

Culture Reappraised

Kenya Hara is Japan's leading thinker on contemporary design and a major force in shaping the way Japanese design is perceived overseas. Since 2002, he has been art director and adviser of Mujirushi Ryohin, better known globally as Muji, and president of Nippon Design Center. He is also a member of the Japan Design Committee, a grouping founded by leaders of Japan's design, architecture and arts communities. The designer, who has been watching society with his own unique outlook, talked about the future challenges for Japan in the changing world.

■ What are the characteristics of Japanese design?

Four words - detail, courteousness, subtlety, concision. However, the airport designs, for example, are not at all interesting, despite Japanese architects being highly regarded and global prizewinners. Or, if you look at Japan's nightscape - pilots around the world say that Japan's nightscape is the most beautiful. That's not only because the air is clear, but also because not one light bulb is missing. ... That's how thorough Japanese are. I don't think there is anywhere in the world that pays that much attention to detail. Those who clean don't just go home when their shift is up; they carry on until they feel their work is done. This is a matter of course for those providing the service and those using it. It's an unspoken principle in Japan that I think is a really crucial backdrop to Japanese design.

■ Has Japanese traditional culture influenced your own design concept?

Culture is always a local thing. There is no such thing as global culture. It is important to interpret an individual culture in relative terms within a global context and to put it in a global context without spoiling its unique traits. In order to do that, one has to be able to explain what Japanese culture is.

In the Meiji period (1868-1912), Japan threw away what we think of as traditional Japanese culture and adopted Western culture. Among the good things we imported were the functional aspects of civilization ... but we also incorporated Western culture. Today, we have slowly started to recognize the values of our own tradition and aesthetic sense. Quite

simply, there are things that people from overseas have found unique and fascinating about Japan, and I think that it is time for us to start appreciating them, too. Japanese people really need to learn about their own culture in greater depth, myself included. We also have to think of Japanese tradition and aesthetic sense not as old or nostalgic things but as resources for the future.

■ Is this important when planning ahead for global events like the Olympics?

Aside from the Olympics, I think we are entering a new era, one we could call the "nomadism era." The opposite of nomadism is "sedentarism." Influential figures on the international stage are flying all over the world on business. Or, they are constant travelers who visit various destinations and enjoy the rich culture of each place. So, these experiences make them see the diversity of world cultures and start realizing the value of each.

The population that is moving across the borders has increased around tenfold since 1964 when the Tokyo Olympics were held. It is said that this will continue expanding to make up a quarter of the world's population by around 2030. This is the reason why tourism will be the world's biggest industry in the twenty-first century.

Japan should be prepared for this reality, in a way it hasn't been before, to welcome visitors from around the world and present the mysterious and wonderful culture we have here. As the job of the designer is to visualize value, our job now is to show Japan in its best light.

■ Is this part of how design has changed?

The shape of industry has changed. The industrial model that has dominated Japan over the seventy years since the war is an industrialized one whereby raw materials would be imported and goods like cameras and fridges manufactured and exported ... I think that age is coming to an end. Technologies will function not in a physical form, but in the background of daily life. I think we can already see new industries offering potential. For example, refrigerators and air conditioning may maintain their basic functions, but will be incorporated into walls and then further into a wider integrated system or, for example, IoT.

The home will transition from a living space to an important junction for a variety of industries including energy, communication, transport, artificial intelligence, robotics, travel and so on. So as a result we will start to see, through dwellings, new industrial possibilities that are different from what we now call architectural design. I produce an exhibition called HOUSE VISION, based on the belief that the role of designers is to create a picture of things of the future that are presently latent and difficult to visualize.

■ What are the different challenges facing the 2020 Olympics compared with the 1964 Tokyo Games?

The last Olympics came at a time of high economic growth when Japan was rebuilding after the war and it was important for people to proudly show the rest of the world just how well it could recover. Since then we've experienced the bubble economy and are moving into a post-industrial society and facing a number of social challenges such as the declining birthrate and increasing proportion of the elderly. Japan has grown, but didn't have the chance to properly mature. And I think that Japan just grew into an adult now and will reach maturity.

A large part of Japan's landscape is dominated by mountains that formed by volcanic activities and plate movements. It is blessed with abundant water sources and dynamic, yet delicately distinct four seasons. And it has such a huge variety of unique



Graphic designer, curator and author Kenya Hara is one of Japan's leading figures in the field of contemporary design. He has served as art director of the minimalist Muji brand of household and consumer goods since 2002. Photo: ROB GILHOOLY

qualities - the sea that surrounds the country, Japanese cuisine that takes advantage of seasonal food, hot springs that bubble up all around Until now the entire archipelago of Japan was used like one factory churning out products to export. We have to turn that around and redesign the entire archipelago for 2020 when people from around the globe come to Japan. I believe that designers can play a big role in working toward that goal. The year 2020 must be the passing point, I think; the target will be a little way farther on.

■ Tell us a little about the Japan Design Committee.

I joined about eighteen years ago and served as the chairperson for eight years. It's a collective of about twenty-five designers, architects and critics. They are leaders in their own fields and work individually in each area. The objective of the committee is to gather to exchange ideas and to obtain a broader view. Located in a department store in Ginza, Tokyo, the committee operates galleries, selects products for DESIGN COLLECTION and develops shops. As Japan heads toward that era of maturation, I think an organization such as this will be very useful when looking toward new situations arising in Japanese culture as a resource. ■

Interview by ROB GILHOOLY
