



## DESIGN NEIGHBOURHOOD

# Bakurocho, Tokyo

Once a "ghost town" in the shadow of Nihonbashi's neon glare, Bakurocho is enjoying a creative revival inspired by its Edo-era craft heritage. By Danielle Demetriou. Photography by Keith Ng

**HOT SUMMER FESTIVALS**, indigo cotton kimonos, old wooden houses, narrow lanes: these are among the earliest childhood memories of Noriko Konuma. And the setting of these memories is always the same – namely Bakurocho, a small neighbourhood in east Tokyo, where she would regularly visit her grandparents as a child.

Today, in a return to her roots, Konuma is the curator of Kumu Tokyo, a minimal design gallery in a renovated industrial space formerly used by the family business on a quiet lane in the heart of Bakurocho.

"My grandparents were both born in Bakurocho," says Konuma. "They lived in the house just opposite the gallery. My grandfather was born in that house

too and my aunt and uncle still live there today." She adds: "Bakurocho might not sound like an obvious place to set up a gallery. But it's a special place. There is a growing creative community and a very positive friendly feeling among people who live here, which is rare in a big city like Tokyo."

The neighbourhood is located just a smudge away from the neon glare of Akihabara's electric shops, the shiny department stores of Nihonbashi and the tourist crowds of Asakusa in the eastern side of the city. Yet, despite its location, Bakurocho is calm and low-key, with a typical Tokyo mismatch of concrete buildings having gradually replaced the old wooden houses over the years.

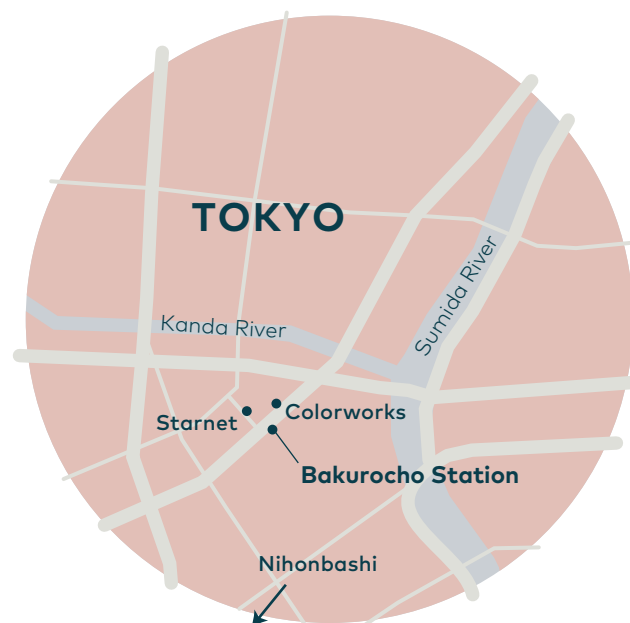
Its atmosphere is also resolutely old school – perhaps due to its heritage as a major wholesale area dating back to the Edo era (the neighbourhood is still known as Tonya Gai – wholesale town – with its streets filled with clothing stores). Like much of east Tokyo, Bakurocho is renowned for its craftsmanship heritage, with numerous generations-old artisan businesses traditionally based in the neighbourhood, offering products that range from leatherware and combs to toys and scissors.

And it's currently in the midst of a creative revival, according to Konuma. "Ten years ago, morale was very low here," she explains. "There was an ageing population, fewer businesses, economic





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uncertainty. It was like a ghost town after dark. But slowly, creative people have started to move into the area. Over the past five years, things have changed dramatically. Creatives relocating here are revitalising Bakurocho."

Konuma, a youthful 47-year-old, is speaking over a delicious lunch of Iwate beef hamburger steak at Kitade Shokudo, a hip local restaurant that perfectly embodies the spirit of new-generation Bakurocho. Open since late 2013, the narrow double-height space is as cosy as it is stylish, with concrete walls, handcrafted wood furnishings, modern art, green plants, scented candles and antique touches.

The brains behind the space is the friendly owner, Shigeo Kitade, who came up with the idea of opening an east Tokyo restaurant after six years working in New York. "I stumbled across this area accidentally," he says, before pausing to say hello to local customers and then to greet his wife and one-year-old daughter. "The moment I saw this particular space, I fell in love immediately. It looked nothing like

this at the time – it was some sort of medicine factory and storage space. But it really reminded me of Brooklyn with its industrial feel."

The end result is a welcoming space with food as warming as the design – homemade tacos served with a signature salsa feature prominently on the menu – and they also sell a line of original herb-tea blends.

The restaurant is in good company in Bakurocho. Just seconds away, on the other side of the street, is a tiny shop called Co-, home to more than 1,000 rare buttons painstakingly collected from around the world. Centre stage in the bijou, button-filled space is the owner Naoko Kozaka, who was inspired by the neighbourhood's friendly spirit ►

**OPPOSITE** Noriko Konuma standing on top of the Palette Building, in front of the rooftops of Bakurocho

**ABOVE** Neighbourhood businesses Colorworks, the ART+EAT cafe and Starnet (clockwise from top left)

FEBRUARY 2016

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LEFT Kitade Shokudo specialises in homemade tacos

BELOW Shigeo Kitade, owner of the "taqueria"

RIGHT Co-'s owner, Naoko Kozaka

BOTTOM Rare buttons on display in the shop



## BAKUROCHO IS DIFFERENT FROM MANY OTHER PARTS OF TOKYO – IT FEELS OLD, HISTORIC AND VERY JAPANESE



to set up shop here five years ago. "Bakurocho has old things and it has new things," she explains. "It's a nice mix. There are a lot of artisans drawn to the neighbourhood because of this. There are also a lot of old button makers around here – most of them started up after the war.

"This area still has the special spirit of Old Tokyo's Edo era, a sense of heritage and innovation and creative collaboration. And it's attracting young people now too. I'm seeing more and more young couples and babies."

Just around the corner – as Konuma jokes, "everything in Bakurocho is just around the corner" – is another local gem: Starnet. The small atmospheric shop is the Tokyo outlet of the

minimalist ceramics gallery and organic restaurant of the same name located in rural Mashiko, a small pottery town in Tochigi prefecture. Open since 2011, the first floor is filled with beautifully packaged green teas, coffees and local snacks, alongside delicately minimal ceramic tea cups and bowls, mostly handcrafted in Mashiko. A wooden staircase leads upstairs to a selection of quality organic clothing – from socks and dresses to cotton bags and knitted jumpers – many produced by Starnet's own label, Organic Handloom.

"The size and atmosphere of the neighbourhood, plus the close proximity of other craftsmen in the neighbourhood is a good fit for us," says staff member Eriko Tsumori. "The values of Starnet match those of Bakurocho."

It's not just food and design for which the area is acquiring a reputation: Bakurocho is also emerging as a contemporary art hub, with a growing number of galleries moving to the area in recent years. Among the pioneers of the neighbourhood's art movement





BELOW A restaurant just next door to the ART+EAT building

BOTTOM AND BOTTOM RIGHT The Palette Building, created by the

paint company Colorworks, includes a showroom and ground-floor cafe

RIGHT Organic clothing in the ART+EAT cafe



is Taro Nasu Gallery, which relocated from its previous more conventional Roppongi location in 2008. Designed by the architect Jun Aoki, its clean-lined entrance – set back a little at the side of the building – leads to a staircase that descends into a minimal white gallery space, complete with double-height ceilings.

Speaking as staff put the finishing touches to hanging artworks for a new photography exhibition, Shino Ozawa, an assistant at the gallery, explains: "We moved here because the owner, Taro Nasu, was trying to find an interesting new area within Tokyo. This neighbourhood is different from many other parts of Tokyo – it feels old, historic and very Japanese. There's also

a good creative atmosphere. We often collaborate with local designers and shops in the area."

The gallery is housed in the Agata-Takezawa Building, whose tenants include a number of new-generation Bakurocho residents – ranging from the industrial-looking jewellery workshop AbHeri to the colourful ART+EAT cafe, where a group of young women in colourful headscarves are taking part in a miso-making workshop during our brief visit.

Testimony to the area's growing popularity is the presence of two sisters visiting from Hong Kong, who are lingering in front of the building before it opens, having made a special pilgrimage to explore the area's creative hotspots.

Pausing from taking iPhone selfies, Ivy Li, a toy designer in a pink beanie hat, says: "I love reading Japanese design magazines and I've read a lot about this neighbourhood so we really wanted to visit."

"We've only just arrived here but it feels very different from other parts of Tokyo. Very calm and relaxed. I like that it's so non-commercial. Japanese people really put their heart into good design and good food in a simple and artistic way. You can really sense that in neighbourhoods such as this."

Just next door is another focal point of Bakurocho's creative scene – Fukumori, a cafe serving food from Yamagata and hosting numerous local events such as concerts, workshops ▶





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and a summer festival. The cafe is run by Hiroyuki Komatsu, who runs the design company KKHK – with clients such as Adidas Japan to Reebok – in an office space in the same building.

According to local legend, it was while searching for an authentic Tokyo setting in contrast to the ever-changing western neighbourhoods of the city that Komatsu came across this potential office space. He was allowed to proceed with a contract, however, only on the condition that he opened a cafe on the ground floor – as stipulated by his late landlord, a local figure called Toriyama san who actively encouraged the creative revitalisation of the area.

Komatsu now also runs the nearby cafe Izumai – renowned for its pies and its small bookstore – on the ground floor of the Palette Building, a modern space created by the paint company Colorworks, complete with a showroom and rooftop terrace.

The cafe is on the corner of the street where Konuma's gallery Kumu is based, which since opening in spring last year showcases Japanese design products created by IFJ Holdings Co. The gallery

building – recently renovated by Atelier Etsuko Architects – balances carefully between industrial heritage and natural minimalism, with expanses of original concrete, high ceilings and a glass facade, complemented by green plants and a carefully curated selection of Japanese design products, from pottery to canvas totes and jewellery.

Standing on the rooftop of the gallery and gazing beyond her grandparents' home across the Bakurocho skyline, Konuma muses: "I feel so lucky to be based here. We have so many wonderful neighbours. And, whether someone wants to collaborate creatively or just needs to borrow some glue, everyone seems to share that sense of community." ♦

CLOCKWISE FROM  
BOTTOM LEFT  
Assistant Shino  
Ozawa outside the  
Taro Nasu Gallery;  
the gallery's exterior;  
the front of Starnet;  
The shop's first-floor  
ceramics gallery