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In just a few short years, Nendo has become one of Japan's hottest, most prolific studios, in demand by such shape-shifters as Moroso and fashion icon Issey Miyake

By Andrew Braithwaite



The Fadeout chair appears to be standing in a pool of fog. Craftsmen joined the acrylic legs to the wooden seat and painted them to disguise the seams.

THE UNBELIEVABLE LIGHTNESS OF NENDO



Created this year as a limited edition, the Transparent chair employs polyurethane film's elasticity to form a nearly invisible, hammock-like seat.

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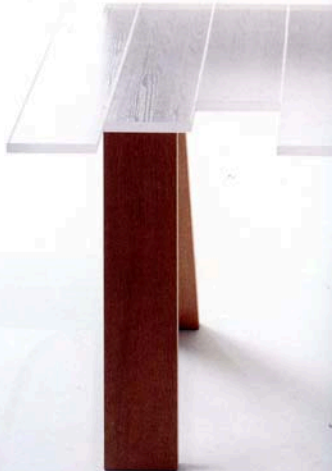
THE TOKYO DESIGN STUDIO NENDO, named after the Japanese word for "clay," may well be the country's hottest, most exciting young atelier. But in its base material state, principal Oki Sato's character has been formed by predictability and routine. He travels the same route to work each morning, and he walks his chihuahuas, Kinako and Monaka, along another set circuit every night. Even his meals present little variation. "I take lunch at the same noodle shop every day," he explains in a soft, measured voice. "I always order the same thing."

Lean and radiating an unflinching calmness, Sato sits at a black-lacquered table in the conference room of the Nendo office in Meguro, a quiet residential neighbourhood in southwestern Tokyo. He's dressed smartly in a black shirt and leather skinny tie. Behind him, meticulously arranged on a set of white shelves, sit intricate models of the key designs that have propelled Nendo to its current international buzz-worthiness. It reads as a micro-catalogue for the vast cross-section of clients the studio has worked with over the past decade, from electronics companies (Elecom and AU); to haute couture boutiques (Issey Miyake); to top-end manufacturers (Moroso, Cappellini and Foscarini among them) who exhibited new Nendo designs at Salone del Mobile in Milan last spring.

Sato's obsession with routine, however, is more than a personal affection. "When you have 160 projects on the go at once, you want to see familiar things outside of work," he explains. "Once everything else is controlled, you can notice the small things."

Though Nendo employs some 25 designers, it is for all intents and purposes wholly representative of Sato, who, at 33, is the studio's elder statesman. His creative sensibility marries Japanese minimalism and functional ingenuity with a playful, almost magical cleverness – what he refers to as the "aha" moments in conversation, or the "!" in type. And rarely has the name of a studio, "clay," so perfectly exemplified its prevailing ethos. In Sato's mind, the name is about "changing forms and colours, and just being flexible and free. In Japanese, it's one of the easier concepts to understand: from *nendo*, you can form whatever you like."

The studio's first significant commission came quickly. Shortly after completing a degree in architecture at Waseda University in 2002, Sato was asked by a friend to create the interior for a small restaurant in Tokyo.



↖ Oki Sato, principal of Nendo, heads up a studio of 25 employees.

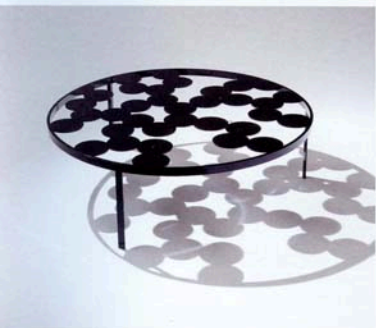
↑ Many of Nendo's designs play with perception and optical expectations. For a line of furniture that includes a chair, a lamp and this table, acrylic is cast in a wooden form to give the pieces a "transparent wood" surface.

↗ At certain angles, the protective film that makes up this shade is invisible, yet the semi-transparent material emits a soft halo of light at any angle. → Issey Miyake gave Nendo a nod of approval and asked the studio to make a chair out of it. The 2008 project, called Cabbage chair, launched the firm into the international limelight.



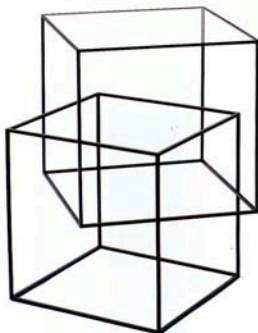
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← Bubbles and Bend are part of Nendo's One Percent line of products made in limited editions of 100.

→ Visible Structures furniture, made from two commonly used building materials, carbon fibre and polystyrene
→ The Thin Black table, for Cappellini, looks like a line drawing suspended in mid-air, but it's made of six-millimetre-thick steel rods.



"We didn't have much budget," he says. So they bought a 200-metre roll of beige fabric and cloaked the entire restaurant, floor to ceiling, inside and out. When that still didn't finish the material, they bought second-hand furniture and covered that, too. With the last scraps, they upholstered menus and matchbooks. Then they christened the restaurant Canvas.

The space soon attracted the attention of Japanese fashion designer Issey Miyake. "He started showing up every month with his friends, or pulling up in a bus with his entire staff," says Sato. For Nendo, the attention was a career maker. In 2008, Miyake sent Sato a roll of rippled paper – a manufacturing by-product of the designer's well-known pleated textile – and asked him to design a chair from it. The result was Cabbage chair, in which users fold back layers to form a seat, and its launch announced Nendo's emergence on the global stage. The following year, the studio created 24 Issey Miyake, a series of shops modelled on a convenience store. "Mr. Miyake wanted a lot of colour, and he wanted to pile up his products randomly," says Sato. "The rest was open to us."

Last year, Nendo expanded on the 24 concept with a walk-through retail space in Shibuya's Parco shopping centre, designed specifically to showcase Miyake's Bilbao handbags. The designers created shelving by fixing vertical clusters of industrial-stock steel rods into the floor, forming a pinpoint surface over which the flexible bags slouch like gurus resting comfortably on a bed of nails. Additional holes were drilled into the floor, so the boutique's staff can periodically rearrange the clusters to "refresh" the store.

Adaptability, and Sato's own unhurried manner, which belies the studio's impressive output, dominates our discussion. On becoming an architect: "I scanned a list of university fields and decided that architecture

was the least unpalatable choice." On his intended audience: "I don't think about designing for a specific user." On Nendo's transition from designing restaurants and houses to retail shops and products: "We just started getting more commissions for interiors and products." With Sato, there is much shrugging, and you get the sense that he's often a bit embarrassed not to have a better story behind his own choices, even though storytelling fuels much of what he creates. But there's also some cheekiness at play. On his job description: "It depends on what a magazine calls me. Whatever they say – architect, interior designer, industrial designer – I guess that's what I am."

He was born in Toronto, and though his family moved to Tokyo when he was 10 he confesses to still feeling like a *gaijin* – a foreigner. "Like taking off your shoes in Japan, that's very interesting to me," he says. "The line for that is just after you enter a room, but what if I redraw the line somewhere else; how would people react?" I glance under the table and notice that he is still wearing his pointed black leather loafers. "See, I'm changing the rules," he says with a laugh.

Footwear and the perception of the everyday come together in Nendo's most recent interior project, for Puma. The sneaker house commissioned the studio to design a subterranean space in Tokyo, just down the street from Herzog & de Meuron's Prada showroom, to serve as a press room and an all-purpose setting for presentations and parties. "While riding the subway, I would notice all these shoes moving over the stairs," says Sato, "so I decided stairs would be a good place to showcase shoes and to give them this sense of movement."

At Puma House, stairs wrap around columns and arch across walls,



↑ For the press and event space at Puma House, Nendo drew inspiration from foot traffic going up and down stairs in subway stations. Here, the steps function as display areas.

↓ Bibiko bags at a 24-hour Miyako shop in Shibuya, Tokyo, are placed on an uneven bed of protruding steel rods. Here, the steps function as display areas.

becoming the venue for displaying the company's sneakers and bags. Sato even placed steps on the ceiling of the long staircase that brings visitors down from street level into the 300-square-metre space, and affixed shoes to the ceiling, upside down. "Nendo is especially well known in fashion circles, but it still has a fresh image, very young and energetic," says Harumi Suzuki, Puma Japan's head of press, who was hosting a group of smartly dressed clients on the morning that I visited the space.

The energy percolating in Nendo's young staff of twentysomethings means the studio never stands still. Feeling that their product work had become too focused on extremes – either mass-produced USB keys or one-off gallery projects – Sato recently returned to a concept Nendo launched five years ago, the One Percent line. The idea is that a production run of 100 represents a nice middle ground. The 2006 collection included such pieces as the Top Gear bottle opener, and the clever Fruit Template "fruit rack." For the second collection, which Nendo plans to roll out in December at Axis Gallery in Tokyo, Sato is currently prototyping with ceramics, exploring tableware in particular.

While we stroll through his studio, we pass Sato's own desk, right in the heart of the action. It perfectly exemplifies the scope and method of his obsession. He has been fussing over two large models, one for an upcoming show in Paris and another for an installation in Moscow. Half the desk is cluttered with computer keyboards, because he is tinkering with a new keyboard concept. Nearby is a purple necktie with a Post-it note underneath it. "Are you redesigning the necktie, too?" I ask. He laughs. "No, that's just to remind me to change my tie later. I'm going on a Japanese television program tonight. I've got to dress the part, right?" **AZ**



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