

## Time to Create a Design Museum

– Making the Most of Japan’s World-Class “Natural Resources” in Design –  
by Issey Miyake

It’s been about 10 years since Japan’s bubble economy burst. Although the future appears totally bleak, Japan may still find a way out of its current condition. If there is any hope for a nation that has lost its confidence, it must come from “creativity” or in that magical six-letter word, “design.” At least, that’s how I view it.

In an interview, designer Ikko Tanaka (who passed away suddenly in January of last year) made the following comment; “designers feel compelled to continuously explore new directions, but if they face only forward, they have no baseline for comparison.”

Tanaka was a brilliant producer who was always at the center of the creative energy generated by people who transcended genres. For him, there was no distinction between the world of graphic arts and that of the three-dimensional world—only the joy of creation mattered. I felt heartened whenever I worked with him, although since his death, it has not been easy to maintain his spirit. I think that it is vital for us to recognize the importance of our “design legacy,” which offers itself as the basis from which we can make comparisons. Honoring our heritage in this way, might give the Japanese incentive and the courage to move forward.

Looking back upon the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Japanese design world was characterized by a folk craft movement in the prewar years, followed by an explosive surge in development linked to economic growth in the postwar era; and one that penetrated deeply into people’s daily lives. In the field of product design we had such giants as Isamu Kenmochi, Sori Yanagi, and Shiro Kuramata; in the graphic arts there were Yusaku Kamekura and Ikko Tanaka. The superb work of these and other artists raised Japanese design to an international standard, with a universal and general appeal that became an integral part of our lives.

Nor should we forget Japan’s superb history of industrial design, including household sundries, electrical appliances, and architectural and environmental design. In the field of fashion design, as well, it has also been the work of Japanese designers and Japanese materials that have added excitement to creations elsewhere.

Today, the Japanese are indifferent to original ideas and technologies, as well as to the design process that gives them 'form.' They should be more aware of the fact that our daily life is functionally enhanced through original design, and this in turn nurtures us both culturally and spiritually. Nothing comes of simply by chasing after brand names. Too often, attempts to start something new are aborted by comments like "That's not really possible," followed by "There's no money."

But that's not really true. Japan's current impoverishment is not material in nature, but stems from a lack of mental (Intellectual? Creative?) confidence. We can see this in the lack of administrative policies for the arts and design, the retreat of Japanese corporations from cultural activities, and the hopelessness espoused by our young people.

Design is one of the reasons that London, Berlin, and some Scandinavian cities have become revitalized. The Europeans are expressing their enthusiasm for life by giving 'form' to their technologies and traditions and showing them to the world.

In 1989, London opened a museum devoted exclusively to design. Design museums have also been established in New York, Berlin, Zurich, Helsinki, and other major cities in the world. We have to ask ourselves why no design museum has been founded in Japan, a nation that can proudly claim its place as one of the world's treasure houses of design.

Japan has no natural resources. If we Japanese are to make our way with heads held high, we must utilize more intellectual energy than ever. Surely one way to do that is to redefine ourselves as a "design nation" with international recognition. We should remind ourselves that merely to consume is not enough. It is also important to create.

The old song, "There's Always Tomorrow" recently enjoyed a popular revival. But, as Ikko Tanaka pointed out, we need to re-establish a baseline for comparison in order to make that tomorrow a reality.

"Something's going on in Japan."

This is the buzz we want to create throughout the world. Young talented people coming to this country to work, which will in turn, generate new ideas, while reinvigorating our communities and our people. If these are the conditions we wish to create, we must preserve and teach people about the importance of the work of the generations who have gone before us. At the same time, we must also open new vistas for the future of design in our own age. What better way to do this than by building a design museum? Such an

institution would become a great symbol that would draw people to Japan from all areas of the globe.

I also urge Japanese corporations to consider establishing their own design archives. Admittedly, it's no easy thing to establish a systematic design archive. There's only so much a single person or design office can accomplish, and their efforts lack long-term continuity. Therefore, government agencies, the private sector, and citizens should join forces to preserve and disseminate Japan's wonderful tradition of design by establishing a design museum as quickly as possible. I am convinced that our next era will be born from this effort.

In closing, permit me to share one of my most deeply held beliefs.

Design is truly fascinating. The reason I have been able to pursue my work without faltering, and for so long is very simple and straightforward: it's because sorrow has no place in act of designing, which encompasses hope and is capable of surprising and delighting people.

Issey Miyake  
designer

(\*translated from Issey Miyake's letter to the Asahi Shinbun, published on January 28, 2003)