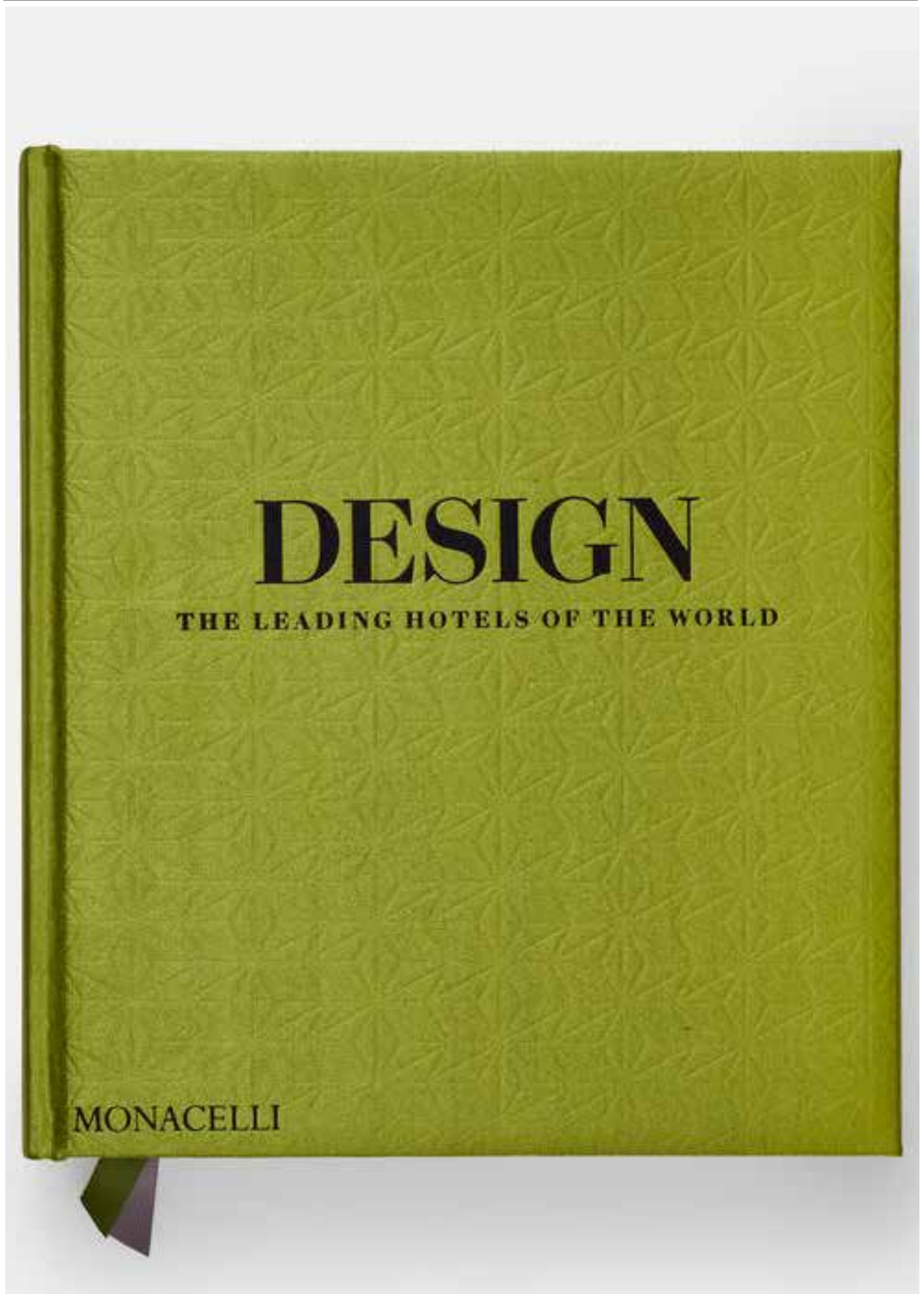
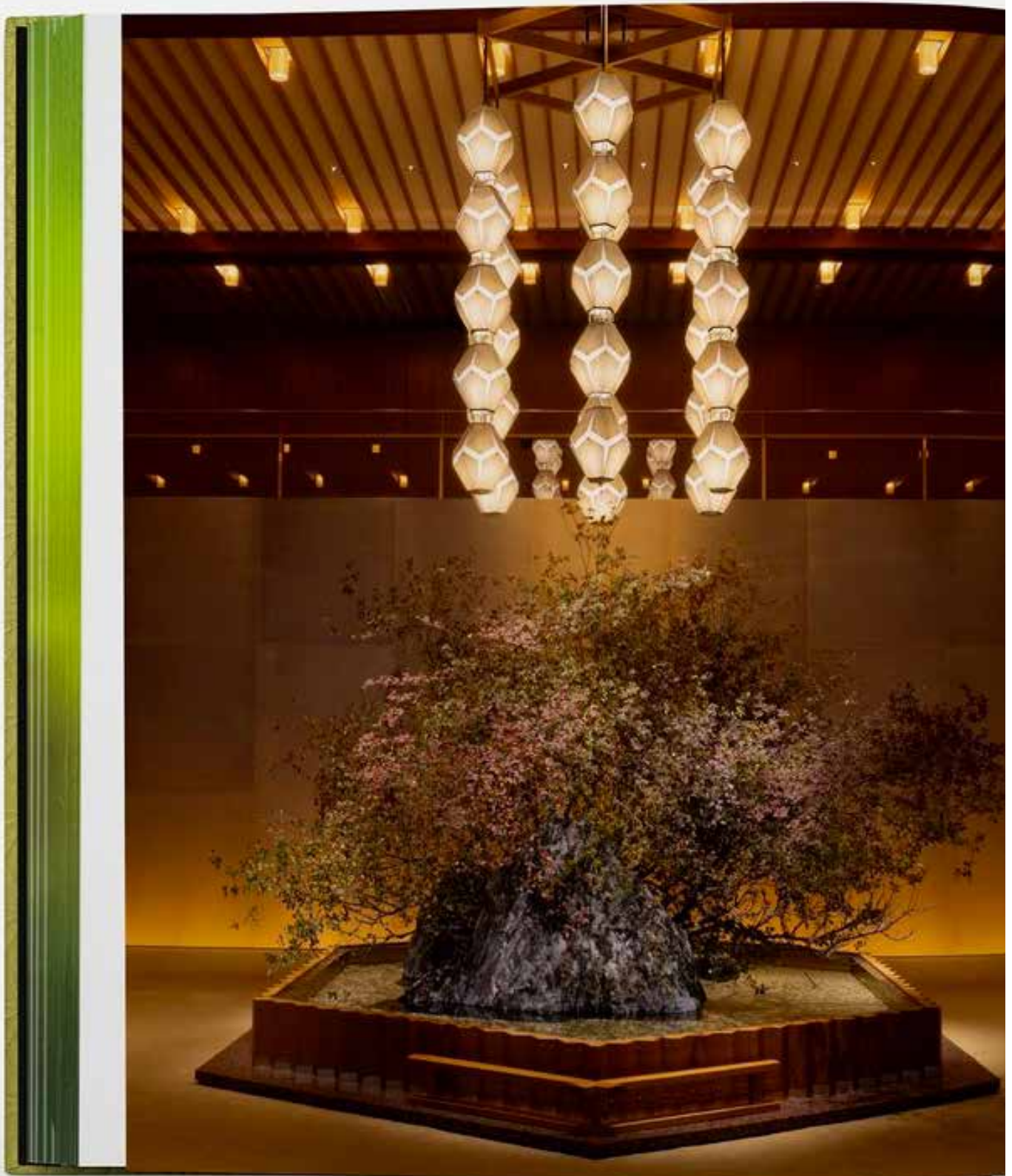






The Okura Tokyo

Tokyo, Japan

Text by **Spencer Bailey**
Photography by **Russel Wong**

Immediately upon entering The Okura Tokyo, located in the city's dense Toranomon business district, an "Okura aura" will wash over you. Step through the front door to the check-in desk of this vast, 508-room property, and an impressive choreography will ensue, swiftly transitioning you into an entirely different space of mind, body, and spirit. A world of Japanese simplicity, elegance, tradition, and innovation will seamlessly unfold. You may experience awe, or maybe even a floating feeling, as if you're in an ethereal dream. This hotel is so exquisite, so well-run, thought-through, and considered, that it seems almost too perfect for this world.

Since opening in 1962, The Okura's mission has been "best accommodation, best cuisine, best service," and it shows. To that, I would like to unofficially add: "best design." Though the original hotel, a midcentury icon designed by Yoshiro Taniguchi

Previous spread
An oversize tower arrangement inside the Prestige Tower's lobby, with beadlike lanterns hanging above.

Opposite, top to bottom
The Prestige Tower's lobby entrance lies just beyond the Okura Square's reflecting pool.

The lobby of The Okura Tokyo is restored and reconstructed to the original by the architect Yoshio Taniguchi, located at the base of the Prestige Tower.

(1904-1979), was torn down—to some controversy and lamentation—in 2015, this clean slate made way for a sublimely sensitive overhaul and expansion: two new glass-curtained structures, the Prestige Tower and the adjacent Heritage Wing, opened in 2019 with interiors by Yoshiro's son, the renowned architect Yoshio Taniguchi, born in 1957 and best known for his redesign of New York's Museum of Modern Art.

Rich in history and representative of Japanese culture, this is a place that honors its lasting heritage at every turn. The lobby, first designed by Yoshiro, was painstakingly re-created and resurrected by Yoshio, who treated it with the utmost reverence and care, as something *hisei*, or sacred, passed from father to son. Extraordinarily, Yoshio not only faithfully reproduced the design, materials, and layout of his father's original creation (albeit turning the room 90 degrees), but also the atmosphere—the light, the acoustics, the temperature, the airflow, the feel. I visited the old Okura in early 2015, just before it was demolished, and as soon as I walked into the new lobby, I instantly sensed an uncanny familiarity. It was as if I'd been transported back in time to the old hotel—the space was much as I remembered it—only now, nestled within a 41-floor skyscraper, it felt refreshed and full of a new kind of energy.

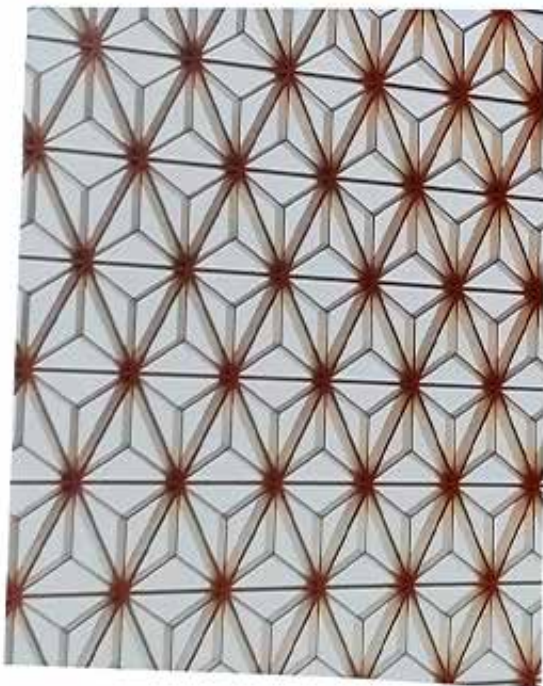
There's an enduring intimacy to The Okura that belies the sleek high-rise it's located inside. Thankfully, the lobby remains the star of the show; without it, The Okura would not be *The Okura*. The oversize, expertly arranged flower vase; the beadlike lanterns strung together and delicately hung from the ceiling; the ornamental flower-petal textiles on the walls; the hemp-leaf *kumiko* lattices

running along the windows; the bamboo shoji screens; the lacquered tables and chairs; and the classic world map sketch and Seiko wall clock—it's all still there, preserved, restored, and timelessly held in place.

The Prestige Tower itself is like a city within a city. Wedged—and practically hidden—between its eight-level base and upper floors are 18 floors of private offices. Starting on the 27th floor, there's a fitness center and spa with a five-lane, 82-foot (25-meter) pool, then guest rooms (floors 28-40) and a club lounge (floor 37), and on the very top, the Sazanka teppanyaki restaurant, the Starlight bar and lounge, and a "sky chapel" and banquet rooms. The lobby level includes the all-day-dining restaurant Orchid and the adjacent Orchid Bar, a jewelry boutique, and a flower shop, while the sixth floor houses the Toh-Ka-Lin Chinese restaurant, a "salon" space, and a business center with four private meeting rooms. More banquet rooms and a 15-store shopping arcade are also on site.

At the northwest corner of the Prestige Tower, a serene, portal-like hallway leads guests to the Heritage Wing, a 17-floor "annex" structure drenched in warm, clean-lined Japanese minimalism. Designed entirely by Yoshio and filled with *ikebana* arrangements and timeless décor, the building exudes a *tokonoma*-like sensibility. (For the uninitiated, a *tokonoma* is an alcove common in Japanese tearooms for displaying objects, pictures, and flowers.) A stairwell in the lobby—which includes a 41-foot (12.5-meter)-tall wisteria-shaped chandelier, conceived by the Beirut-born, Paris-based architect Lina Ghotmeh and made of purple-hued Czech glass—leads guests downstairs to the Japanese restaurant Yamazato, which





Opposite, clockwise from top: The lobby staircase in the Heritage Wing, with the Paris-based architect Lina Ghotmeh's "Wisteria Shadow" chandelier.

The entrance door to a lower-level banquet room, with brass door handles upcycled from the original Okura Tokyo.

A traditional *kumiko* lattice screen.

features the *sukuya*-style Choshō-an teahouse, originally built in 1962 by the master carpenter Sotoji Nakamura and sensitively installed by Yoshio. On the Heritage Wing lobby floor is a second restaurant, *Nouvelle Époque*, which serves French cuisine. (Remarkably, Yamazato and *Nouvelle Époque* are the only two restaurants in the world designed by Yoshio.) On the building's exterior, The Okura family crest, a *gokaibishi*, or five-layered diamond, runs up the walls, adding further texture to the building.

I stayed in one of the property's 140 spacious Heritage Rooms, which range from 570 to 678 square feet (53 to 63 square meters), and are just slightly larger in size than the Prestige Rooms housed in the neighboring tower. While decidedly contemporary in feeling, the meditative design of the Heritage Rooms evokes traditional Japanese architecture. Featuring grand views, the spaces summon a sense of *shakkei*, or "borrowed scenery," where the outside becomes a part of the inside. Then there are the high-end amenities: Each Heritage Room includes a steam room, as well as a jet bath, a heated bathroom floor, and a walk-in closet. Every night, immaculately ironed pajamas are laid out during turndown service. As a guest, it's impossible not to feel pampered.

The "gate" to this sprawling, shiny new campus is the enchanting Okura Square, which features a central 138-foot (42-meter)-wide water reflecting pool and a carpet-like road covered in granite and styled in *ichimatsu*, a classic Japanese checkered pattern. On the southwest corner of the site sits the Okura Museum of Art, originally designed by Itō Chūta and completed in 1927. Japan's oldest existing private art museum, it was founded by the

businessman Kihachiro Okura, the father of the hotel's founder, Kishichiro Okura, and holds an impressive 2,500 works in its collection. Registered as a Tangible Cultural Property of Japan, the museum was moved 21 feet (6.5 meters) in order to accommodate the site's new layout, and its interior was subsequently renovated by Yoshio. In many ways, the museum and its holdings serve as a fitting, deep-rooted metaphor and framework for the entire Okura experience.

The refreshed site also includes a 5.2-acre (1.3-hectare) green space in the form of a garden. Inspired by the *kyōkusai*, or "meandering water," garden previously located on the seventh floor of the original main building, this new space features hydrangeas, Siberian irises, and sweet flag grass; many replanted trees and replaced stones from the old structure; and even a camphor tree first planted by the Meiji-era admiral Tōgō Heihachirō.

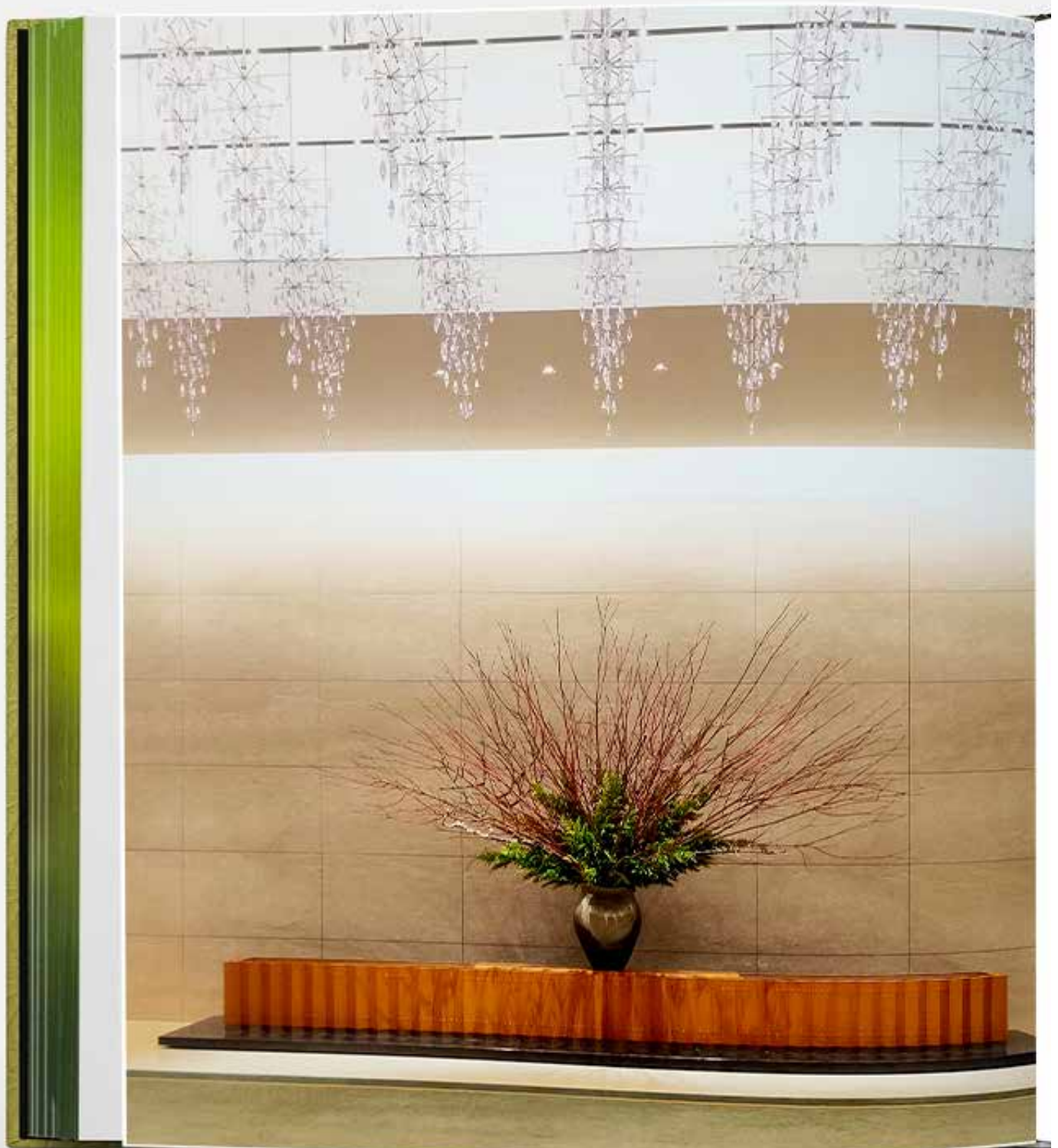
Beyond The Okura's extraordinary design, it's the *omotenashi*, or supreme level of hospitality and mindfulness, that pervades the property. The service is so discreetly done that it practically dissolves (during my stay, there was always someone there to help, but never in a way that felt invasive). For Shinji Umehara, the president and representative director of The Okura Tokyo, the hotel serves as Japan's reception hall—something it has strived to be from the start. Located across the street from the U.S. embassy and the U.S. ambassador's residence, there is indeed a diplomatic—if decidedly low-key and unfussy—nature to the place. The Okura Tokyo invites you in with a graceful, elegant bow, and through both its highly refined design and sensitive service says, "*Irasshaimase*." Welcome.

This page
A private dining room
in the restaurant
Yamazato, located in
the Heritage Wing.

Opposite
A section of the
Sanjuroku-kan
Koshu, or "Thirty-Six
Immortals of Poetry,"
panels in the Heritage
Wing lobby, featuring
paper from an old
Osaka banquet room.







Opposite
A view from the
penthouse level
overlooking the
city at night with
a view of the
signature light
tower.

This page
inside the "balcony"
space on the sixty
floor of the Prestige
Tower, overlooking
Ovira Square.

