashion. The establishment enlists independent local artisans who still take pride in their work and tradition. Collaborations with Arts & Science, and Opening Ceremony ensure their relevance.

Ardent fans of Rei Kawakubo and/or Comme des Garçons should head to Kolor ([www.kolor.jp](http://www.kolor.jp)), an accolade-winning brand by Junichi Abe, among Kawakubo's protégés who have established their own successful brands. Abe is also behind the launch of the Junya Watanabe line at Comme des Garçons. Apparent in Abe's collection from his time with Kawakubo has been the famed deconstructed aesthetic and an almost intuitive sense of texture. Abe, however, is more measuredly understated and often uses custom-developed Japanese fabrics to showcase local craftsmanship, including his own.



For the other end of the sartorial spectrum, and more of Kawakubo's mentoring prowess, one simply needs to turn to Sacai ([www.sacai.jp](http://www.sacai.jp)), founded and helmed by Abe's wife, Chitose Abe; the couple met over two decades ago at Comme des Garçons. Sacai stands out in handling incongruous fabrics, and ideas, and blurring gender divides to create the most unique pieces around.

Retail doesn't come greener than the purpose-built, eco-friendly Yoyogi Village ([www.yoyogivillage.jp](http://www.yoyogivillage.jp)), not far from the Roppongi Art Triangle. Acclaimed music producer Takeshi Kobayashi conceptualized the village to be a healthy approach to urban planning, where sustainability and style go hand in hand. This assortment of low-rise and low-carbon-impact structures is a rarity in itself amidst the skyscraping buildings all across the city. Designed by a team led by Wonderwall, the entire village is circled by a gorgeously landscaped garden, which should remind sceptics that green doesn't mean dull and plain.

The anchor establishment is Code Kurkku, part organic restaurant and part bar-and-lounge with views of an impressive vertical garden. The Container Zone has several kooky fashion joints, bookstores and even an art gallery. In keeping with Kobayashi's day job, The Music Bar features a cool watering hole with dark alcoves, posh leather armchairs, and brilliant cocktails.





The main dining room at Chanel restaurant features custom furniture upholstered in the label's signature tweed. Peter Marino evokes shoji screens in Beige—the Alain Ducasse-helmed restaurant that crowns the Chanel Building in Ginza.

RESTAURANTS

Sustenance after a day of exploring the city is a must. A thoroughly traditional variety can be had at Tokyo Shiba Tofuya-Ukai ([www.ukai.co.jp/english/shiba](http://www.ukai.co.jp/english/shiba)). Kaiseki restaurants are special in their own right, but the soy curd specialist Ukai elevates the dining experience with its gorgeous surroundings of carp ponds, and traditional wooden architecture finished with unobstructed views of Tokyo Tower. The seasonal menu changes every two months. Indeed, kaiseki

may cause a slight dent in one's wallet, but the service, food, and surroundings guarantee a unique experience.

Head to Beige for a more modern French experience ([www.beige-tokyo.com/en/](http://www.beige-tokyo.com/en/)). Alain Ducasse lends his name to the carefully curated menu with interiors by architect Peter Marino, and the overall concept strung together by Karl Lagerfeld. The latter's involvement explains why the restaurant sits at the very top of the Chanel flagship building in Ginza. 📍

THE KENGO KUMA QUARTET



Kengo Kuma's winning revision of the 2020 Olympic Stadium in Tokyo is an oval, wood-latticed structure that is in keeping with his characteristic ephemeral 'artist of the floating world' style. To celebrate this feat, (sorry, Ms Hadid), we feature a quartet of his works from different categories.

NEZU MUSEUM

Named after the railway baron and businessman behind this collection of pre-modern Japanese and East Asian art, the museum, completed in 2009, cleverly blends wa (harmony in Japanese), the art and the verdant surroundings that is central to the balance and serenity of the entire premises, to which Kuma himself alludes. It is a welcome respite from the hive of activity on the main thoroughfare of Omotesandō, the first wave of calm hitting on the way up the bamboo-lined pathway. The liberal use of glass throughout the six galleries allows natural sunlight into the interiors and brings the zen emanating from the Buddhist statutes inside into one big frame. [www.nezu-muse.or.jp/en/](http://www.nezu-muse.or.jp/en/)

CAPITOL HOTEL TOKYU

Keeping in line with Kuma's archetypal perspective that the building and the garden are one, a seamless integration, the Capitol Hotel Tokyu fuses the woodland that extends from the historically and spiritually important Hie Shrine nearby with the Capitol Hotel's own gardens. Previously Tokyo's only foreign-managed luxury hotel, the Hilton Tokyo, it has been taken over by homegrown Capitol brand and renovated as contemporary Japanese. The awe-inspiring lattice-work both on the façade and the interiors is vintage Kengo Kuma. (The gesture can be seen on an even more extensive scale in the aforementioned Olympic Stadium.) Rooms, cavernous by Tokyo standards, have panoramic views over the Hie Shrine and the Diet.

TOKYO UNIVERSITY HONGO CAMPUS

This building is so distinctively Kuma that he must have designed it straight from his heart. Commissioned by his alma mater, Tokyo University, Kuma showcased cedar strips, for the building that houses the Computing Research Facility, that resembles the scales on a very pretty fish as well as omikujii—strips of fortune-telling paper at typical Shinto shrines. One would be hard-pressed to find a more organic façade on any building anywhere.

WAKETOKUYAMA

One of Kuma's infrequent forays into restaurant design, this luxury kappo (which means, cut first, then simmer) is essentially an open-kitchen concept restaurant. The imposing sliced cement panels that greet patrons represent a reaction against the cliché use of paper and bamboo common among Japanese restaurants, and immediately creates a sleek and cool modern space to enjoy the two-Michelin starred omakase experience. Hiromitsu Nozaki, author (and authority) on Japanese knives, is the executive chef. [www.interconti-tokyo.com/en/restaurant/waketokuyama.html](http://www.interconti-tokyo.com/en/restaurant/waketokuyama.html)



Capitol Hotel Tokyu



Tokyo University Exterior



Tokyo University Interior