

## Kyoto—City Fabric

Story and photos by Bill Tingey

Anyone driving into Tokyo from Narita could easily be forgiven for questioning the old adage about Japanese houses being "made of wood and paper." The capital, in particular, is now much more like the city in the movie *Blade Runner* than any of the abiding impressions which have stuck in the Western mind for so long. But if we are willing to look, that wood and paper culture can still be found, even in Kyoto where concrete and glass now abound.

Woven deeply into the fabric of the city, Kyoto's backstreets still sport numerous traditional wooden town houses that follow a time-honored form. Many have a narrow frontage and stand on sites reaching deeply back to meet lots extending from the other side of a city block, more often than not bounded on all four sides by buildings.

The block pattern and grid-iron of streets in the central part of the city is a relic of how Kyoto was first laid out more than 1200 years ago. And the patterns of behavior and etiquette of life associated with the town houses that still exist, keep alive the kind of communities

that have existed there ever since Kyoto was first inhabited.

Quite naturally, the interior spaces of a town house become less public, and therefore more private in nature, the further they are located from the street. Rooms fronting the street are used for formal meetings, business, and during festivals or local events in a semi-public capacity. They might also be used at the time of a death in the family. But the actual entrance to the interior is quite often behind one of these more public spaces and reached through a short covered vestibule leading off the street. Such inner entrances are called *uchi-genkan*, literally the "inner hall," and are quite often unroofed. Here, within the confines of the building, the changing patterns

of light through the day or seasons, flurries of snow or drenchings of rain become exaggerated experiences because of the way that our senses are sharpened by the building form.

Right at the back of the

building, there will often be a reception room facing a garden which, depending on its orientation, will act like a sundial recording the position of the sun on the plants and walls flanking this man-made encapsulation of nature. The gardens are a restrained ensemble of textures and simple hues which pacify rather than excite and are only fired by blazing sunlight that may find its way into one of these inner sanctuaries.

Many of the remaining traditional buildings in Kyoto are places of a commercial nature, sometimes housing *chaya*, the very exclusive establishments of refined entertainment.

Others are used by small businesses, tea ceremony teachers or craftspeople as combined work places and homes. But whatever their use, the daub walls, paper screens, and weathered, unfinished wood of these traditional architectural gems combine to produce a rich juxtaposition of effects, particularly enhanced by the natural lighting which finds its way into one of these buildings.

The essentially rustic nature of these materials is sometimes contrasted by the gleam and glimmer of colored silk, particularly in the Nishijin district, which for centuries has been Kyoto's center of textile endeavor. It is here, too, that embroidery is done, albeit in ever dwindling quantities.

When Buddhism was introduced into Japan during the sixth century, so



Gleaming, glimmering silk of a piece of Kyoto's finest embroidery.



Left: Sunlight warms this garden almost until sunset. Right: Discreet screen façade of a chaya.

Kyoto can be easily reached by train. Examples of embroidery can be seen at Nishijin-ori Kaikan located just south of Imadegawa-dori and on Horikawa-dori, in Kamigyo Ward. Tel: 075-451-9231 or 075-432-6131. To see examples of traditional town houses, shops and chaya, go to the Gion district, Pontocho, or the area known as Kamishichiken near Kitano Tenmangu Shrine. Or just explore the streets of the Nishijin district. If you become a member of the preservation society of Sugimoto House, a large merchant house, you may visit and spend some time looking around by appointment only. You may also visit with someone who is already a member of the society. Call, in Japanese please, 075-344-5724.



too were the crafts and architecture associated with it. Carpenters, metal workers and even artisans skilled in the technique of embroidery were brought to these islands to train the local people in skills from the continent.

Embroidery was mastered and developed by the Japanese, and in 794 A.D., when the capital was moved to Kyoto, an official department for the

craft was established at the court of the emperor. Following these noble beginnings, embroidery was later employed to decorate elements of the warrior's wardrobe. As time progressed, new stitches were added to the embroidery "palette" and the more elaborate techniques gradually became popular amongst the people at large for kimono and *obi*. Noh costumes were always ample excuses for

the embroiderer to exercise his art but nowadays, gentlemen's dress waistcoats and suspenders are being elaborately decorated with needle and thread, thus adding a new page to the history of the craft and further embellishing the fabric of the city.



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JAPAN TRADITIONAL  
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## TABLE TALK

### Hot Spring Inn Kuroyu & Arakisoba Restaurant



This article introduces two highlights of my September 1996 visit to Akita and Yamagata Prefectures in the northern Tohoku region: *Kuroyu*, a hot spring inn in Akita, and *Arakisoba*, a renowned *soba* restaurant in Yamagata.

Under the Hot Springs Act, a spring does not qualify as "hot" unless the water temperature is naturally maintained at 25° Celsius or above. There are 2,431 such spots across Japan. Aside from the water temperature, fewer can be called "secluded hot springs." My definition of a secluded hot spring calls for no TV or telephone in any guest room, shared toilet and wash room facilities, a single, uncovered light bulb dangling from the ceiling, and for about ¥3,000 per night there would be an annex for those who seek the curative powers of a hot bath, and guests would bring their own *miso* and rice to cook. I may add that such hot springs should preserve

Japan's old tradition of a single, communal bathing facility for men and women. All in all, there probably are only 50 or so such places nationwide.

Kuroyu is located in the highlands at an altitude of 820 meters, overlooking Lake Tazawa, the deepest lake (420 meters) in Japan, and reputed to have the country's clearest water. After World War II, the late Prince Takamatsu, a younger brother of the Showa Emperor, visited this inn.

The restful stay on the remote mountainside heightened our appreciation of the good food to be found in Yamagata Prefecture, known for its tasty *soba* noodles. Mr. Sasaki Hiroshi, my traveling companion who takes great pride in his knowledge of *soba*, took me to Murayama City. After a 30-minute ride from Yamagata City, we arrived at "Soba Strasse" along Mogami River. Of 14 *soba* restaurants, Mr. Sasaki patronizes the last one at the end of the street. *Arakisoba* is a farmhouse-turned-restaurant and boasts an 80-year history.

Thick "country-type noodles" made solely from locally produced buckwheat, regular *soba* and soup were simply other-worldly. Our taste buds fully content after this gastronomic bliss, we felt the long trip was worth it.

Local saké, side dishes of herring fillet cooked day and night in *miso*, and *akebi* (a mountain fruit) grilled with *miso* were served following the noodles. We found these dishes to be equal in excellence to the *soba*. The bill came to only half that for such delicacies in Tokyo.

Second only to sushi, *soba* is quickly gaining in popularity among foreign residents in Japan. *Arakisoba* will

please the most finicky palate of *soba* lovers from abroad. For these people, I conclude this article by revealing that the third-generation owner of *Arakisoba* is Ms. Ashino Mayumi who speaks fluent English. Why not visit this Yamagata town and learn more about *soba* from Ms. Ashino, who can answer any question in English.

**Hori Yoshimichi**  
President, Fukui Oil Storage Co., Ltd.

**Hot Spring Inn Kuroyu**  
2-1 Aza Kuroyuzawa, Obonai, Senboku-gun, Akita-ken  
Tel: 0187-46-2214  
Open: June 1 through November 5  
Accommodation: ¥10,000 with two meals, per night, per guest.

**Arakisoba**  
65 Ko, Okubo, Murayama-shi, Yamagata-ken  
Tel: 0237-54-2248  
Hours: 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.  
Closed on the 11th and 26th of each month.

