

DESIGN

# Japanese Design Group Nendo Honors Its Unusual Charm

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PARIS — It was such a smart name, or so it must have seemed at the time. When the Japanese design group Nendo decided to make small objects, such as vases and chairs, in series of 100 a few years ago, it called the collection “1%” because each individual item represented one percent of the whole. But since the activists in the Occupy movement unfurled banners proclaiming “We are the 99%” last autumn, “1%” has been synonymous with capitalist excess.

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Nendo

Oki Sato, cofounder and chief designer of Nendo.


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“I suppose the name does seem negative now,” said Oki Sato, the 34-year-old cofounder and chief designer of Nendo, with a rueful laugh. “We are planning to release a new product for the collection soon, and, yes, we will still call it 1%.”

It is typical of Nendo to stick to a unfashionable name since it has not embraced any of the defining themes of contemporary design while emerging as one of the most dynamic design groups of the last decade. During that time, design has been dominated by complex challenges: addressing environmental and social problems, grappling with advances in science and technology, and exploring the neuroses of modern life. Yet Nendo has favored the old-fashioned approach of producing wittily elegant objects that have intriguing stories. Take its best-known product, the cabbage chair, which consists of a roll of pleated paper that is usually a byproduct in the production of Issey Miyake’s clothes. It unravels to create a comfortable and beautiful chair.

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Masayuki Hayashi/Nendo

A cabbage chair, which consists of a roll of pleated paper that is usually a byproduct in clothing production.

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Masayuki Hayashi/Nendo

Blown-fabric lighting, designed by Nendo in 2009.

“There is a playfulness in Nendo’s work, and a formal simplicity, which is deceptive, because the birth of the products can be extremely complex,” said Jana Scholze, curator of contemporary furniture and product design at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London. “I don’t know many designers who have produced such an astounding number of new works in such a short period. Oki has a curiosity that never stops. He is interested in everything, and always has something to say.”

Prolific though Nendo has been so far, it will be even busier in 2012. The year has barely begun, yet it has already won “Designer of the Year” in *Wallpaper\** magazine’s design awards and opened two exhibitions in Paris: one at the Carpenters Workshop Gallery (through March 3) and another for *Spécimen Editions* at Galerie Pierre-Alain Challier (through March 17). Nendo is soon to open new shoe stores in Istanbul and Osaka for Camper, and a project at La Rinascente’s department store in Milan. If all goes to plan, it will also introduce a raft of new products at the Milan Furniture Fair in April.

Nendo was hatched in 2002 when Mr. Sato went to the Milan fair with five friends and fellow architecture graduates from Waseda University in Tokyo. “I’d finished my master’s degree and didn’t have anything to do,” he recalled. “Ten years ago in Japan, architects were only supposed to design houses, interior designers interiors and furniture designers furniture. But in Milan, we noticed that everyone was designing very freely. That was the way we wanted to work.”

Back in Tokyo, he and his friends cofounded Nendo (the Japanese word for children’s modeling clay) as a multidisciplinary design and architecture group. After winning a couple of competitions, they were asked to design a Tokyo restaurant, Canvas, and covered the walls in cheap canvas, then made business cards from the leftovers.

Now run by two of the cofounders, Mr. Sato and Akihiro Ito, who is the managing director, Nendo has 30 employees in its Tokyo office. It has completed scores of projects all over the world, ranging from mass-manufactured products, such as tiny earphones that resemble jellyfish and are packaged in plastic containers that look like scientific specimen jars, to limited editions of objects, including those on show in Paris.

To a foreign eye, the lightness and simplicity of Nendo’s work evokes the minimalist tradition of Japanese design, which dates to the late 1400s and was a defining influence on Western Modernism. But those qualities are softened by its childlike humor, which seems closer in spirit to Japanese popular culture than to the rationalism of modernist grandees, like the late Sori Yanagi and Naoto Fukasawa.

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“My designs are very simple and very minimal, but I don’t want them to be too cold,” Mr. Sato explained. “I like them to have a friendliness and playfulness, and a sense of humor. And my starting point is always the story behind the object.”

For the glass pieces at Carpenter’s Workshop, the story began with Mr. Sato’s visit to the Lasvit, a traditional Bohemian glass works in the Czech Republic. “When I saw these huge guys blowing glass inside steel molds, I had an a-ha moment,” he recalled. “I’d thought glass-making was a clinical, controlled process, but it isn’t. The material is so powerful that it is impossible to control. So I asked them to make tables by allowing the glass to spill out over the top of the mold, and for two men to blow glass into a mold at the same time, so the bubbles push against each other.”

The inspiration for the furniture Nendo has designed for the Galerie Pierre-Alain Challier exhibition was our tendency to “redesign” our possessions. “Often, I have noticed that people have stuck little pieces of paper under a leg of a desk to make it stabler,” he said. “I thought it would be interesting to make the paper part of the original desk. Like a lot of my work, it comes from observing daily life, and noticing the strange, slight things that make subtle differences.”

Subtle though Nendo’s stories are, part of their appeal is that everyone can enjoy the joke. There is nothing enigmatic about Mr. Sato’s a-ha moments, yet they are sophisticated enough not to seem trite.

“Oki thrives on confounding expectation,” said Zoë Ryan, chair of architecture and design at the Art Institute of Chicago. “His furniture and objects are always more than the sum of their component parts.”

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