

“Starbucks Café & Art Gallery Yanaka Gotenzaka” — Design Notes by HAGISO

From HAGISO, the architectural design team, we would like to share the background, context, and intentions behind the design.

The building is designed to be enjoyable even without this knowledge, but we hope that understanding these aspects will make the experience even richer for those who are interested.

1. Reiwa-era Kanban-kenchiku

This Starbucks faces Gotenzaka, a street where many examples of kanban-kenchiku (signboard architecture) still remain. Kanban-kenchiku refers to a style that became widespread in Tokyo after the Great Kanto Earthquake (1923), in which the front of traditional wooden townhouses was covered with materials such as mortar, copper plates, or tiles to create decorative Western-style facades. The term was later coined by architectural historian and architect Terunobu Fujimori (1946~).

At that time, these buildings reflected a charming and endearing effort: while aspiring to the grand Western-style architecture seen in places like Ginza and Nihonbashi, other parts of Tokyo, such as the historic downtown areas (shitamachi) were creating their own versions of the signboard architecture. Merchants and artisans in these areas worked within the constraints of modest wooden structures, when they created their own version of this particular architectural style. I always find it delightful to come across surviving examples of kanban-kenchiku in the city, but their numbers are drastically declining as urban redevelopment and modernization sweep through these historic neighborhoods.

In particular, the neighboring shop, Nakano-ya, a tsukudani (a food boiled in soy sauce) store, was founded in 1923—the year of the Great Kanto Earthquake. Along this street, examples of kanban-kenchiku from the Taisho (1912-1926), Showa (1926-1989), and Heisei (1989-2019) eras can all be found. With this context in mind, we designed this building as a “Reiwa-era kanban-kenchiku” - a modern re-creation for our current era - placing a “signboard” facade on the front of a two-story wooden structure with a gabled roof.

One of the charms of kanban-kenchiku lies in how each facade expresses the identity of the shop through unique design details. For this project, the non-combustible requirements of the building code actually reinforced a natural design direction. We collaborated with a ceramics lab in Tokoname to create custom tiles. Each tile is formed by pouring glaze freely and firing it as it naturally settles, preserving its accidental textures. Five variations were produced through combinations of base clay color and glaze, and they are arranged randomly across the facade. The building changes in character depending on the viewing distance, and on rainy days the wet tiles take on new expressions—reflecting the sky and subtly guiding light into the depth of the alley.

While naturally considering Starbucks' corporate colors, we carefully explored tones that would harmonize with the surrounding streetscape. The height of the billboard and window levels are aligned with the neighboring Nakano-ya building, and the matching awnings are finished in black, inspired by the idea of a “black apron.” On the eastern side, the thinness of the billboard reveals the underlying wooden structure, as a kind of “disclosure” of how kanban-kenchiku works. In time, as another building rises on the adjacent lot, the continuity of the streetscape will be further completed.

Although the number of kanban-kenchiku is steadily decreasing, I sincerely hope that this valuable cultural and architectural heritage of Tokyo will continue to be preserved.

2. The “Manju Structure” of a Temple Town

The feature of the urban fabric in Yanaka and Nippori is, in fact, shaped by the relationship between temples and townhouses. This structure is often likened to a manju—a traditional Japanese sweet with a filling and an outer skin.

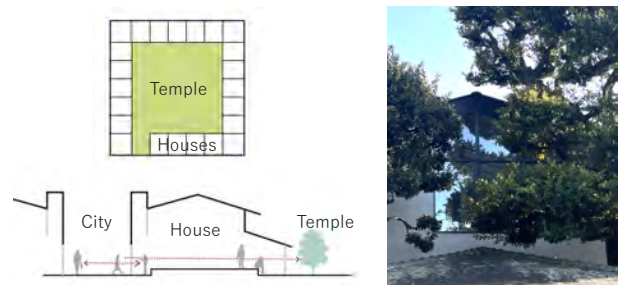
Yanaka, in particular, is known as a temple district, with more than 70 temples concentrated in the area even today. This dates back to the Edo period (1603-1867), when Kaneiji—the Tokugawa family's temple, located in a 15 minutes walk from here—was established on Ueno Hill to protect Edo Castle from the northeast (considered an inauspicious direction). The area's character was further defined following the Great Fire of Meireki (1657), a catastrophic blaze that destroyed over 60% of the capital and claimed over 100,000 lives. In the aftermath, the Shogunate reorganized the city's layout to prevent future disasters, relocating many temples from the crowded center, such as Kanda, to the outskirts like Yanaka. As temples gathered, visitors coming to pay respects at graves increased, and teahouses and entertainment stalls began to appear. Even during the Edo period, Yanaka was defined by this constant flow of people coming and going, and that trend continues today. The neighborhood has once again become a major destination, drawing a vibrant mix of both domestic and international visitors who come to experience its changing atmosphere.

From an urban perspective, rental houses and small shops naturally developed along the edges of temple grounds. Like the filling and skin of a manju, clusters of small wooden townhouses surround the temples. Walking through Yanaka, one sees rows of narrow-fronted wooden houses lining the streets, but stepping just behind them reveals the quiet temple precincts, often opening up to unexpectedly expansive skies.

This contrast between front and back is something we have also experienced firsthand in HAGISO, the small cultural complex we design and operate adjacent to a temple. HAGISO is located just 5 minutes on foot from here, and we would be happy to welcome you all there as well. It is precisely this duality—the lively street and the tranquil temple grounds—that forms the unique urban character of Yanaka and Nippori.

The site for this project also faces the historic grounds of Kyōōji Temple, where the atmosphere shifts dramatically between front and back. To allow visitors to experience this transition gradually, we designed a narrow alley-like route to the entrance to the Starbucks. This alley gradually leads the visitors inside, away from the bustling street of Gotenzaka, similarly to the neighboring temples. Inside, both on the first and second floors, large windows frames borrowed views of the temple's greenery and structures, bringing the presence of the temple into the interior.

In particular, the second floor offers a view that often surprises first-time visitors. Within a single building, one can experience the dual nature of this urban structure—the liveliness of the town and the quietude of the temple.



3. The Entrance Is in the Alley

This building has no entrance facing the main street. In fact, the entrance itself is not immediately visible—it lies at the end of a narrow alley between the building and the neighboring shop, Nakano-ya.

Although the Yanaka area did suffer damage during World War II, it experienced relatively little destruction from incendiary bombings. As a result, postwar land readjustment was never carried out, and much of the prewar street fabric remains intact. In this project, we sought to draw from the experience of these intimate alley spaces.

In “Learning from Las Vegas (1972)” , postmodern architect Robert Venturi and his collaborators criticized modernist architecture by calling it a “DUCK.” , a building where the entire form and function are merged into one sculptural shape to create iconic forms. In contrast, they advocated for the “Decorated Shed.” , a simple, functional structure that relies on applied symbols or a “decorated” front to communicate its purpose to the world. Kanban-kenchiku can be understood as a quintessential example of this “Decorated Shed.”

In this project, however, the “signboard” is not treated merely as a symbolic facade. Instead, it is bent along the depth of the site to align with the alley, becoming an active spatial element that helps shape the alley itself. Furthermore, the volume of the main structure with a gabled roof breaks through this folded signboard, creating a semi-exterior space under the eaves. Through this gesture, we intentionally disrupt the simple dichotomy of inside and outside, aiming to produce a more layered and complex spatial relationship.

The alley approach also serves practical purposes. It helps contain the inevitable queue of customers within the site rather than spilling out onto the street. The outdoor benches along the alley offer a place to pause—whether to enjoy the seasonal atmosphere or to stop by during a walk with a pet.

This strategy of extending the street into the site by creating an alley space is something we have explored repeatedly in projects such as in our TAYORI and asatte shops, which we designed and operate here in Yanaka. Compared to flat and homogeneous urban environments, we believe that cities with depth—where unexpected encounters await just beyond a slightly courageous step—offer a richer experience.

Such alley spaces require careful attention to planting and the creation of a human-scale streetscape. For this project, we collaborated with landscape designer Kazunori Anzai, who also lives in the neighborhood. He approached the planting with a long-term perspective, cultivating greenery that connects seamlessly with the lush grounds of Kyōōji Temple.



4. Structure and Interior

For this project, we were primarily responsible for the architectural and landscape design, while the interior design was led by Starbucks' design team. That said, from the early stages of the project, we engaged in extensive discussions, building a collaborative relationship where we could openly exchange ideas while maintaining mutual respect for each other's areas of expertise.

The timber structure, in particular, has had a decisive influence on the interior space. The structural design was developed in collaboration with structural engineer Ryotaro Sakata, whose office is based nearby in Nezu.

The building takes as its prototype a townhouse-like form with a narrow frontage and deep plan, topped by a gabled roof. However, as the site widens toward the back, the structural framework splits into two branches.

On the ground floor, in order to emphasize this sense of depth, a series of glulam portal frames gently bends and continues in response to the widening site. In many timber structures built in quasi-fireproof districts, designated areas in Tokyo, where specific fire safety standards are needed to prevent the spread of fire, the structure is often concealed behind the walls made by non-combustible materials. In this case, however, we adopted a “char allowance” design approach, in which the members are sized so that even if the outer layer of the timber chars during a fire, the remaining section can still support the structure. This allowed us to leave the portal frames and roof beams exposed as interior-timber.

On the second floor, the ceiling follows the slope of the gabled roof, with soft light filtering down from occasional high-side windows that rise above the roofline.

Responding to the depth and spatial expansion created by the structure, the interior design incorporates elements such as a black floor that reflects the greenery seen through the rear windows and draws it into the space, the repeated rhythm of ceiling battens on the second floor, and floor finishes that transition into furniture in response to subtle level changes.

Many of the furniture pieces were also specially designed for this project by the Starbucks design team.

Our hope is that this building does not stand apart from Gotenzaka, but rather folds itself into the daily life of the neighborhood, much like the signboard buildings of the past that aimed for the grand while remaining rooted in the modest, wooden reality of the shitamachi. As the tiles from Tokoname weather with the seasons and the planting by the temple grows to meet the eaves, we hope that “Starbucks Café & Art Gallery Yanaka Gotenzaka” becomes more than just a place to pause for coffee. We envision it as a threshold, a space where the bustling energy of the merchant street meets the quietude of the temple grounds, and where the architectural heritage of Tokyo finds a sustainable path into the future. We invite you to step off the main street, walk through the alley, and experience this layered depth for yourself.

