

THEME

Nendo Design & Oki Sato's
Aha! Moment

Toy Story: Children
MAKING SOMETHING
OUT OF NOTHING

HUMDINGER WIND
GENERATES A GOOD IDEA

Kenji Kawakami & the Art of
Un-useless Inventions



Eureka!

THE
WHY DIDN'T I
THINK OF THAT
ISSUE.



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Chocolate Pencils

And 10 Other Things Nendo Designed That You Wished You'd Thought Of First.

Let's say you're sitting under a tree, and an apple falls out of it and hits you in the head. What would your reaction be? Some people would rub their head and curse; others would laugh; others would shrug and eat the apple; and if you're a Sir Isaac Newton kind of guy, you have an "Aha!" moment—you reflect on what just happened, write a paper, and give humanity a concise understanding of gravity.

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Story by **N. Rain Noe** Work Images Courtesy of **Nendo**



Cabbage Chair

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designer Oki Sato is most definitely a Sir Isaac Newton kind of guy. The mild-mannered head of Tokyo's Nendo design firm—a prolific design force with a list of awards and projects so long, you can't believe they're not a huge company—Sato draws inspiration for his striking designs from surprisingly mundane situations. "Everyday life," he explains. "Some people get inspiration by looking at a magazine or going somewhere far away, seeing something really different. But I really

get influenced by everyday life. Just walking around my neighborhood for five minutes, I can often find something influential."

What does that mean in practical terms? Take Nendo's *Hanabi* lamp: made from shape-memory alloy, the hanging lamp opens up like a flower shortly after being turned on; heat from the bulb causes the metal to spread its tendrils. And the inspiration for this design came from...a glass of iced tea.

"I was sitting in a cafe by myself, which I usually do on the weekends," Sato



Hanabi

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Talking

4

explains, “having a glass of iced tea. The ice started melting, and then it moved and made that sound—do you know what I mean? Like when the ice starts to slide. It made that sound and I started thinking, ‘Couldn’t I design something that would move or change according to a change of temperature?’”

“Then I remembered there was a metal, ‘shape-memory alloy,’ and if I could set the alloy’s position according to the temperature of the lightbulb, I could make a lamp that would ‘bloom’ when the lightbulb changed temperature. It was very natural, and it wasn’t inspired from the material itself—the story was there first, and then I found materials that would match the story.”

Then there’s Nendo’s *Talking* salt, pepper, and soy sauce shakers, which don’t rely on printed letters, colors, icons, or the amount of holes in the top to tell you what’s inside—instead there are little faceless mouths sculpted into the side of them, each set of lips clearly enunciating a particular sound: “yu” for *shoyu* (soy sauce), “shi” for *shio* (salt), and “ko” for *kosho* (pepper).



ILLOIHA - Omotesando

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"It was again when I was in a small restaurant; I noticed that the salt and pepper holders had a small 'S' and 'P' on the containers," Sato says. "I was thinking maybe there's a different way of telling someone what's inside the container without using letters or words. Then I thought maybe I'd use a voice or, like, gestures. I started thinking *shi* for *shio*, salt in Japanese. The shape of the mouth became the design itself."

We joke to Sato that a lot of his inspirations seem to come from him sitting in cafes and restaurants; is that where he spends all of his spare time?

"The truth is, I really like to stay home. I'm like a design *otaku*," he laughs. "I don't have many friends so I like to stay home, have a cup of coffee, take walks and things like that."

Though he's a self-professed homebody now, Sato's current course was set on a trip overseas, six years ago, just after grad school. After receiving his Masters in Architecture at "a university called Waseda," as Sato humbly describes it (Waseda is the Harvard of Japan), he took a graduation trip with some classmates. "Just finishing school, I had nothing to do. Five or six of us decided to take a trip to the Salone Internazionale del Mobile, the Milan Design Furniture Fair."

"I had heard of the Salone before but had never been there, and there wasn't much information about it in Japan. So it was quite interesting to see! How do you say it? In architecture school, there were so many rules, it was really strict—you can't do this, you can't do that. But at the Furniture Fair I found everyone was designing so *freely*. And I wanted to design the way that they were designing."

Sato's classmates had the same desire, and upon returning to Tokyo, they formed the aptly-named Nendo. "Nendo" means free-form clay, like Play-



Moss House

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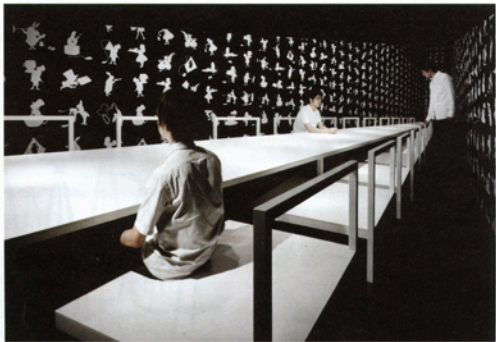
Doh, very soft, very fluid," Sato explains. "That was the exact way we wanted to work."

"Work" was the operative word, and also the problem—in the economic doldrums of 2002, there wasn't any. So the group—Sato at the top, managing director Akihiro Ito, PR man Takahiro Matsumura, architect Takayuki Ishikawa, and designers Teruaki Okada and Yoshitaka Ito—sustained themselves with design competition award money. That year they entered and won the Lipton Cup Design Contest with, *Liptone*, a clever Pantone-chip-gridded mug, and their *Al(Pb) Lumi* (an ultra-flat aluminum and lead hanging lamp) won them the Koizumi International Lighting Design Competition, as well as the Tokyo Designers Block Frame Award.

That garnered Nendo enough attention to attract their first paying job, the *Canvas* restaurant. "It was a very small house, and the client wanted us to make it in to a small restaurant," says Sato. "We had a very low budget, so we bought 200 meters of the same fabric—it's cheaper

Alice's Tea Party

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Diamond Chair

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that way—and wrapped the exterior, interior, and furniture in that same canvas fabric.” The leftover material was used for business cards and matchboxes, and Nendo topped the space off by lighting it with a sexy series of lamps—their *Al(Pb) Lumi*. “After finishing that project we got a lot of attention from the Japanese media and luckily we were able to get more jobs,” Sato recounts.

In 2003 Nendo was back at the Milan Design Furniture Fair—but this time as exhibitors, not wide-eyed grad students. Their *Al(Pb) Lumi* lamp won Special Mention. “Then we had some contacts from Italian companies, furniture companies,” Sato remembers, and Nendo’s reputation spread.

By the end of 2006 Nendo had established offices in both Tokyo and Milan, and had completed an astonishing 90 projects in six categories (architecture, interior, events, furniture, product, and graphics), winning 30 design awards (in Stockholm, Paris, New York, Berlin, Milan, Madrid, Shanghai, Tokyo, and others). We ask Sato how they are able to accomplish such an insane

pace with a staff of only eight designers (including Sato) and one manager; do they sleep? “We sleep,” Sato laughs, “but we do have a lot of projects. I guess we really enjoy designing, and we don’t like saying ‘no’ to the client. If we feel like it is very interesting, we just do it.”

That same year Nendo made design news with their climbing wall at Tokyo’s ILLOIHA Omotesando gym. “[We] developed a design that uses the mismatch between a rugged outdoor sport and Tokyo’s fashion district to its advantage,” reads the Nendo description. “Instead of the usual rough and outdoorsy climbing wall, we came up with the idea of using interior design elements like picture frames, mirrors, deer heads, bird cages, and flower vases to create a challenging wall with hard-to-find holds and unusual finger grips.” The design, unsurprisingly, won them yet another prize, the Japanese Society of Commercial Space Designers Gold Award.

But winning prizes and accolades is not the goal of Nendo, nor Sato; both are more interested in creating unusual

Rokumaru

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Bulb-Lamps 1% Products

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experiences. Nendo's 1% products line is perhaps the best embodiment of this, seeking to "give owners the chance to experience the joy of owning 1%."

"We have a lot of projects in our office—the [one-off] art pieces, and then the designs that are produced in the thousands," says Sato. "I thought, 'What would be the best number to produce a design of something in?' I thought 100 would be a nice number, sort of a magic number, and by owning one piece it means that you own one percent of the entire design."

The result was the 1% product line, a series of housewares and furniture produced in runs of 100. The small production runs are not about exclusivity, but manufacturing realities. "It's not like a limited edition," Sato explains, "but by limiting the manufacturing

numbers there's a freedom of creating something—you can use different technologies or materials which are not fit for mass production, even older or handcraft techniques. We can go to a manufacturer and even if the piece is difficult to produce, they would say, 'Okay, it's only 100 pieces, we can do that for you.'

"Very small ideas, very small designs are important for me," Sato continues. "I guess that comes from my design inspiration, which is everyday life. Small moments can give a large surprise or something really different or really new. I really enjoy those 'Aha!' moments, and I want to share those moments with people." 卐