Timelessness in the Ordinary

The fundamental value of human function in Japanese & Danish modern design

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Abstract

I have observed that many Japanese and Danish designers turn to ordinariness as a way to provide the most elegant design solutions. I have encountered many modern designs from Japan and Denmark that bear the quality of being so ordinary that they become extraordinary.

Often times, this appreciation for the ordinary is expressed through the designer's appreciation for simplicity, his or her refusal to change anything if it already works, and by focusing on the smaller, overlooked details. Through an abundant use of wood and other natural materials, we can also see the designer's value for nature. And by creating functional solutions that are attentive to the convenience of the user, they exhibit the aim to provide as much human interaction and comfort as possible.

Many modern designs described as minimal or functional are cold, stark, and uninviting. The Japanese and Danish designers that I have selected to analyze in my thesis produce things that are both minimal and functional, but by returning to basics, these designers create things that are warm, whole, inviting, and timeless. In order to move away from the consumer-driven goal that has become so linked with the design realm, this return to basics might be an important step.

Introduction

'Design' is a term that can convey a diverse range of meanings for different people. Throughout my childhood, I thought of design as decoration, embellishment, and filling space with things. To me, interior design was the practice of filling rooms with objects, based on the occupier's taste in patterns, shape, and colors; it was all about preferences that were only surface-deep. At the same time, I thought of most architecture, interior design, and urban landscape to be comprised of forms that represented the designer's taste, and to be distanced from the function of the design itself. Even modern design, a style associated with minimalism, purity, and so-called functionalism, seemed superfluous and unnecessary. Being raised in Los Angeles exposed me to many large homes with spacious interior space and big furniture to fill the space, with couches too big and cushiony, and beds overly padded and high off the ground. Thus, it was my annual summer trips to Japan that put my assumptions of design into perspective. I was intrigued by clever designs and routines that solved difficulties of the lack of space in both traditional and modern Japanese lifestyles, such as futons beds that were folded away in the daytime. I became increasingly aware of a certain simplicity and sensibility inherent in Japanese lifestyle and designs. And after spending a semester studying in Copenhagen, Denmark, I became able to articulate my observations about how significantly these small, simple details can impact design.

When studying design for a semester in Copenhagen, I was exposed to several design pieces that appeared "modern" on one hand, yet on the other hand, were so warm, inviting, and comfortable that they seemed to transcend modern design altogether. Furthermore, I noticed that it was often the simplest details that were the most striking,

and that there was an extraordinary beauty in designs that were familiar, yet had been slightly altered. Designs that were modest and subtle—not loud and proud—were the most appealing and attractive, and they taught me that design is not a practice of embellishing or adding features, but a holistic process in which each step must complement the others. I learned the importance of creating things that would not add to the world's clutter, but fit into a larger picture, as if to become a member of a larger ecosystem. The furniture, buildings, and city streets of Denmark exuded an energy that I had never felt in Los Angeles.

I had noticed that Japanese designers seemed to appreciate a similar taste for small, modest details, and their values of craftsmanship perservere, despite modernity's reverence for the machine. In order to combat the coldness of modern design, many Japanese and Danish designers aim to put the human back into the picture by always thinking about the function of the human being, rather than the function of the materials. Solidifying in the mid twentieth century, consumerism misled designers to create unnecessary objects that clutter our lives today. In the last century, there are particular Japanese and Danish designers who have resisted designing such clutter, by returning to the human and basics in life. While modern designers in most countries lost touch with human needs for the sake of manufacturing processes, the modern designers of Japan and Denmark used human needs as their fundamental starting point, preserved their values of craftsmanship, and in result, they have created pieces that are simple, humanized, and timeless.

I. Return to the ordinary

There are designs we encounter on a daily basis that are so commonplace and routine that we forget they were designed. Toothbrushes, pencils, water bottles, and soap bottles are objects that many of us use each day without considering who might have designed them. In his novel titled *The Art of Travel,* the Swiss philosopher Alain de Botton explores the satisfactions we stumble upon while traveling. De Botton writes that when traveling to another country, trivial features can shape your impression in significant ways. De Botton describes the time he was struck by the understated elegance of an "Arrivals" announcement board in Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport. "Despite its simplicity, even its mundanity," he writes, "the sign delights me, a delight for which the adjective *exotic*, though unusual, seems apt" (67). The sign grabbed his attention because of its choice of words and font, which were different from what would be used in his own country. He calls the Schipol sign "exotic" because its details suggest to him, "vaguely but intensely," that what lies beyond the airport's doors might have something that his own country does not (69). "And so it was with my enthusiasms in Amsterdam, which were connected to my dissatisfactions with my own country, including its lack of modernity and aesthetic simplicity, its resistance to urban life and its net-curtained mentality. What we find exotic abroad may be what we hunger for in vain at home" (77). While the style of this airport sign may seem like a trivial detail, De Botton was picking up on something that told a larger story about the country itself. The things that struck De Botton were not found in landmarks, but in commonplace objects that citizens might overlook. Subtle and commonplace details can affect people in powerful ways.

During my annual visits to Japan, I observed that in many Japanese supermarkets, butter or margarine is sold in a small tub-like container, instead of being wrapped in blocks, and the lid has a small flap through which the knife can rest. This small convenience eliminates the extra step of having to find a place to put the butter-knife, and it suggests that this is more of a concern in Japan than in other countries where butter sold in sticks suffices. Another detail I have observed in Japan is the shape of the refill packets used to replenish shampoo or body wash bottles. In America, these bottles intended for refilling consist of the same shape and materiality of the original bottle. In Japan, however, the refills avoid using more plastic and are instead packaged in thin pouches. These pouches are a more sustainable solution because they reduce the use of plastic. Furthermore, the pouches have small, spouts that fit perfectly inside the bottles to eliminate the mess involved with transferring soap from one container to another. Whether these refills come in plastic or in pouches may seem like a small detail, but it makes a big difference. If the point of refills is to reduce the consumption of plastic, then the Japanese pouches take this point further by not using plastic in the refills. This pouch-style refill does exist in America but only rarely.

Margerine lid: the small flap opens for the knife to be inserted when not in use

Japanese shampoo bottle with pouch style refill

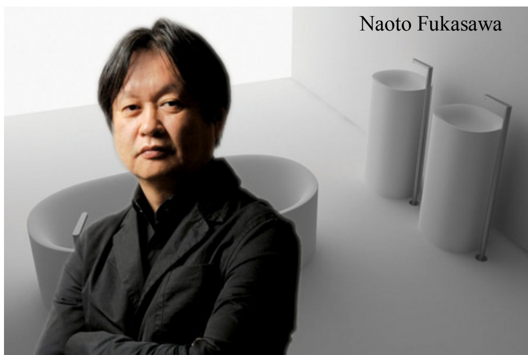
American hand soap with bottle refill

The fascinating thing about these small details is that they give us hints of what Blauvelt calls "little stories that get embedded in objects," reminding us that every object tells its own story within its own cultural context (Objectified). But in order to read the stories, you have to know the cultural context. Without cultural context, there are many things that might seem inconvenient in a culture. From my American standpoint, for instance, I have found it inconvenient that the Japanese hand-wash their dishes instead of using dishwashers, use small garbage bags instead of garbage disposals in homes, and line dry their clothes instead of machine dry. I began to appreciate these routines, however, when I recognized that they are all characteristic of Japanese resourcefulness, which stems from the limited space in Japanese homes, as well as the preference for doing things by hand. These lifestyle choices demonstrate the fact that by preventing certain technologies to take over their routines, the Japanese have preferred to sustain certain chores without the help of machines. These routines show us that the idea of convenience differs across cultures.

What the margarine tub and shampoo refills demonstrate is that convenience often becomes tailored in a basic object to suit a particular need. These objects can be so ordinary that citizens overlook them, but this is a good sign. It means that they have

become integrated into a person's routine because of their usefulness. In Objectified, design critic Alice Rawsthorn states that many of the best examples of industrial design are things that people don't even think about being "designed" (Objectified). It is not the convenience of an object on its own that matters, but the convenience of an object within a particular cultural context. Someone could create the most convenient contraption, but if its audience does not find it practical, it will not be used. Thus, it is culture that determines what is useful or convenient. And since people are what sustain culture, these citizens regulate the utility of designs. In order to create convenient objects, designers must be attentive to their end users' needs.

Today, the tendency to design for such needs has become obscured by the desire to create noticeable rather than normal designs. Japanese designer Naoto Fukasawa and British designer Jasper Morrison have united in their belief that things designed for the purpose of attracting attention are generally unsatisfactory. Encouraged by "glossy lifestyle magazines" and marketing maneuvers, design has become a competition to make things as noticeable as possible through colors, shapes, and surprises. Because of this, Morrison states, design has become a "major source of pollution" today (Fukasawa and Morrison 28). This "pollution" can be traced back to the mid 1900s, when industrialization


Naoto Fukasawa

Jasper Morrison

and mass production factories became the favored source of production and began to replace craftsmanship and craft workshops.

In the twentieth century, industrial advancements and building technologies allowed manufacturers to explore new industrial materials, such as concrete, metal, and steel, as well as new colors, shapes, and features. Industrial production methods provided new ways to focus on new shapes, but they also caused us to lose touch with the basic function of a design. The historic and idealistic purpose of "design" as an industry—to serve both industry and the consumers, and to create things that improved the quality of life—was side-tracked, writes Morrison (Fukasawa and Morrison 28). After all, "who wants normal if they can have special?" (29). Industrial production methods provided processes that were quick, easy, economic, and rational, but this distanced the manufacturers or designers from their products. Instead of being craftsmen who put all their labor into their work, designers became more like directors of their products, reassigning part of the process to machines. It was no longer about the care, attention, and time put into design, but about the way the finished product could grab the attention of consumers and make a profit. As the design process moved further away from craftsmanship, designers no longer had to touch, feel, or manipulate their designs with their own hands, and the distance between the designer and his product grew.

Perhaps it was this distance that caused designers to focus on the short-term life of their products (from creation to being in the stores) and disregard the long-term relationship between their product and the human that would ensue. As Morrison explains, however, "Special is generally less useful than normal, and less rewarding in the long term. Special things demand attention for the wrong reasons, interrupting

potentially good atmosphere with their awkward presence" (Fukasawa and Morrison 29). Victor Papanek, the author of *Design for Human Scale*, writes, "There are too many products. Too much energy, too many irreplaceable resources, and too much creative talent is involved in making them" (Papanek 45). He attributes our current product addiction to the postwar years, when people were "trained, wooed, cajoled, threatened, irritated, and subliminally manipulated into becoming product addicts" (45). He explains that in order to keep up, designers had to satisfy the needs generated by this consumer industry (45). By the 1980s, this tendency to keep up with consumers by creating unique and visually alluring designs had risen, and the market was demanding "meaningless" and "unnecessary" forms more than ever (Lovell 363). For example, consumers were becoming more and more attracted to objects with "all-in-one" functions, so the more buttons a food processor had, the more appealing it was, or the more settings a dryer had, the more high-tech it appeared.

It is interesting, then, to think that modern design, an outcome of this new industrial era, rejected things "meaningless" and "unnecessary." In a book titled *The History of Modern Design*, David Raizman explores the varying perceptions of what makes design "modern." In general, "modern design" was a break from tradition that began with the acceleration in the division of labor and the introduction of mechanized production during the nineteenth century. These new production methods provided cheap, easy, and fast ways to produce things in extremely large quantities. As this acceleration continued in the twentieth century, "modern design" came to describe the development of an international style that embodied the idea that the forms of a building or a design should emulate its function (11). Coined by American architect Louis

Sullivan, the dictum "form (ever) follows function" expressed the philosophy that once the functions of a building or a design were determined, its forms would be the outward manifestation of these functions (Twombly 20). This modern principle was further articulated in the aesthetic practices of functionalism and minimalism. Functionalism and minimalism are not interchangeable terms, but they both describe the belief that "function" is the most important aspect, and that exteriors should emulate a design's inner function and nothing more.

Thus, the meaningless and unnecessary elements that modern designers rejected were judged on a visual and aesthetic level, rather than by deeming what did or did not serve as functional to a human being. Dieter Rams, the former design director of Braun, stated in the film Objectified, "That's what particularly bothers me today, the arbitrariness and thoughtlessness with which many things are produced and brought to market. Not only in the sector of consumer goods, but also in architecture, in advertising. We have too many unnecessary things everywhere" (Objectified). Such thoughtlessness was a consequence of new mass production methods, which emphasized the potential for consumerism in modern design. Papanek points out, however, that these dehumanized designs were not unique to capitalist countries, but existed in nations that were not ruled by capitalism (Papanek 91). Attributing this dehumanization to designers' lack of consultation with people and the lack of common sense, Papanek regretted the fact that the products we use, the cars, we drive, and the buildings we live and work in are so impersonal and mechanic that they "often lack a human face," and he argued that the humanization of design is perhaps the "most important task facing designers and

architects today" (91). Papanek wrote this book in 1983, and it seems that we are still very far away from re-humanizing design.

On the one hand, modern design aimed to reduce clutter and chaos by stripping away unnecessary elements to expose a design's materiality. On the other hand, at the heart of modern design was consumerism, since the novelty and allure modern design was the new fast and efficient manufacturing methods of this period. Many critics recognize that modern design emerged as a part of a capitalist economic system that gave control of production to the hands of industrialists and manufactures with the goal of stimulating consumption (Raizman 11). This increasing concentration on consumption led designers to advertise their products as objects that satisfied your desires, causing the actual function of products themselves to become obscured (11). This period caused "design" to move away from craftsmanship and art and towards consumerism. Because of this, the way in which a product would function in someone's life came to matter less, as long as consumers would be attracted to it. Modern design introduced buildings, landscapes, furniture, and products that were detached from human needs, and this is why so many meaningless and inhuman forms exist in the design world today. As design shifted away from craftsmanship and towards consumerism and mass production, designing in terms of quantity became more profitable than designing for quality. New industrial methods made it possible for designs to have more functions or settings than ever. In a book titled *The Paradox of Choice,* author Barry Schwartz articulates the idea that too much choice

Overwhelming amount of choices at the

is a bad thing. He explains that while choice is a word that usually triggers positive and desirable reactions, it can be overwhelming when we are presented with too many choices. Schwartz uses American supermarkets to illustrate his point, suggesting that we are doomed by the array of choice and would benefit from returning to a simpler time when we had less clutter and fewer options (9-12). It can be more stressful than convenient to come face-to-face with twenty brands of vinegar when you just want the most basic kind. Papanek emphasizes the amount of consumer products that were dominating the design world by the 1980s, listing lawnmowers, televisions, sports cars, and electric pasta makers as just some examples. He states, "We can see a new threat emerging: the subservience of people to machines" (91).

By the mid-1990s, Fukasawa had tired of all this clutter and these unnecessary forms that no longer suited human needs. Similarly, Morrison observed that a lot of projects were being made with the aim of inciting publicity and raising individual profiles but without any genuine effort to serve as beneficial for the public. Along with fellow designer Andreas Brandolini, Morrison coined the term "Uselessnism" to describe design or architecture that ignores this fundamental goal of being useful. He writes,

> "I started to notice that successful objects, that is, objects which are good to live with…were never the result of aesthetic decisions alone, nor were they purely functional. They always balanced these two extremes with the additional consideration of the appropriateness of materials and their combination, of the human experience of using and living with the object, of the objects effect on its surroundings and of the communication of its purpose. I realised that certain less noticeable objects could over time become the object of daily choice by virtue of

> charm, stealth and efficiency. In the long term they just had more character for the job than others of the same class. Most of these objects were not 'designed' in the marketing sense, probably because of marketing's simultaneous demands of uniqueness and sameness, which seems to prohibit practicality and any genuinely well meant problem solving. It's a sad fact that marketing is often the motor of unnecessary change, replacing satisfactory products with products which may be less efficient but which are easier to sell. I doubt a comparison of everyday objects of previous decades, even previous centuries, with those available today would show an improvement in overall quality. Technologies and new materials may improve performance and design; they may bring things up to date and occasionally innovate, but the experience of living with an object seems to have cheapened. Furthermore, it appears that the more 'developed' a society becomes the more value is placed on useless objects and the less appreciation there is for something useful. We need to keep this appreciation alive or we may lose touch with reality" (*Everything but the Walls* 43)

Morrison articulates the urge to return to a time when before media or consumerism was the main goal of design, and human function was carefully studied. He recalls the time he purchased a heavy hand-blown wine glass from a thrift store, and its normal presence made him wonder, "How can it be that so many designs fail to have any real beneficial effect on the atmosphere, and yet these glasses, made without much design thought or any attempt to achieve anything other than a good ordinary wine glass, happen to be successful?" (Fukasawa and Morrison 28). These wine glasses stood out to Morrison as

poignantly satisfactory because they exhibited a kind of normality that was modest and unpretentious, a normality that stemmed from practicality rather than mere visual taste.

Super Normal exhibition

Fukasawa and Morrison express the effort to keep this normality alive with "Super Normal," a term they created that refers to ordinary objects that are "really normal" (Fukasawa and Morrison 100). The Super Normal phenomenon began when the two designers realized that they share an admiration for objects that displayed an essence of normality. They decided to assemble a collection of objects that they considered to have the peculiar power of being so basic and functional that they transcend our generally understood concept of "normal" altogether, and they displayed these at their first exhibition at Axis Gallery in Tokyo in 2006, writes design critic Alice Rawsthorn (Rawsthorn). In the exhibition there is an element of protest against the tendency of young designers, in particular, to "fall into the trap of creating superficially spectacular objects to generate media coverage, rather than to be used," and against the tendency of designers and manufacturers to "churn out a new version of existing products, simply by restyling them to make them seem more exciting, without considering whether or not they are needed" (Rawsthorn). When asked in an interview if Super Normal could be considered as a sort of theory, Fukasawa responded,

> Super Normal is not a theory. I believe it's re-realizing something that you already knew, re-acknowledging what you naturally thought was good in something. It's true that design is all about improving what already exists, but

> there's also the danger that things that were already good get changed. Design is expected to provide something 'new' or 'beautiful' or 'special.' When we look at the things around us with such a mindset, those things outside 'design' are viewed as being 'normal' or 'ugly' in contrast. Super Normal consists of the things that we overlook when we focus too much on 'design' – I think it points to those things in our everyday lives that we naturally hold an affinity for. I believe Super Normal is the inevitable form that results from the lengthy use of a thing—shall we say, a core of awareness. Design is refining that 'normal' core existence bit by bit so that it fits in with our lives today…I think that Super Normal indicates our 'realization' of what is good in 'normal.' (Fukasawa and Morrison 99).

What this illuminates is that an object does not become Super Normal through its design, but through the way humans use it. In this way, an object's Super Normal quality goes beyond any initial visual judgments and is judged, instead, by a long-term discovery of its quality and functionality in human life (Fukasawa and Morrison 99). While modern design was an attempt to break with tradition, an object becomes deemed as Super Normal through its "long tradition of evolutionary advancement in the shape of everyday things, not attempting to break with the history of form but rather trying to summarise it, knowing its place in the society of things" (29). Designers create solutions for the desires and needs of people. And as Papanek reminds us, these needs arise from people, not from the "heads of designers or form corporate decision makers" (91). These corporate and media forces, however, have confused us by making us believe we need new, unusual, and colorful things, rather than ordinary, everyday, and commonplace objects. "When the wrong problems are set," writes Papanek, "the wrong solutions emerge.

Frequently these solutions are dehumanizing, demeaning, and highly mechanistic" (91). Super Normal is about putting the human back into the picture, since people are what determine what is functional enough to be normal.

Industrial advances in the modern design world gave freedom to create abstract forms that provided the opportunities to create new, different, and surprising things. In consequence, the process of creating and designing lost touch with the "normal" and the functional. The idea of "essentiality" is something that both modern design and the Super Normal designers claim is important, but while modern design was an aesthetic and mechanical reaction against the frills of previous design movements, Super Normal promotes the aim to return to basics and reiterate the importance of human function. If "normal" refers to the things in life that are so commonplace that we forget they were ever designed, then Super Normal refers to a re-realization of these things, along with a quality of protest against designs that are "special" for the sake of attracting attention. Of course, this aesthetic movement, which self-consciously attempts to emulate the unconscious style of normality, has a kind of artificiality to it. Fukasawa and Morrison recognize that Super Normal is artificial in its effort to replace the normal, and that the attempt to return to this "simpler time" when design was about craftsmanship and art for living rather than the attempt to create eye-catching, special objects, is still a self-aware, artificial process. While it centers on an admiration for natural evolution of objects and natural elements, it is an act of reproduction to look back to this stage. This, however, might be a necessary step to allow people to live with fewer choices, higher quality, and more consideration for their functional needs, not their consumer needs.

II. Re-humanizing design

In *Towards a New Architecture*, modern architect Le Corbusier argued that a house was a "machine for living in" and a city was a "machine for efficiently organizing industrial society" (Blake 123). This fondness for treating architecture and urban design as machines is what led to the harsh forms of being cold, grey, and manufactured. In terms of architecture, attention was placed on how the finished product would bear the new production methods, without enough consideration for who the occupiers would be, or how they would use the place. Their function and essence consisted of its materiality, but by exposing the essence of the materials used and stripping away everything else, they became geared towards machines more than humans.

When Fukasawa encountered Dieter Ram's designs for Braun in the 1990s, however, he recognized that there was something more to design than just functionality. He writes, "I remember that I was not only attracted to the precise, functional designs, but also to the human softness, the tenderness in them—the fact that they were functional and simple but not cold" (Lovell 363). This "human softness" is an essential element that many modern designs lack.

Stereo by Dieter Rams

Similarly, most minimalist designs I had seen before were "minimal" based on their aesthetic value rather than their functional worth. What I observed in Denmark, however, was that its modern and minimalist designs retained this kind of "human softness" because they were in tune with how the user would experience the object. Perhaps the

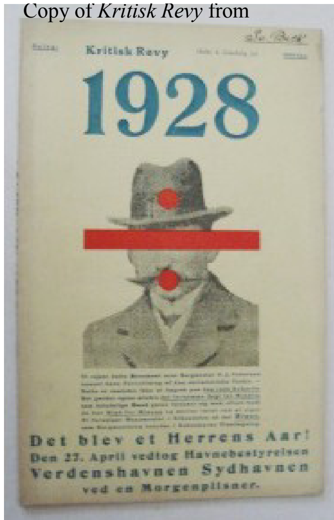
fact that Denmark is a small country with less space is what has fostered the Danes' proficiency for living with less space and fewer objects. The aesthetics of many Danish designs are based on functional efficiency combined with beauty.

The Japanese author and furniture collector Noristugu Oda appreciates this functional beauty, and his book *Danish Chairs* celebrates their elegance. Before the twentieth century, as Oda writes, Danish design was strongly associated with the rest of the Europe, particularly France and England, but by the beginning of the twentieth century, Scandinavian design was undergoing radical changes in developing its own persona (Oda 10). In 1919, Swedish functionalist theoretician Gregor Paulsson coined the motto, "better goods for daily life," and this motto became a catch phrase in the Scandinavian countries (12). Paulsson acknowledged the spirit of functionalism but improved it by adding a sociological dimension of the consumers' needs (12). Because of this, high quality became a standard in Scandinavian design, promoting the idea that objects should provide emotional comfort first and foremost, as Danish design specialist Mark Perlson writes (Perlson 17). In Denmark, functionalism became an even less general concept and took the form of something particular to the needs of Danish society (Oda 12). Perlson suggests that perhaps it is because Danes remain inside so much during the cold winters that they always loved simple, comfortable goods and cherish time spent at home with the family (10). "The Danish designers were able to inject a level of warmth and emotion to this idea, displaying a true understanding of the user's needs, not just the functional requirements of the piece" (10).

From the 1920s through the 1960s, Danish design experienced its golden age, which was characterized by the search for articles for everyday use (Oda 12). In 1924,

influential Danish designer Kaare Klint began teaching furniture design at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, and he started the course by having students measure the human body, along with examples of chairs they found were well-proportioned and fitted to the body (13). While his way of teaching was very basic and mathematical, it was revolutionary at the time because unlike other forms of modern design, it measured the dimensions of furniture in relation to the human body, reminding students that the very basic function of furniture was to facilitate a human body. This method clarified the importance of harmonizing scale of furniture with the scale of the human body. As Oda writes, Klint taught his students to measure the things that people actually used in daily life and apply these measurements to the scale and movement of the human body, then to investigate the inherent qualities of the materials used and to consider these qualities in terms of the overall aesthetic (13-14). While young Danish designers still embraced the new production methods and the clean lines of modern design principles (i.e. those of the modern school Bauhaus Dessau, 1919-1933), they reinterpreted this modern design style as means of improving people's lives. Thus, the "Danish modern" style emerged.

Along with Klint's influential teaching methods, the magazine *Kritisk Revy*, or "Critical Review," contributed to the internationally renown concept of "Danish modern" (Oda 14). Beginning publication in 1926, the magazine's authors were avant-garde designers who revolted against the exaggerated aesthetic details of old-fashioned styles, claiming that these unnecessary embellishments caused designers to lose track of the needs of human beings (12). This applied to various types of design and craft products as well as architecture (12-13). The magazine's director, designer Poul Henningsen, advocated the idea that it was "the moral duty of designers to be concerned about the



Copy of *Kritisk Revy* from

quality of people's lives" (13). The unique thing about this movement, however, was that in addition to opposing this style of ornamentation and superfluity, it strongly resisted the opposite: the modern movement. Bearing a minimalist aesthetic, modern design exploited industrial materials, leaving craftsmanship in the dust, and *Kritisk Revy* revolted against this style by encouraging designers to show a greater social conscience and concern for the consumer and to maintain their values of craftsmanship (13). The journal ceased publication in 1928, but it was a big influence on Danish designers, inspiring them to create humanized, user-centered designs instead of the machine-like designs that dominated other modern design realms at the time.

This Danish interpretation of functionalism became known as "Danish functionalism," fostering the concept of "functionalism" to mean that a design should be valued in a social sense instead of an industrial one. In other words, the "function" of a design was measured by its purpose for humans. For this reason, Danish functionalism did not exploit new machines or materials for the sake of creating new looks that rejected traditional aesthetics, but instead used these mechanical advancements to shape familiar materials in innovative ways. For instance, instead of turning to concrete or steel for materials, Danish designers exhibited a renewed interest in traditional materials such as wood, using machine methods to enhance its natural qualities in new ways. In most countries, modern designers were concerned with the details of a product itself, forgetting about the larger picture and the way the object would be used in someone's life. The

division of labor in production methods meant that each step of the design process became isolated, which caused the final project to lack cohesiveness. Modern Danish designers of the golden age, however, maintained a more holistic approach by focusing on the way in which their design would function in a person's life and seeing each detail as a part of the whole. Because of this belief in human rather than machine functionalism, the Danish modern designers adapted some of the core elements of modern design—chiefly its simple aesthetic or utility of machines—with elements of warmth through the use of form, democratic ideals, workmanship, and natural materials (Perlson 14). An important lesson that many Danish designers preach is that in order to keep a design humanized, the designer must pay close attention to scale, materials, and function, all in terms of how the end user will experience it.

Arne Jacobsen (1902-1971) is a Danish designer who was regarded as the innovator associated with the term "Danish modern" more than any other architect or designer (Berdichevsky 144). Jacobsen believed that the design of every component should be harmonious with the overall design, and that the building should fit into the natural landscape (145). His well-known SAS (Scandinavian Airline System) Hotel exemplified this holistic approach to design: the hotel was not just renowned for its outer façade, but for how its exterior interacted with the interiors and even the furniture within the rooms, all of which Jacobsen carefully planned and designed with a bigger picture in mind. Furthermore, Jacobsen's designs demonstrated how curvature and natural forms could be incorporated

Arne Jacobsen

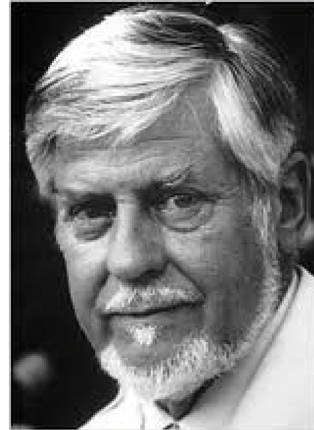
into the geometric forms of modern design. "The elements of the SAS Houses—from building to furniture to objects—displayed a direct correspondence between scale, form, and technique," writes American architect and author Michael Sheridan (Sheridan 241). Jacobsen mixed nature into a modernized urban setting by giving geometric attributes to things larger than the body, while giving objects closer to the body, or are held in the hand, a signature curvature. Jacobsen distinguished the function of each object or element in the hotel in relation to the human body, and this signature curve is what balanced the geometric lines of the hotel's exterior. "Room 606" has been preserved with its original furnishings of when the hotel opened in 1960, with Jacobsen's iconic "Egg Chairs," which are modern and futuristic, yet diligently curved to fit the human body. There is no doubt that Jacobsen's designs were modern, but they maintained natural curvature as well as craftsmanship. While the SAS House had frames and furniture and fixtures that were mass-produced and shaped in molds and presses, these objects were finished by hand at the end of the manufacturing process. And at the smallest scale, the objects inside the room were handmade by traditional artisans (241).

SAS Hotel exterior

Stainless-steel cutlery

Room 606, with Egg Chair and Drop Chair

This quality of holistic consideration is characteristic not only of Jacobsen, but also of many Danish designers. It stems from the essence of Danish design, which is to supply products to improve peoples' lives. Following mass-production techniques with a human finish was the preference of most Danish designers at the time, and it allowed designs to have a less machine-like and more crafted feel than other mass-produced designs. Jens Quistgaard (1919-2008) was a Danish craftsman and designer who is often credited for bringing Danish design into the most American homes (Perlson 8). Starting in the 1950s, he began designing for the international distribution line "Dansk." The ideas behind his creations might seem basic today, but they were revolutionary in his time. Prior to Dansk, Americans kept their utilitarian pots and pans hidden in the kitchen and left their fancy elegant serving dishes for the dining room. Quistgaard felt that if objects were designed well, they should not be hidden, and created a pot called "Kobenstyle," which was brightly colored and highly sculptural so that people would want to keep it exposed on counters, instead of having to hide them inside cupboards (8). But the main attribute was that it was the first "oven-to-table" line of cookware, for which the lid could be used as a trivet to further reinforce this concept of utility. Instead of taking the top of a pot off and leaving it somewhere, then using a trivet to put the pot on the table, Quistgaard took advantage of the fact that the shapes of a trivet and a pot's lid are relatively the same. He combined these two items and functions into the power of one single item, eliminating



Jens Quistgaard

the necessity of purchasing two separate items. This simple detail demonstrates Quistgaard's investment in catering to the user's experience.

Quistgaard's Kobenstyle pot and trivet

Danish Teak Pepper Mills collection

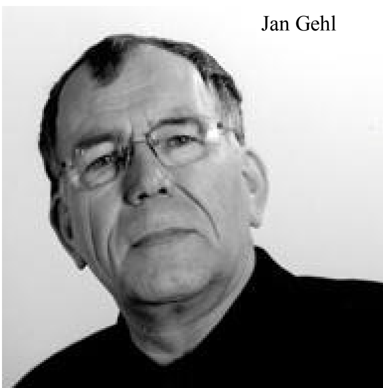
In the period between the late 1950s and the early 1980s, Quistgaard designed a series of combination pepper mill saltshakers for Dansk. This series took a similar approach of reducing the amount of items consumers could buy into one design with assured quality in craftsmanship. The ad for the mills read: "The top holds salt. The lower half grinds up pepper. Clever? Yes. But there's more to it than that…each must be fresh. Dignified. Audacious, timeless, satisfying to behold" (Perlson quotes the Dansk ad from 1964, 7). Another unique quality of these pepper mills was the fact that they did not have settings for adjusting the grinds. While some may see this as a negative, Dansk explained that each mill is pre-set to a medium grind, simply because that is how pepper tastes best: "No re-adjustments, no chunks—just a smooth, even sprinkling of pungent grains" (Perlson 12). This promotes the idea that good design is not about including a wide range of features, but about providing only the best feature and setting to ensure quality and satisfaction. There would be no reason to change a setting if it works perfectly without any adjustments. Quistgaard developed an appreciation for wood as a child by playing with the material in his father's sculpture studio, and by being

surrounded by the trees near his home, and because of this wood was Quistaard's medium of choice, serving as a starting point for most of his work, even if the final product used another medium (13). Quistgaard was able to create such high quality and functional products because he had a deep understanding of the materials he was working with and was in tune with the emotional and rational needs of the user (Perlson 10). By 1962, the Danish Modern style was popular in the U.S. and Dansk had expanded, with all of its products now designed by Quistgaard. The selling point was that since everything was designed by one man, there was careful attention to make sure that each piece looked good and functioned well with the other pieces. A 1961 ad said, "Dansk designs are compatible…Notice how the copper, enamelware, stainless, and teak live perfectly together. The great uncluttered line of designer Jens Quistgaard runs though them like his signature" (9). What Quistgaard's combined-function designs point out is the fact that in order to create high quality designs that cater to several functions, consumerism cannot be the designer's main goal. If consumerism is the main goal, the designer is thinking about selling the items, not about the long-term relationship between the end user and the product.

What Arne Jacobsen and Jens Quistgaard demonstrate is the perception of "function" as a service to humans rather than to machines. Jacobsen resisted the modern temptation to build machine-like skyscrapers and remained faithful to human scale. Regin Schwaen, a Danish architect stated, "It's difficult for me to say exactly what it is that makes you feel so comfortable in [Jacobsen's] buildings. They have a clear structure that is very logical, but still everything is brought down to a human scale. Outside a building may be brick or marble, but inside the interiors were always warm and nice.

The colors would usually be in the dark blue to green range—the colors you observe in Danish nature." (Berdichevsky 147). Jacobsen used shapes and materials to engage in a play of the geometric and the curved, the manmade and the natural. He demonstrated that the new industrial materials and machines and human comfort did not have to be exclusive. Quistgaard resisted the temptation of consumerism and clutter by creating designs that eliminated the need to buy various items, instead providing the functions of a few items all in one. Quistgaard's solutions, however, were never complicated in their multiple uses, but were particularly simple and straightforward. He upheld his skills in craftsmanship and his understanding of the materials used, despite the coaxing of new industrial materials. The critique of modern design, as having overlooked the human dimension, is characteristic of many Danish designers, extending past furniture, tableware, or architecture, to the very design of cities.

Danish urban planner Jan Gehl is an advocate for rethinking and designing cities so that they encourage human comfort and interaction. He criticizes modern urban designers for rejecting the city and its spaces, and shifting the focus to individual buildings. By 1960, Gehl explains, this modern way of urban planning had become the dominant way of designing buildings and cities, and its principles continue to affect the planning of many new urban areas today (Gehl 3). Because of the shift to individual buildings, Gehl argues, "dominant planning ideologies—modernism in particular—have specifically put a low priority on public space, pedestrianism and the role of city space as a meeting place for urban dwellers" (3). The consequence


Jan Gehl

is that many new city areas have been designed with buildings, streets, and spaces that are too large, cold, dismissive and amorphous to promote human activity or interactions (164). The Danish modern designers aimed to put the human back into the picture and, through their deep understanding of their materials and function, promoted human interactions between people and their lived environment and maintained human softness in their designs.

Mid-century Danish designers were also highly respected for their "honest" creations. Honesty in design means that the structure of a building, chair, or object, etc., is openly displayed and even praised as the beauty and appeal of the design itself (Anderson and Mitchell). Designers achieved this especially by creating wooden furniture pieces whose joints would be exposed, not hidden, and whose wood would be left bare in its natural hue, and not tinted. Honesty in design means that its aesthetic and form are not altered in a way that would deceive its users; when you see it, you know how to use it. It could be argued that modern designers also aimed for honesty by operating on the dictum "form follows function" and having the form represent the design's function. There is a distinction, however, in what is perceived as a design's "function. Modern, functionalist, and minimalist designers saw the "function" as an isolated event, questioning the use (function) of the design on its own and turning this into its aesthetic form. Because of this, the function was interpreted in a literal, two-dimensional sense. The function becomes flattened into an aesthetic interpretation, neglecting how the product will actually function (be useful) in the context of a person's life. In pursuit of exposing their mechanistic qualities, they lost touch with the definition of "function" in design as the way in which the product will serve its end user. Thus, to a

user, a design whose "form follows function" becomes purely form, whose function has been swallowed up by its form. For example, if a chair made out of concrete without any cushioning is considered modern for exposing its "function," then its function refers to how its materials exist, rather than how people use the materials. Therefore, in a modern sense, the function of the chair would be to expose its concrete materiality. But since concrete is cold, hard, geometric, heavy, and uncomfortable to sit on, its function becomes a purely formal and aesthetic interpretation, and its function to human users is suppressed. A concrete chair is therefore dishonest to its users because its materiality does not take into consideration the user's needs. Honest designs do not isolate their materiality, but consider their materials in context with the human experience.

The appearance of an honest design is so comprehensible that we know how to use it when we see it. In this sense, the design must have an aesthetic and function that we are familiar with. Morrison explains that some objects are Super Normal because they are familiar, or even nostalgic, to the user (Fukasawa and Morrison 109). While this is determined subjectively, the more a designer knows about what its users consider to be familiar, the more comfortable and obvious the design will appear. What the Klint school and the user-centric integrity of modern Danish designs imply is that in Denmark, the designers felt that people might find new industrial materials, such as metal, concrete, or steel, to be too unfamiliar and unwelcoming. This consciousness of their users, paired with their enduring devotion to craftsmanship, prevented them from going too far with industrial materials. The iconic Danish modern designers explored new mechanic methods, but they complemented these methods with their craftsmanship skills and the awareness of what the human body finds comfortable.

For Alain de Botton, one of the most interesting details during his travels in Amsterdam was the red front door of an inconspicuous house. "Whereas front doorways in London are prone to ape the look of classical temples, in Amsterdam they accept their status, avoiding pillars and plaster in favor of neat, undecorated brick. The building was modern in the best sense, speaking of order, cleanliness and light" (De Botton 75). He explains that there was "an honesty in its design" that came from values of modesty (75). Modesty is a value present in both Danish and Japanese cultures, which has been translated into the aesthetics of these countries. Furthermore, these values of modesty are manifested in both cultures' distance from materialism in some aspect. In Denmark, there is a set of ten rules called *janteloven* that every Dane is aware of. The *janteloven* is a manifesto of social equality and intolerance for people who think they are superior to anyone. (Berdichevsky 84). Danes perceive it as uncivilized and rude to show off one's skills or wealth, and instead they value modesty and collaboration amongst citizens (84). In Japan, *kanso* describes a Japanese aesthetic term that promotes humility. Meaning "plain," "simple," or even "homely, the Japanese Zen concept preaches the rejection of materialism and conspicuous ornamentation, and the beauty in making things as simple as possible (De Mente 60). Zen Buddhism in Japan also teaches us to focus on the small details and the natural, inherent pleasures in life rather than to pursue the grandiose; materialism is seen as an obstacle in the aim to promote harmony and equality amongst citizens. These cultural values in Danish and Japanese cultures are perhaps what allowed designers of both countries to detach themselves from consumerism and materialism (but not of materiality), and instead appreciate the simpler, more ordinary, and humbler details in design.

The Japanese sense of simplicity and humility in design was defined long ago. In the book *Elements of Japanese Design*, Boye de Mente explains the history of Japanese aesthetics, beginning with the fact that the basic philosophical principles of Japanese aesthetics as we know them today originated in the Buddhist principles of China and India and were carried to Japan in A.D. 538 (20). Large numbers of craftsmen from Korea had already been exposed to the arts and crafts of China, and when they migrated to Japan, they brought these Chinese principles with them (20). The Japanese were influenced by this new wave of Chinese aesthetics, but they did not want to simply duplicate Chinese design. Instead, Japanese craftsmen and designers sought to make these Chinese aesthetics their own by improving them within the context of their own cultural background (21). For instance, when the ancient Chinese tea ceremonies were first introduced in Japan, they featured ornamental details and complicated patterns, which symbolized power and control. During the Nara period, which was approximately from 1423-1502, the Zen priest Murata Shuko of Nara recognized that these details had no functional meaning, and he introduced an adapted tea ceremony, replacing the fancy gold, jade, and porcelain of the popular Chinese tea ceremonies with simple, rough, wooden and clay instruments (Reibstein 29). About a hundred years after the new instruments were introduced, the famous tea master Sen no Rikyu of Kyoto constructed a teahouse that was simpler, and humbler than ever before, turning the tea ceremony into a practice of simplicity, modesty, and nature, making it clear that simplicity, lack of polish, and asymmetry were all highly esteemed qualities in the performance of the tea ceremony. These qualities applied not only to the tea ceremonies, but also came to define Japanese

aesthetics on a larger scale, from architecture and interior design to product and furniture design.

De Mente argues that in Japan, the concept of aesthetics has provided "precise guidelines, standards, and customs for recognizing and appreciating beauty," unlike most Western countries, in which aesthetics have never been explicitly outlined (38). According to De Mente, the "appreciation of beauty" has been a part of daily life for more than a thousand years in Japan: "It was something that they studied and practiced as a part of their being Japanese. Their model and standard for beauty was the natural or what was suggested by nature, including some things most westerners would describe as ugly" (38). To say that all Japanese studied and practiced aesthetics, however, is misleading. The main elements of the Japanese tea ceremony may reflect the core of Japanese aesthetics, but only the most elite people of the highest classes could participate in these ceremonies. Perhaps De Mente is speaking of a different kind of practice, one that is more intuitive and culturally inherent than deliberate. Lao Tsu, the Chinese founder of Taoism, taught that "there is beauty in everything in nature and it is up to the viewer to see it," and his followers continued to teach that beauty is not just something you can see, but that one could only truly appreciate beauty if he made his own thoughts and behavior beautiful (39). This concept of beauty, as more than a visual judgment but a way of living, was influential on Japanese arts thereafter.

Perhaps what De Mente means when he says that Japanese aesthetics are "practiced" is that they have become routines of everyday life in Japan. People of refined upper classes may have been the only ones to actively engage in the Japanese tea ceremonies, but regardless of whether or not they were actively practiced, the aesthetic

qualities of these tea ceremonies have become woven into the threads of Japanese culture (38). In *Super Normal*, Fukasawa supports a similar idea. He writes,

> I believe that in Japan, there is a tendency to take the actual act of using a thing as beauty. This is precisely the beauty of the relationship between objects and people. For example, a chair might have a backrest with a shape that invites me to lean on it when I'm standing behind it, so it's not the beauty of the shape as such that is appreciated but rather a form's presence that sparks of actions and contributes to the atmosphere around it. (Fukasawa and Morrison 106).

The relationship between the user and the object is a non-physical phenomenon, which means that it must be felt or experienced, and not seen. In Japan, there seems to be a kind of mysterious and modest attraction to that which is invisible and non-physical. This attraction manifests in several Japanese terms. Of highest prominence is the concept of *wabi-sabi*, an aesthetic manifested in the Japanese tea ceremony. Simply stated, *wabi-sabi* is a way of looking at the world by finding beauty in things imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete. *Wabi* denotes desolate beauty, simplicity, humility, and being in tune with nature; *sabi* captures the beauty in rust and natural withering, an understanding that beauty is fleeting and grows old (Koren 21-22). The English understanding of rust, however, is different from the Japanese perception. In English it describes something simple, artless, unsophisticated, or having irregular surfaces, whereas in Japan, rusticity is a sign of time, intricacy, and consequently, sophistication. In Japan, the passage of time is not interpreted as negatively as in other countries, but allows for a special type of beauty that only age can bring.

Wabi-sabi opposes the Western ideal of great beauty in the monumental or spectacular in that it is not about the gorgeous flowers or majestic trees, but about the hidden and ephemeral parts of nature; it is not about moments of bloom and lushness in nature, but about the moments of "inception or subsiding" (Koren 50). Fukasawa writes that in Japan, *wabi-sabi* refers to designs that are modest in their normality and "have nothing special about them except that they have the potential for acquiring the beauty of *wabi-sabi*. (Fukusawa and Morrison 111). Since wood is a natural resource that gets better, more mysterious, and more beautiful with age and time, Japanese designers have upheld their devotion to wood as a material in design.

This bowl is *wabi-sabi* for its imperfect edges, rusted creases, and asymmetrical coloring. These qualities pay homage to nature's irregular beauty.

Wabi-sabi is often described as something hard to define in ideological terms, because it is more of a feeling you get from an object than a definite aesthetic attribute. Furthermore, to leave the term unexplained and just felt, it leaves room for a person to define the term in the context of his or her own experiences, which is something preferred in Japanese culture. The concepts inherent in *wabi-sabi* are manifested not only in the physical, but also in our everyday acts. In a book called *The Wabi-sabi House,* Robin Griggs Lawrence writes, "The subtle messages that live within wabi-sabi are the things we all seem to long for today: Slow down. Take the time to find beauty in what seems ordinary—and to turn the 'ordinary' into something beautiful. Make things yourself

instead of buying those spit out by a machine, and smile when your work is flawed. Wash your dishes by hand. And, most important, I believe: learn to think of others before yourself" (Lawrence 11). This capability to slow down and appreciate simpler things also stems from Japan's devotion to tradition, ancestry, and nature. Japanese aesthetics follow the belief that designs are for ordinary living experiences, favoring natural, commonplace, and inexpensive materials. "The most highly praised designs are those that offer skillful expressions in the simplest of materials," writes designer Ikko Tanaka (Tanaka 11). On one hand, the Japanese admire machine production methods for giving the masses a "new and rational way of life," but on the other hand, the constant return to nature has fostered the preservation of the human touch and resistance to letting machines take over (11-12).

Ikko Tanaka

Kazuko Koike

Takashi Sugimoto

The Japanese store MUJI has taken the values of honesty, modesty, ordinariness, and ephemerality in design to another level. If Super Normal describes the phrase and exhibition created by Fukasawa and Morrison, then MUJI is the retail manifestation of almost identical core ideas. Conceived by a team of three Japanese designers, Ikko Tanaka, Kazuko Koike, and Takashi Sugimoto, MUJI started operations in Japan in the

early 1980s as a subsidiary of the supermarket chain Seiyu Ltd, and became independent in 1989 (Holloway 557). This was during the oil crisis, a time when citizens refused to spend money on superfluous things but still wanted to shop (Locher 101). The idea behind MUJI was to provide a store that was both well designed and homey, selling high-quality goods at reasonable prices to cater to the attitude toward "frugality without compromising quality" (101). Starting under the slogan "Lower Priced for a Reason" MUJI emphasized high quality design, sensible use of materials, utilitarian practicality, and low cost as its selling point (*Designing Design* 232-235). In the beginning, the store sold only 30-40 items, but has expanded to sell a more extensive range of items, including stationary, kitchen supplies, food items, furniture, storage items, and even clothing. Nevertheless, MUJI remains loyal to its careful selection, selling only the items it deems essential. In 1991, MUJI opened its first overseas store in London and today there are 238 stores in Japan and a total of 134 stores overseas including four in the United States, all of which are in New York, and seven in Sweden.[1]

Known in Japan as *Mujirushi Ryohin*, the store's name translates to "No-brand Quality Goods." The basic principle of MUJI's merchandise development is to create products that are "fundamental, practical and really necessary in daily life, and to ensure efficient and minimal manufacturing processes," and in order to achieve this, the businesses constantly review their materials and designs, streamline time and labor in the manufacturing process, and

MUJI's simple and minimal packaging and labels

[1] According to Ryohin Keikaku's Corporate Information, calculated at the end of February 2011.

simplify the packaging.[2] It is a significant feature that instead of expanding or adding, MUJI is constantly streamlining and simplifying its products and production methods. Visually differentiated from other stores with its "brand-less" aesthetic, every product sold in MUJI has been designed by one of its designers. The only indication of its brand is on the generic-looking stickers that only come in white or tan colors. The products themselves are, for the most part, unbranded. In its deliberate pursuit of the pure and the ordinary, MUJI "achieves the extraordinary," as the store's designers claim. [3]

MUJI addresses the consequences of too much choice by having its designers make the choices for you. Its designers select a certain product or item they deem necessary for everyday life, which is what sets MUJI apart from other stores. For example, their ear buds are not significantly different from other ear buds, but there is only one choice at MUJI, which is this pair of white, simple, no-brand ear buds. There aren't multiple colors of them, they don't have embellishments on them, and there is simply only one to choose from. It is not necessarily that these ear buds are better than other ear buds might be, but that the experience of purchasing them is simple and straightforward because you only have one choice. The idea is that if something is designed well, there is no reason to change it, just as Fukasawa and Morrison believe. This selective range of color is another important characteristic: the fact that most of the products are tan, white, or clear pushes the store's lack of branding even further. It captures the idea that the more generic the color, the

MUJI ear buds

[2] *Ryohin Keikaku* Corporate Information
[3] Stated on MUJI's U.S. website in the About MUJI section

wider range of people it has the potential to cater to. This natural color scheme distinguishes MUJI from another basics stores by stretching the objective of catering to the most people by providing the most basic designs.

There is a kind of honesty found in this entire process, for it uses its own materials for every step of the business. One thing that really sets MUJI apart from other design or manufacturing stores or businesses is that the "design" is not only seen in the finished product, but in the item's production process from start to finish (*Designing Design* 229). MUJI's designers intervene the manufacturing process by reducing the extra steps of unnecessary packaging. Because of this, each product at MUJI is a form of self-advertising: the stark appearance and minimal packaging of these clear or white products that lack embellishments has such a character that it intrigues interest on its own. For many companies, advertising is simply the means by which to sell the product or service itself, but the advertising is not intertwined with the thing being sold. With MUJI, advertising, design, and packaging are all a part of one message. Instead of thinking in terms of isolated elements, MUJI's designs are produced with holistic consideration. An example of this can be found in MUJI's ink gel pens. Instead of having pens that come in packages that with labels and corporate information, these pens have transparent bodies, so that the color of the ink is visible from the outside. In addition, there is a dot indicating the color at the top of the pen's lid. This dot is not a superfluous piece of plastic, but a part that is necessary in the composition of a pen, and would be there whether or not its purpose was to indicate the color. Therefore, there is no reason to add superfluous indications of the

MUJI's gel ink pens

pen's color; the color has been integrated into the necessary elements of the pens. Furthermore, the function of the pen is something that users are assumed to know how to use, so there would be no instructions necessary. MUJI carefully selects these certain products in life that would not need much instruction, if any, because they are so inherent in our cultures. Perhaps this is a way to look at MUJI's selection of products it produces, as those which do not need additional instructions, but are culturally inherent and necessary enough to have obvious functions. Just as the objects exhibited in Fukasawa and Morrison's Super Normal exhibit, MUJI's products have been selected through careful observation and insight for what people need in their lives today. Again, the users are really the people who decide what products get produced, and the designers are the people who make them. The Super Normal exhibition displays the most timeless and universal designs through a long period of use, but because MUJI is a retail business, it must continue to adapt its products at least slightly in order to keep up with consumers. But despite its expansion in the amount of product it sells, MUJI holds on to its "Super Normal" goods and adapts them only when needed.

Kenya Hara is a Japanese designer who has become iconic in the realms of graphic design, industrial design, art directing, curating, and as a spokesperson for Japanese design. Preferring to call his designs "circumstances" or "conditions" rather than "things," Hara is interested in producing elements for communicating with humans, emphasizing the idea that a product is not fully a physical object, but a "language" (Brownell 88). Like the many user-centered Danish designers, Hara focuses on

Kenya Hara

“function” purely in the human sense of the word. He is interested in the relationship between object and human, not just between designer and object. Hara prefers a more harmonious approach to thinking about design factors. For example, instead of thinking about form and color as separate factors, Hara reminds us that forms are constituted by materials, and materials have their own natural colors, so by combining materials in a harmonious manner, the finished product is elegant in a simple way (*Skeleton* 44). This is why MUJI’s products are so “elegant” yet simple—the materials used for each product are clear in their purpose; for MUJI, the materials are not the skeletons upon which unnecessary details are added, but instead they are the skeletons that provide the structure and the aesthetic on which the users can impose meaning and utility. Thus, on the one hand, MUJI’s products exhibit clarity and honesty through their easily understood functionality. On the other hand, they exhibit ambiguity in their function, since many of these products are basic enough to be used in varying ways. MUJI’s products seldom come with instructions or suggestions for how to use the products. After all, one of the most important principles of MUJI is its careful selection for products that are so familiar to us, that we know their function just by looking at them. MUJI sells an array of many small little plastic containers, for example. These are all variations of the same basic item, but each size or shape is meant to hold a particular item inside, but the purpose of the item is up to you. Earplugs, shampoos, hair ties, small stones, small tools, or pencils are all examples of items that can be contained. The ambiguity lies not in how it functions, but in how each user will interpret its many possible functions. While it may seem contradictory for MUJI’s products to be both clear and ambiguous, they both provide ways of catering to a wider range of users, which is one of MUJI’s driving

principles.

Fukasawa expressed a similar fascination with containers with his Tokyo exhibition in 2010, called "Containers," which was part of a series called "Without Thought." The prompt for this exhibit asked,

> What comes into mind when people hear the word 'container'?
>
> Is there a clear cut image held in common by everyone?
>
> Is the shape of a container dependent on its contents?
>
> Or do people look at a container and think,
>
> 'If it's this shape, then I want to put X in it'?
>
> There's an appeal to containers, regardless of what's in them.
>
> We came up with various designs when discussing just what that appeal was.
>
> We searched out the soul of this appeal that was 'effortlessly good'.
>
> *(Naoto Fukasawa* quoted in *Designboom: Container – Without Thought)*

What Fukasawa implies is that there is a basic yet special appeal to containers, because they are always seen in relationship to something else. There is so much freedom on the user's part to decide what goes inside the container; thus, no matter how simple or plain the container is, the user can quickly personalize it just by choosing what goes inside of it. In many ways, containers embody emptiness because of their function to hold other things. In Japan, however, emptiness is not perceived as a negative value, but in fact a positive one. Hara states "A creative mind…does not see an empty bowl as valueless, but perceives it as existing in a transitional state, waiting for the content that will eventually fill it; and this creative perspective instills power in the emptiness" (*White* 36).

Hara believes that in design, emptiness provides the opportunity for the user to fill in the space.

This positive interpretation of emptiness is reinforced by the appreciation for nature as depicted in the *wabi-sabi* aesthetic, which teaches us that all things are incomplete. In the Japanese tea ceremonies, lack of ornamentation requires an effort on behalf of participants to complete their surroundings in their minds, which was a mental exercise required during the tea ceremony. "Zen does not regard 'nothingness' as a state of the absence of objects but rather affirms the existence of the unseen behind the empty space" (Davies and Ikeno 225). Empty space is a positive value in Japanese aesthetics because it represents the chance of becoming something (*White* 39). In its original form, the Shinto shrine consists of four raised pillars tied together with the sacred ropes, leaving empty space in the center and fortifying its basic principle, to "embrace emptiness" (39). Its empty space allows the possibility of something to enter it, specifically the Shinto gods. Shintoism is unique in that it has "eight million gods" who do not exist in a certain location, but exist freely in nature and can enter the Shinto shrine whenever they please (40). The gods are everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Because it refuses to exist in a certain physical space, emptiness allows for a certain timelessness to emerge.

III. Timelessness

Today, some of the most highly praised designs are those that are so basic and inherent in their functionality that they have a sort of timelessness to them. To be "timeless" means to avoid being restricted to a particular time or date; in terms of design, an object is timeless when it lasts throughout many time periods and avoids being associated with just one. For example, chairs, beds, trash cans, are timeless objects because their functions have been useful to people for a long time, and it is unlikely that humans will decide not to use them anytime soon. Even if the functions of these objects are timeless, however, each object will lose its sense of timelessness if its aesthetics belong to a certain place in time, as this contradicts the definition of being timeless. Chairs with intricately carved embellishments in their woodwork, for instance, may be associated with the Renaissance age of earlier centuries. Thus, while a chair is a timeless piece, this Renaissance chair would not be timeless. There is a book called *500 Teapots: Contemporary Explorations of a Timeless Design*, which demonstrates the same kind of disparity in the meaning of timelessness. Each teapot within this collection exhibits a different shape and technique, and when isolated, each appears so characterized and stylized that it seems to recall a very particular time and place. But as a whole, this book illustrates the many ways in which a design can be adapted, which is what reveals the timelessness of a teapot. If an item is basic and inherent enough to be adapted into so many styles, then it is timeless because no matter how much people change it, its function remains the same.

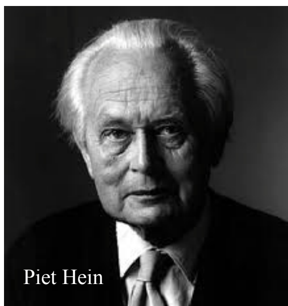
In this way, the word "timeless" can describe something that is so inherently part of life that it simply evades time. Something that is timeless also has a quality of being ageless and eternal. Some of the most "timeless" materials, however, are those that are

very revealing to aging. Wood is an example of a timeless material, because it has been around for so long and has been used in so many varying design styles and periods. It is interesting, then, that while many things in nature are timeless, they are not ageless. Nature, on a large and general scale, is timeless, yet the things found in nature are all things that will wither away, as do humans. Nature reminds us that all things are impermanent. This leads to the minor discrepancy of timelessness and decay. If wood is considered to be a timeless material, then how is it also so reflective of its own decay? This seeming contradiction can be explained with the notion of *wabi-sabi* in Japanese aesthetics, which explains that decay *is* an indicator of timelessness, since it is an inherent part of life's cycles.

In some aspects, this concept of timelessness was one of the main drives behind the modern movement. The idea was that the less something relates to the styles of particular time period, the more rational and efficient it becomes. For modern designs, this timelessness often manifested in geometric and abstract shapes, demonstrating the idea that since machines created things that were rational and equal, geometric and machine-like aesthetics avoided being anchored in history. In this very revolt against being placed in time, however, the industrial and minimal aesthetic of many twentieth century modern era designs fostered a strong image of its time. In Denmark, however, the modern furniture masterpieces are iconic of the mid-century golden era but over time, they seemed to have evaded time and become timeless pieces. Many of the most iconic modern pieces are still being reproduced today, and they are still commonly found in houses or institutional buildings. The long-standing presence of these designs is due to their basic and simple aesthetics, as well as the comfort they provide their users. When

designers created them in the first place, they never lost touch of human needs or softness; and since our needs for a chair have not changed drastically since the mid twentieth century, the powerful elegance of these modern pieces still applies to our needs today. According to Oda, what sets Danish furniture apart from the rest is the delicate balance of designership creativity and craftsperson technique, in both handcrafted and mass produced furniture (Oda 8). The designs are made to be high quality and last a long time, and Oda calls this a way to create a feeling of intimacy for the people who live with these products and create relationships with them (Oda 8). Similarly to how Japanese aesthetics appreciate beauty in objects that age well over time, Danish design values the longevity of a piece and its ability to grow with the user and his or her lifestyle. Both Danish and Japanese designers see furniture as objects grow and change according to you: if you scratch a chair, dent it, or spill water on it, the marks will leave imprints that give the item a kind of "soul."

Piet Hein (1905-1996), a Danish designer whose background was in as diverse fields as mathematics, painting, furniture design, and philosophy (Berdichevsky 103).


Piet Hein

Piet Hein's mathematical background led him to create the perfect compromise between a rectangle and a circle, which he named the super-ellipse. It began in 1959 when an urban planning team consulted Piet Hein to help them solve a problem in Stockholm, Sweden. The planners were trying to direct traffic smoothly around a rectangular square in the center of the city: a rectangular shape disrupted the circulation, but an elliptical shape did not work either because its pointed ends were too sharp for the flow of traffic. Piet Hein's super-ellipse was a simple yet

extraordinary solution to this urban design, and it was stimulating enough to be used in various other subjects, from buildings to tables, tableware, or placemats (103). His super-ellipse table, in particular, began to be featured in many magazines and became a common household design, as well as the preferred table for Danish welfare institutions

(Right) Piet Hein's Superellipse table in beech. (Left) Piet Hein's Superellipse table with Arne Jacobsen's renowned Seven chair

While this table used wood in some models, Piet Hein did not always stick to natural materials, but he demonstrated a respect for nature in different sense. His super-elliptical shape was created by a mathematical formula, a perfect balance between two shapes. Because this sense of "geometry" is so basic, it seems to come from nature. Unlike the geometric shapes that modern designers aimed to achieve, Piet Hein used geometry to soften these shapes, in order to make them more desirable and comfortable to humans.

The "Superegg"

Thus, an important disparity is that it is not whether or not an object is made of purely natural materials that deems it fit for nature and humans; the question of whether or not the object fits well into its surroundings, including both the natural environment and our human lifestyles, is what makes it fit naturally into our desires. If a product facilitates a person's lifestyle and adds pleasure, then it succeeds. One of the most unique elements

of Piet Hein's designs is the very fact that he created a shape that was both geometrically simple and aesthetically pleasing enough to apply to a wide range of objects. For this reason, his use of the super-ellipse was also a testament to the fact that he resisted the modern temptation of being "special" by using unique colors or shapes to grab the attention of consumers.

In many ways, MUJI takes this idea of timelessness in functionality, as well as slow evolution, and turns it into an aesthetic, with its minimal containers and simplified stationary books. This may seem to describe the same goal of modernist designers, but the difference here is that the modernist designers aimed for timelessness in terms of anonymity and rationality, while MUJI aims for timelessness in the sense that their products will always work for you, whether you are a child, an adult, a woman, or a man. MUJI's designs are timeless in relation to the lives of its buyers, whereas modernist designs are timeless because they avoid relating to a certain style of a particular time period. The distinction here is that while modernist designs focus on the design in relation to the rest of the design world, MUJI is considering how its products will be used in the user's life. Fukasawa and Morrison displayed a goose egg at their Super Normal exhibit, an object familiar yet different from the more familiar chicken egg. This was their attempt to remind us that there is variation in types of eggs. This "slight deviation from the standard," the idea that an intervention so minimal can change the way we interpret an object, is one of the driving ideas behind Super Normal. As Morrison explains, the minimal deviation could be a change in scale or proportion, or the concentration on the objects' "character," or adapting the feature of an object into a new form (Fukasawa and Morrison 108). Fukasawa and Morrison's point is that in order to

create elegant designs, they do not have to be drastically different from their older counterparts. Instead, there is subtle beauty, perhaps even more evocative and powerful to us, that lies in the most minimal alterations of a design. There are many products that grab the attention of consumers with their "all-in-one" multiple functionalities, but another way to achieve multiple functionality is by being simple enough to cater to more people, instead of by including more features.

In the natural world, things evolve slowly over time, adapting only what is necessary for survival and leaving the rest alone. If something works, then there is no reason to change it radically. Timeless designs also alter as little as possible, moving at a speed that is closer to nature's evolutionary experiences rather than the fast pace of consumerism today. Both Danish and Japanese modern designers appreciate machinery and mass-production for the ability to create consistency and rationality, but instead of basing their very designs on the manufacturing process, they use them and then humanize them. Above all, these countries preserve craftsmanship and a humanistic nature instead of letting the machine take over. In our technological age where haste and innovation is imperative in design, people forget how important it is to slow down and return to basics. Many designs become so abstract that their functions are concealed; they lose touch with their original purpose, which is to serve a purpose in life. What these Japanese and Danish designers remind us is that in order to create timeless pieces that attend to the needs of users, we must look back to nature and the very basic humanistic qualities that define us.

Conclusion

Because they base their designs upon a certain "normality" that has been determined by people over a long period of time, these designs achieve a sort of timeless quality. This timelessness might be a necessary step in moving design away from clutter, and towards its fitness for everyday life. Today, the environment is becoming a growing concern, but designers are dealing with this concern in a way that would appeal to consumers, and perhaps not in the most sustainable ways. For instance, instead of manufacturing cheap objects with partly recycled materials and marketing them as "recycled," designers should focus more on whether or not a product really needs to be created in the first place, how it will facilitate activities of daily life, and how it will grow with the person. This last point—the longevity of a product—is typically overlooked for the sake of keeping up with the fast growing market. Instead of turning all our focus to recycling, we must become more aware of the materials we consume. In *Skeleton,* Hara states that instead of simply teaching people to reuse and recycle, designers should create packages that the consumer will create a liking for and will have a hard time parting with (44). Because this means that the quality of the packaging must also be improved, it seems that a return to the favoring of quality over quantity is in order.

While many modern designs became entwined with the cheap production methods of the industrial age, Danish modern designers maintained craftsmanship skills and always strongly considered the proportions in terms of humans. Because they never deviated too far from our basic needs, Danish modern designs still fit our lifestyles today. Super Normal and MUJI are important stores because they base their designs upon a certain "normality" that has been determined by people over a long period of time, these

designs achieve a sort of timeless quality. Both normality and timelessness are things that many designers overlook today, but they might be necessary step in moving design away from clutter, and towards its fitness for everyday life.

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