



Nendo World

Introducing Oki Sato

At Nendo, the Tokyo-based design office, Oki Sato concentrates on his happiness, the client's happiness and the public's happiness, all at the same time. With designs spanning from the smallest everyday item to entire spaces, and with concepts such as growing furniture in the very same way as plants, he is well ahead of the curve in the way he sets about designing. His mission is to find small "!" moments in everyday life and to use those to create design works at whatever scale. To discover those remarkable moments, he need only take a stroll around the neighbourhood.

text CATHELIJNE NUIJSINK
images NENDO except where mentioned otherwise

DAMn°: What is the best time and place to find those moments of surprise that define the start of your designs?

OS: It's during the weekends when I am really relaxed and walk around my house or my studio in Tokyo. I'm never desperately looking for something. It is as if I am carrying a filter. During one walk, lots of small objects will get stuck in my filter. At home I wash the filter and think about the most interesting things I caught. At times I also draw sketches after those walks, though they are really awful, like manga sketches. The walks I'm referring to always take place in Tokyo. It's too easy to find different things when you are abroad. My aim is to find slightly different things in very normal, everyday places that are familiar.

DAMn°: Are those Tokyo observations understood globally?

OS: Some of the things I observe are very local, which means that not many people will be able to understand. I won't use such surprises as a starting point for my design. I only use the small surprises, or happy moments and feelings that everyone around the globe can understand.

DAMn°: You are 33 years old and already nominated as one of the 100 most respected Japanese.

OS: I am a very busy man, but I don't feel successful at all. I'm just a very normal, boring person who returns home after work, to his dogs and his wife. I don't have many hobbies, I don't go to parties and I don't drink. I guess my only hobby is design. At school, teachers would get so mad at me when I would draw manga during class. But now when I draw manga, people are actually happy. How lucky I am. I don't even feel I'm working everyday.

DAMn°: How did you roll into design?

OS: I graduated with a Master's in Architecture from Waseda University in Tokyo, but, to be honest, I felt quite uncomfortable with those studies. Architecture is so strict. The professors were mainly teaching me what I couldn't do. You have to think about the city, economics, lifestyle, law, and structure. I couldn't understand the freedom of design anymore. When I first visited the Milano Salone fair in Italy I was surprised that people were designing so freely. Everybody seemed happy, including the people looking at the designs. I was quite a naive, fresh graduate and didn't understand that it was

Corona for Watanabe Kyogu
Photo © Masayuki Hayashi

Facing page:
Oki Sato in his studio (top left)
Photo © Cathelijne Nuijsink

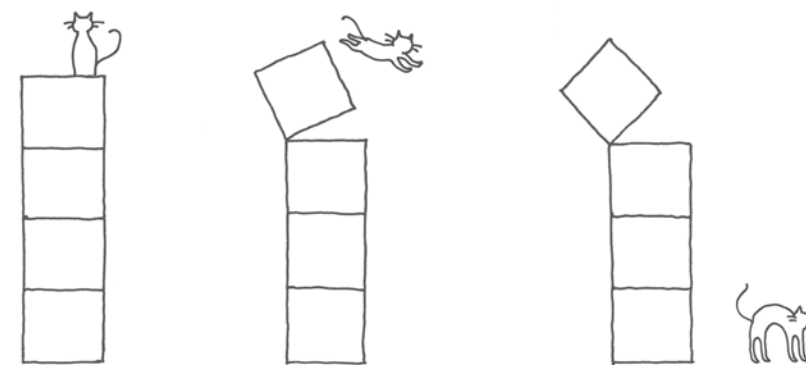
Cabbage chair for the XX1st
Century Man exhibition curated
by Issey Miyake (top right)

Cord chair, a collaboration
with Hiroshima Prefecture
manufacturer Maruni Wood
Industry (bottom left)

Tokyo Baby Cafe, design for a
'parent and child cafe' on Tokyo's
Omotesando (bottom right)
Photo © Jimmy Cohrssen



Chair Garden, furniture that grows, for Galleria Jannone
Photo below and above right:
© Masayuki Hayashi



because I was in Italy, among Italians. But I did feel that going in the direction of design, products, furniture and graphics would make me much happier. There were six of us, a bunch of friends from high school and university, who started the Nendo office in 2002. We were very flexible, changing the Nendo colour all the time. Now we have ten permanent staff members and about ten intern students.

DAMn°: Your office concept is very clear and strong. Is that the secret of your success?

OS: I believe that the way of thinking about the design of a small piece of chewing gum or a house should be the same. Although the process is technically completely different, I try to design both scales in a similar way. That explains why all our designs have something very Nendo-like.

DAMn°: Are you a designer who stores his ideas in a drawer and takes them out when the right commission presents itself?

OS: I tried it a few times, but it didn't work! Our ideas are really like fresh sashimi. You keep it in the fridge for a while and it becomes bad. See me as a sushi chef, and the client as a customer at a sushi restaurant. We talk about what he wants to eat, and I help him by recommending what fish is best that season. Then I start cutting the fish, preparing what I've recommended. Some designers prefer making design like a soup. They

take their time, add many things, and with that create flavour. I like to keep things very fresh. The quicker, the better.

DAMn°: But how is the interest in modern design in a country full of wonderful traditional crafts?

OS: I agree that most Japanese nowadays don't even understand that they have this beautiful tradition of craftsmanship in their own country. As a result, people also don't notice that this craftsmanship is disappearing very rapidly as old masters are retiring. I am happy that one day we were asked to collaborate with Masayasu Mitsuke, a Kanazawa-based pottery craftsman who draws very detailed pictures on ceramics with a small brush, in a red finish. As I didn't want to make the usual cups or bowls with him, I started thinking about the future of ceramics. I knew that ceramic plates were also used as circuit boards inside computers. After some research, we discovered that the process starts with a one-centimetre thick ceramic plate, which they then grind into one-millimetre thick plates. The sample looked so stunning that we decided to collaborate with Mitsuke in making a ceramic speaker. Usually speakers and computers have the circuit board inside a box and nobody is able to see it. In fact, nobody has actually touched the item because it is entirely made by robots. We included the craftsman in the manufacturing process. The board itself is the speaker and Mitsuke draws directly on it.

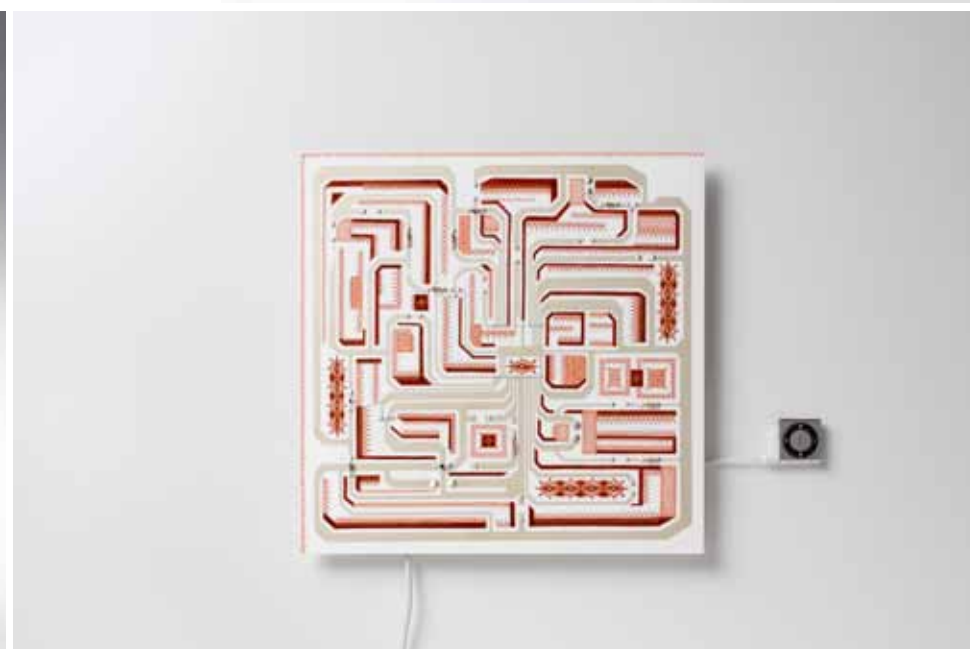


DAMn°: How do you incorporate those happy moments into a spatial design?

OS: We start designing spaces from a short story or idea, which is usually an object. We try to let this object grow into a space. The development of the Tokyo district of Akihabara is a good example of how we think about space design. Akihabara is a major shopping area for electronic, computer, anime and otaku goods. The area wasn't planned but grew spontaneously, like a virus. People with similar tastes or hobbies started to gather here to sell their goods and collectors' items in different buildings. Now, the goods spill out of the buildings and into the streets. Although the area wasn't planned this way, it has lots of energy and the people look very happy.

DAMn°: Can you explain this idea, using Tokyo Baby Café as an example?

OS: This project is definitely growing! The client is a young couple who figured out that they had no place to go in Tokyo with their newborn baby. They came up with the need for a place where a mother can have



tea with her child and at the same time change his/her nappy. When we started studying playrooms in Japan we discovered nothing but glass rooms; mothers sitting in front of a glass wall sipping tea, almost like a zoo. In this project, we acknowledged that mother and child see the same object in a completely different way and started playing around with scales and functions. The cafe's huge and tiny furnishings consider both the perspective of the child and that of the mother. A nursing sofa blown up to a massive scale becomes a playroom, and when shrunk to minuscule proportions, it's a nappy-changing table.

DAMn°: How can you design with a sense of humour without offending the users, for example, the patients of MD.net clinic?

OS: At this clinic, they don't just make sick people into healthy people, they also want patients to simply become happier. You don't have to be really sick to come to this clinic. Just feeling tired or having the flu will also do. By implementing this story into the design, to open new doors for new ideas, I wanted to make the patients happier. It looks scary to me to be waiting in the waiting room for the doctor to come through a door. The doors I made in the waiting room of MD.net clinic are not exactly doors. To the patient's surprise, it is the wall that opens when the doctor comes out to fetch you.

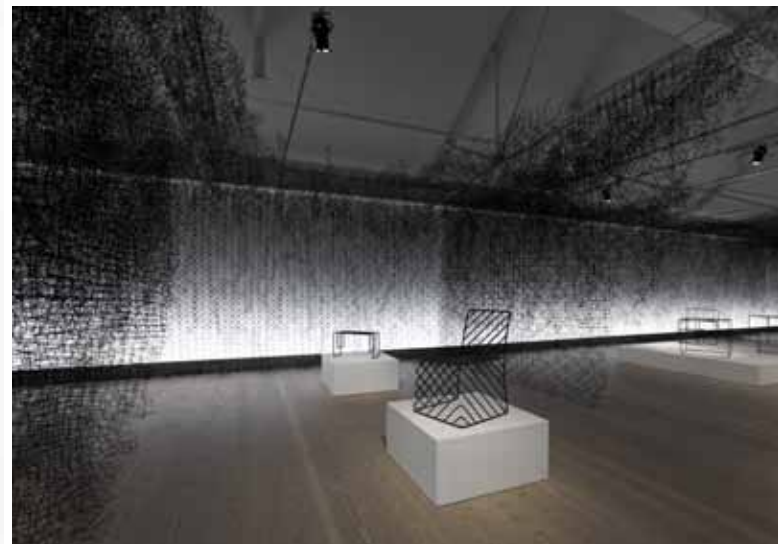
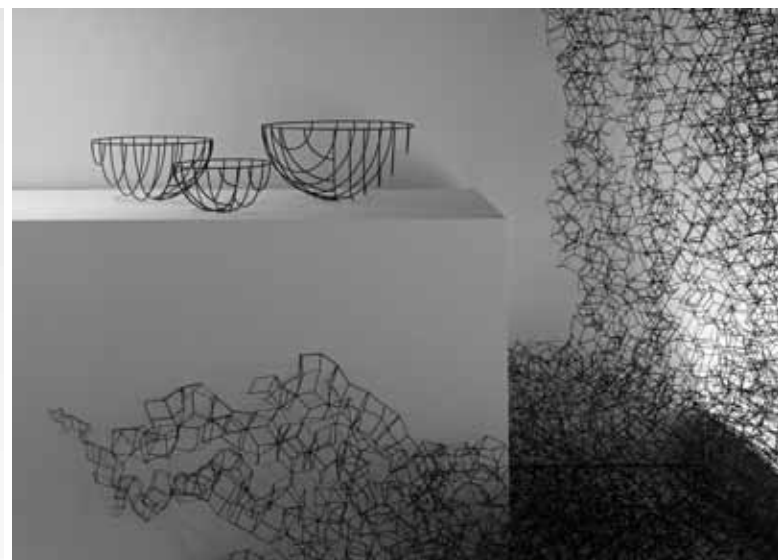
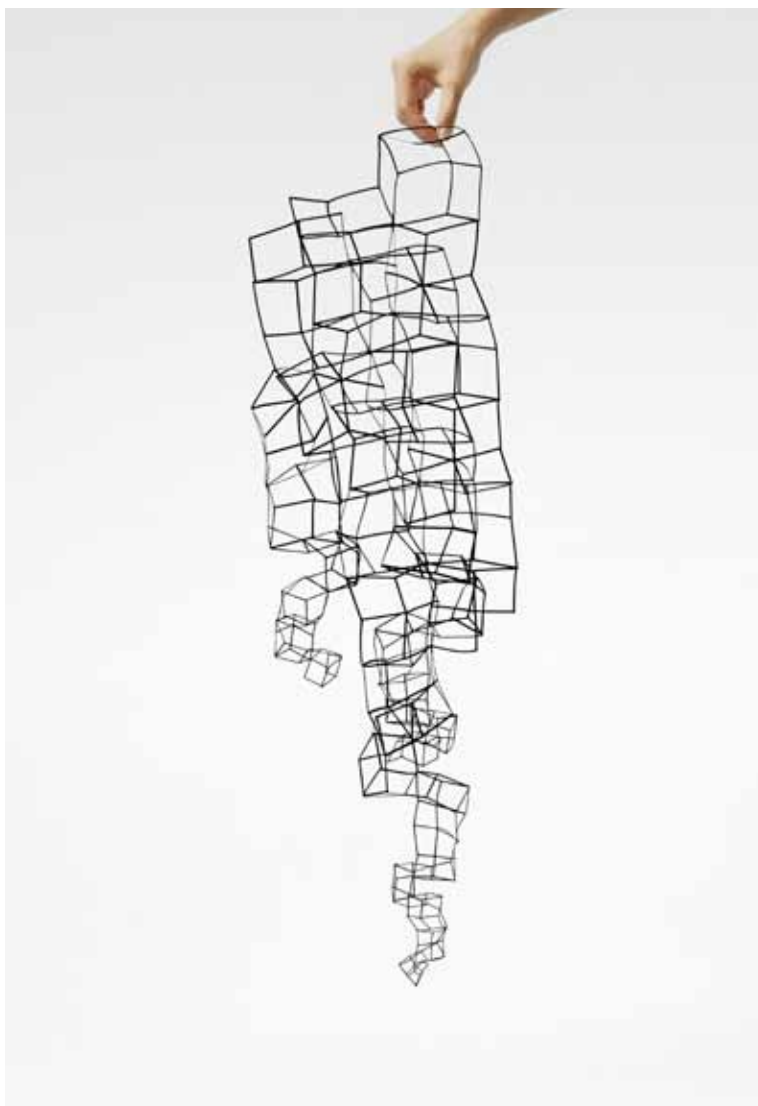
Dancing Squares for Art Stage; a private exhibition in Singapore (top, both images)

Ceramic speaker, audio speaker: a contribution to the Revalue Nippon project launched by former Japan footballer Nakata Hidetoshi to revitalise the traditional crafts in Japan (above)

Clear Perfume Bottle; a perfume bottle filled with nothing. When part of the cap is pulled up, an atomizer capable of holding 2 ml of perfume appears. Is the bottle full of water, or is it filled with air in which soft soap bubbles float? Bubbles in the glass give the illusion of either. By giving the user this experience of 'emptiness', the bottle invites him/her to explore the invisible sensation that is fragrance (left)

Photos © Masayuki Hayashi





to find completely new functions. 'Chair Garden' is an installation made of 5000 chairs and 1500 pots filled with different ideas that are presented as an unfinished piece of design.

Tokyo Baby Cafe, design for a 'parent and child cafe' on Tokyo's Omotesando (top left)
Photo © Jimmy Cohrsen

24 ISSEY MIYAKE shop is based on the concept of the Japanese convenience store, it combines inexpensive prices, a large variety of colours and frequent changes in product lineup (top right)
Photo © Daici Ano

Fatback, outdoor lounge chair for Tectona (above middle)

Dent, low table for Arketipo (above)

Forest-spoon, for the Japan-wide curry chain restaurant Coco Ichibanya's annual 'Grandmother Curry' campaign, in which 100,000 lucky customers win curry spoons through a lottery (above left)
Photo © Masayuki Hayashi

Facing page:
MD.net Clinic; the interior design for a mental health clinic in Akasaka, Tokyo (top)
Photo © Jimmy Cohrsen

Think Black Lines; a solo exhibition by Phillips de Pury & Company at the Saatchi Gallery in London (bottom, all images)
Photo © Masayuki Hayashi (bottom left) and Daici Ano

DAMn°: Do you see a private exhibition like 'Chair Garden' in Milan, as a piece of art, or as an explanation of your design method?

OS: I believe that the Milano Salone is no longer a place to show finished products, but also a place to show what the brand is all about, using the entire space. But this time I didn't want to design one large space like we did for Lexus in 2007. Instead, we have worked with very small objects and small ideas to show what is going on in my mind. When I think about furniture or objects, I try not to think about function. If you do that, you always end up with the same kind of chair. And when you start thinking of the space, most likely you will end up in a Corbusier-like modular space. In this project I thought about the process of growing plants. We researched lots of cactuses, plants, roots, and flowers, and tried to imagine how a chair would grow in a similar way. What you see are stools that gradually grow backrests and armrests. Sometimes they grow even further, into a bench or a bed. If you start growing pieces of furniture instead of designing, you can expect

DAMn°: Are there also people who inspire your design process? I guess you learn a lot of things when collaborating.

OS: I had never worked on paintings and ceramics before working with Masayasu Mitsuke. The experience of working on the Cabbage Chair with the Japanese fashion designer Issey Miyake was interesting too. I used to think that I would always have to finish a product and think about all its details. But what Miyake taught me is that you have to stop somewhere and not complete the object. It allows for a sense of ma, the Japanese word referring to a spatial interval. This leftover space allows users to imagine something for themselves.

DAMn°: What ideas are currently spinning round in your mind?

OS: We are working on about 100 projects with 60-70 different clients, so I have lots of things to think about! This year, we will extend our projects to Singapore, Taiwan and Korea, and I will do a lot of solo exhibitions at art galleries. A solo exhibition is a nice way to show a new collection of products and at the same time it's a chance to design an interior. The art scene used to be a show of tremendously expensive art works or objects, but nowadays the galleries are looking for new ideas. It allows us to experiment with new materials and techniques. #

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