

# Reflections on design through a letter from a Japanese to a Japanese

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In Japan the real celebrations come from the joys of living well, and the real heroes, therefore, turn out to be the countries artists and designers. These are individuals who have managed to build an entire legacy out of the cult of the beautiful since Japan's reconstruction during the post-War period.

In a letter written from one such eminent Japanese to another, we have occasion to reflect on how the language of design informs the most sacramental (of) moments in the life of the Japanese. In this case it is on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the 1945 atomic explosions at Hiroshima-Nagasaki, and an exhibition that had been inaugurated in Japan in the summer of 1997 as a tribute to the memory of the holocaust. The exhibition is entitled 'Isamu Noguchi and Issaye Miyake - Arizona' because it is in collaborative effort between these two creative minds. Alongside the exhibition unfolds this delightful letter through which we will introduce the two cultural ambassadors of modern Japan, both of whom have had something decisive to do with Hiroshima.

Needless to say, the pleasures of reading this letter, which is in Japanese, would remain incomplete without a meaningful glimpse into the creative minds of these individuals. One of them is Isamu Noguchi, a sculptor, to whom the letter has been addressed. The other is Issaye Miyake, the fashion designer, who has written it. For those not familiar with the works of these individuals, it needs to be said that Noguchi and Miyake today stand out as shining examples of individuals for whom Japan has always represented a celebration of homecoming in spite of their frequent and long -drawnout trips abroad, propelled by their respective creative and artistic careers. Of course these careers have been built on an undeniable quality of brilliance that has, without any wonder, caught the world's attention on innumerable occasions. And how do the two creative minds connect up with Hiroshima? They delve in various ways into progressively deeper levels of the Hiroshima rhetoric. At the most obvious level of association, however, remains the fact that Issaye Miyake, by far the younger of the two, was born in Hiroshima while Isamu Noguchi, who considered himself to be a "citizen of the earth", was called upon in the fifties to design some of the structures destroyed in Hiroshima by the explosions.

In this letter to Noguchi, Issaye Miyake dwells upon a couple of bridges that he would get to cross everyday on his way to the Kokutaiji high school and back where he had studied.

These bridges designed by Noguchi and completed in 1952, were named by the artist himself as 'Tsukuru' which in Japanese means "to build", and 'Yuku' which means "to depart." What seems interesting is Miyake's own reinterpretation of the names. He saw the bridges as symbols of 'to live' and 'to die' because the collective effect of walking across these bridges in his teens had left him with a sense of "sentimentality and strong emotion". There is more to dwell upon in the context of these bridges. Miyake confesses that his first understanding of the concept of design itself had been arrived upon from the daily viewing of these bridges. This was his very first lesson in designing, as evident from the letter, in which he says "that was the time when I became clear about the word design".

In continuation with his admiration for the older artist, Miyake mentions in the letter about how he had travelled in 1981 to visit Noguchi, who by then had moved to an area that had once been a land-fill. This is where the younger designer stood listening to Noguchi's thoughts on 'time and space'. Needless to say, 'Isamu's House' as Noguchi had named it, had seemed a veritable piece of poetry from the sculptor's abiding philosophy on nature. Noguchi had once said in his interview to his biographer Sam Hunter that it is his desire to view nature through nature's eyes and "ignore man as an object for special veneration." A credo that was promptly applied to one of nature's most ubiquitous scatterings, the stone. Noguchi felt that stones had two facets to their identity - one dead and one alive. A philosophy that came dramatically alive in the gardens of the UNESCO headquarters in Paris designed by Noguchi in 1958. In his 'Japonais jardin' (French for Japanese garden), as this piece of designing had come to be known, there are blue-coloured stones that were searched and hand-picked by the artist from a river-bed in Japan and carted all the way to this garden in Paris.

As an artist who had designed gardens in which sculpture and nature remain intertwined, it seems of little wonder that Noguchi's own house would also have a large garden of sculpture "encircled by a big stone wall and framed by the neighbouring mountains" as Miyake lovingly recalls in this letter. For Miyake, the house and the garden were also the picture of a little piece of heaven that would continue to carry its reflections in indirect reference within the theme of the exhibition itself.

Notwithstanding the harmonious relationship between the two artists, or perhaps because of it, the age-gap between the two needs a bit of reflection. While Noguchi was being included in the last full-scale Surrealist show held in 1947 in Paris - Miyake's vision of the world would yet have been through the eyes of a toddler. So it would be many years before Miyake

would begin his own shows at the Louvre's underground auditorium, the Salle le Notre, designed by I.M.Pei an honour reserved for only the best.

Even though Miyake has made his mark internationally, with his shows being held in all the major fashion capitals of the world, he in fact has never, really left Hiroshima. For while in Tokyo for the spring event of his show in 1995, Miyake and his colleagues sported T-shirts printed with a line drawing of a dove of peace on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Hiroshima bombing. (This appeared as a natural culmination of a historical fact coming as it did from a person born in Hiroshima, and coming from a designer whose concerns have revolved around everyday living and around "real people".)

Both Noguchi and Miyake have achieved heights of in their respective fields of endeavour. But there are some interesting points of convergences in their thinking. There is the matter of Noguchi and Miyake's interfacing with the West that bonds the two artists. While Miyake's book 'East meets West' has served to build bridges between the two worlds of the East and the West, this vision of unison in Miyake's thoughts actually follows in the footsteps of Noguchi's, who had way back in the fifties, attempted a synthesis of the Eastern and the Western arts through his own sculptures. And apart from being a product of both the worlds - Noguchi's mother was American.

Noguchi's innovations also lay in his being able to straddle across the various forms of the arts. He designed bridges, landscaped gardens and sculpted figures as an expression of his inner thoughts. In other words, Noguchi moved with ease and commitment between the various art forms.

Likewise, Miyake's forte lies in his ability to bridge the old with the new, in Japan. He holds the view alongwith contemporary Japanese designer Eiko Ishioka, that because of the wholesale destruction of old values, they had "to be pioneers... the harbingers of the new Japan". A generation that had dreamt between the two worlds, then finally broke away to go global.

Miyake, like Noguchi, also carries forth the quintessential Japanese love and respect for the elements of nature, in terms of their essential qualities of beauty and strength of survival. He often says "I am trying to make clothes that blend in with the air, the light, the wind."

At the end, however, notwithstanding all his achievements, Miyake's letter stands as testimony to a much larger intent - his ability to make space for a legend who has given the world seventy insightful years of creativity. They say that Noguchi and Miyake's works stand on differences in method. But yet, the results are reflected in a 'fearsome harmony that envelopes those that behold them. Perhaps this letter remains

a homage to this oneness that Miyake feels with Noguchi's thinking, hence the desire to be able to take time out to acknowledge a debt of gratitude in such a deep personal way as a letter. For all the sensibilities he has drawn from the older genius either directly or subliminally.