



# ICERI **2014**

**7TH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF  
EDUCATION,  
RESEARCH AND  
INNOVATION**



# **CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS**

**SEVILLE (SPAIN)  
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# LEARNING ON THE MOVE: APPRECIATING CULTURE AND DESIGN IN OSAKA AND SASAYAMA

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## Abstract

In this paper we will outline our experience of teaching cultural studies and design to young students while at the same time placing the design solutions in a cultural context. Art and design are inseparable from culture and in order to fully understand design that originates overseas, we need to learn more about the culture from which it grew. After some research we were grateful to find a designer in Japan (Toshiyuki Kita) who values traditional culture and craftsmanship yet who is also committed to producing contemporary solutions that can sit comfortably within both realms.

In order to present this delicate balance to our students we then wished to find two locations in Japan that could illustrate this relationship of design and culture, one a modern metropolis and the other situated in the traditional heartland. Our chosen designer, Kita provided an opportunity to realise our plan, his office in downtown Osaka and his studio in rural Sasayama an hour and a half train ride out of the city. We planned to visit both locations to allow our students to experience firsthand how Kita San's designs can be appreciated in either setting.

Through tutorials on site and feedback in later sharing sessions we saw how the experiences had left an indelible impression on the students. The students recognized the meaning of the two locations we had taken them to and they began to understand the relationship between design and craftsmanship. Designers work for society, they seek to satisfy society's needs and make people feel happy.

Keywords: Shizen philosophy, contemporary design, traditional culture, experiential learning, hands-on experience, craftsmanship

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The teaching of design these days must include consideration of sustainability and culture. This includes both the design elements and the choice of materials used, how these two elements are placed in balance with the environment, and how the product assimilates into the consumers' lifestyle. Students are taught that the designer's role is no longer to design and sell products to people, even if they really are not needed. A designer's role is to fulfill genuine needs and also, if possible, to refine products, make them more efficient and less destructive to the environment. Designers need to be creative and innovative, and so do teachers. The emphasis has to move away from teaching and concentrate more on learning.

The teacher needs to move away from the position of being the 'Sage on Stage' and move towards being the 'Guide on the Side' (King, 1993), instead of being the central figure delivering information to the students, the teacher needs to become a facilitator who allows the students to discover the knowledge via tasks and experiences. The teacher and students can share this experience and along the way the teacher could provide guidance or clues if needed. This is especially true in the Cultural Studies class. In order to understand another culture it is preferable, if not essential, to immerse the students in that culture in order to gain a first hand experience that can be felt. This cannot be gained from a textbook, PowerPoint lecture or class handout.

Education, in these days of outcome based learning, sometimes seems as though it has become a continual round of assessments and exams. There hardly seems enough time to learn anything before the next set of tests and assignments are upon us. At every stage there is the requirement to test or assess the students to gauge their learning. Of course there has to be system of assessment so that teachers, educational managers, parents and other stakeholders can see clearly if the educational system is working as it should. This puts pressure on teachers as they need to deliver the curriculum efficiently and quickly and it also puts pressure on students, as they need to absorb the curriculum and react to it straight away with little time for exploration and experimentation. They often only have time

for one attempt and it has to be correct, as it will be assessed. So it is clear that a method of teaching that involves first hand experience could stay with the students and become an indelible impression that would stay with them for many years in the future – as the saying goes 'Tell me and I forget, teach me and I remember, involve me and I learn' (commonly attributed to Benjamin Franklin, probably a translation of a Chinese proverb).

The value of student cultural study trips overseas had already been tried in a previous study with successful benefits to both the students' education, their appreciation of culture and curiosity for learning, 'Once the students' curiosity and enthusiasm has been awakened, they were able to respond positively to the new culture they were immersed in'. (Ford & Yiu, 2013)

## 2 DESIGN PHILOSOPHY

One of the main qualities of Japanese design and lifestyle it was felt important to communicate to the students was the way the Japanese manage to balance the traditional elements and values with the contemporary, high tech world that has developed.

'Bamboo, Japanese washi paper and lacquer are also considered to be environmentally friendly. For example, as well as being extremely sturdy, bamboo grows quickly, making it both useful and ecological as a building material, says Yukio Hashimoto, an interior designer based in Tokyo'. (Nakamoto, 2014)

"Japanese crafts bring out the best qualities of natural materials," says Hashimoto. But if those crafts are only used to make the same old, traditional products, they end up losing relevance to contemporary living he adds. By putting traditional materials to new use, a new generation of designers, craftsmen and distributors are committed to ensuring that these time-honoured crafts cannot only regain a place in modern life but also thrive and endure.' (Nakamoto, 2014)

'In the West, there is the model of diminishing returns (beyond some level, improvements in quality are likely to cost more than they save). The Japanese do not accept this truism; indeed it is taken for granted that, in setting quality targets, the cost of reaching the target will be lower than present costs'. (McManus, 1994)

As we go forward into the future, concerns for the environment and an appreciation of the ageing society will figure ever more critically in the minds of designers.

These qualities are the ones that are taught to the students within different modules and it was found that through a trip to Japan and a personal experience with such a designer could bring all these elements together and demonstrate to the students how the various qualities such as tradition, innovation, craftsmanship, truth to materials, sustainability, and contemporary design could be integrated into an overall philosophy.

After some research a designer was located in Japan who represents exactly the approach to design that was required.

Toshiyuki Kita was born in Osaka, Japan in 1942 and has had a very successful career in design. He has established offices in Japan and Italy and several of his designs have been accepted into the permanent collections of the *New York Museum of Modern Art* and the *Museum fur Kunst und Gewerbe in Hamburg, Germany*.

'As a furniture designer in Italy, Kita earned the reputation as one of the "most European" of Japanese designers. His cheerful and avant-garde style combines animation with functionality, aesthetics with user friendliness. Despite a seemingly modern flair, he believes in retaining a design's cultural uniqueness.' (Tan, 2014)



“Fig. 1” Toshiyuki Kita

## 2.1 Harmony

Kita designs with empathy, his products need to find a place in people’s lives and contribute to their happiness and satisfaction. He believes that different forms and colours transmit certain feelings and he uses these aspects well to create a balance or harmony. This transmission of information is communication and helps to create human, friendly products. ‘I imagine children climbing up and down the sofa in which their parents are sitting or lying on it. I liken the sofa to an islet in a room.’ (Toshiyuki, 1990) As he states “I always think about how to make people happy and satisfied”, “I consider design a filter within a society. A designer has to put in the effort to become a good filter as well as have empathy and consideration for other people.” (Tan, 2014). Kita stresses this harmony between people and objects and relates this to the way nature creates its own balance between its constituent elements, ‘I think, if the expression of things can be changed, rapport would be built between human and things’. (Toshiyuki, 1990)

As Kita says ‘The basis of design is communication, so it is for people. Art is for oneself. The designer should consider the people who use and will make their products. The designer should always consider ecology, economy, function and materials and try to achieve a balance of these aspects. (Butler, 2007)

## 2.2 Nature

The concepts of nature and tradition often go hand-in-hand. Traditional practices take time to develop and take root and are passed down through the generations. Each generation feels this connection with the past, with the inherited skills and knowledge, and part of this tradition is the human’s relationship to materials. We sense a feeling of warmth that emanates from wood as if we subconsciously acknowledge that, like us, the wood was once a living thing. Other natural materials generate the same response. Kita enjoys working on projects that provide an opportunity to examine the tradition of an object, whether that concerns the material or the form.

This gravitation towards the inherent values of traditional artwork informs his design philosophy which is akin to *Shizen* ‘an aesthetic expressed through balance with harmony, raw and without pretence. His designs emanate an appealing and light-hearted feeling at first glance, reminding people of the “humanness” in design.’ (Ling, 2007)

Designers, as creators of objects, need to consider both an individual’s lifestyle and also nature and the environment: Kita believes that his designs should take into consideration both the enrichment of people’s lives as well as the balance of nature. There is a delicate balance to be maintained in contemporary design, the drive towards global commonality while at the same time preserving the cultural identity of each community or region.

Another crucial aspect of an appreciation of nature is awareness of ‘recyclability and sustainability, “we have to make something special that compels people to keep and treasure instead of discarding,”

he stresses. Coming from the master holding a philosophy of bringing happiness to the world while living in harmony with nature, this concept indeed makes perfect sense.’ (Tan, 2014)

## 2.3 Contemporary

Kita’s aim is to preserve the traditional while at the same time embracing the contemporary creating a balanced and harmonious relationship between the two as Kita says while describing his work ‘I would say it has an organic style, the main theme would be the balance between technology and nature. I like to combine man-made materials with natural ones,’ and goes on to explain that his attitude employs this combination to address sustainability ‘I always think about how to make people happy and satisfied. The designer should create something special that convinces people to keep and treasure instead of discarding’. (Butler, 2007)

‘The past, present and future, elements of one dimension is very important to me. With new technology, our lifestyle, environment and the world itself is undergoing unprecedentedly many drastic changes. Keeping this fact in my mind, I want to make a new step forward.’ (Toshiyuki, 1990)

‘Humanity today possesses the inestimable value of ancient artisanship and avant-garde technological research: it is the designer’s task to make their union a reality, creating a lifestyle that can respect the resources that enrich us’, ‘Light, durable wood from the Cryptomeria and Paulownia trees, washi paper and Arita porcelain, historical materials of Japanese craftsmanship, are reborn in the hands of the designer and merged into an original combination with recycled aluminium and carbon fibre, creating innovative and eco-friendly objects.’ (Admin, 2008)

## 3 TWO LOCATIONS

The cultural trip plan was comprised of two parts, each part representing one of the two faces of Japanese design (contemporary vs. traditional) we wanted to investigate and it was intended that the two parts would mirror the two aspects of Japanese design & culture. It was eventually decided that it would be good to find two locations that could illustrate this contrast and after developing the contacts with Kita, it was discovered that he had offices in downtown Osaka and a studio in rural Sasayama – a great solution. The contrast between these two locations meant that we could use geography to emphasise our point and the journey from one to the other would be the team’s way of switching channels. This could be used later during discussions as the separation and the journey between them could help to anchor the experience in the students’ memories.

### 3.1 Osaka

For the first part (contemporary) the whole group travelled to Osaka to meet Kita San in his office. Here the students were able to perceive Kita’s work in the contemporary setting of a modern city. All the contemporary aspects of design are brought to life in this setting, we can imagine the designs sitting comfortably in the modern metropolis, and the designs are not out of place despite utilizing traditional materials.



“Fig. 2” Student sharing group (a)



“Fig. 3” Student sharing group (b)

Kita patiently listened as each student group introduced their projects. This was a precious experience for them, to have a designer of international stature as an audience. Kita allowed each group to fully explain their motivation, planning, data gathering, and then to speculate as to where this may lead them. At the end of each presentation Kita asked probing questions to clarify certain points and added advice and encouragement. The students visibly grew in confidence as their ideas and concepts were taken seriously and as a short discussion evolved around them.

### **3.2 Sasayama**

For the second part of our experiment we travelled to Sasayama to visit Kita’s studio. Here, in this quieter, more rural setting other aspects of his designs are highlighted. In this environment we begin to perceive different qualities in the work, the materials, the craftsmanship, the economy of form.

The whole party caught the train from Osaka to Sasayama, a journey of 1.5 hours. During the journey, as seen from the window, the countryside changed from Urban to Rural, buildings eventually gave way to hills, forests and fields of vegetables. At Sasayama Station a local bus was available to begin the final stage of the journey to our destination. Before visiting Kita’s studio the whole party joined together for a communal lunch nearby.

At Kita’s studio our students were shown into a large room on the first floor where they enjoyed a documentary presenting Kita’s work and it’s influences, describing the relationship of his design to nature etc.

Following the video presentation, everyone made their way to the garden at the rear of the building where tables and chairs had been prepared. While sipping matcha green tea and eating delicious sweet cakes, the various groups assembled for tutorial sessions. This gave the teachers an opportunity to discuss what had been seen, what had been understood and what had been learned. It was a unique experience to be discussing the designs of Toshiyuki Kita while sipping tea from the cups he had designed and eating sweet cakes from the plates he had designed.

Before catching the bus and train back to Osaka, everyone had a little bit of time to see the rest of Sasayama. This small hamlet had a surprise, nearby there is the ruin of Sasayama Castle. The moat, entrance gate and walls are still standing but the castle was torn down and all the buildings in the castle except the grand hall were destroyed after the Meiji Restoration. On the orders of Tokugawa Iyasu, the keep (tenshu) was never built, as he was worried that due to the castle’s superior design it may one day be used against him. The main hall or Ōshoin was subsequently destroyed by American forces in 1944 and rebuilt in 2000.

## **4 AN INDELIBLE IMPRESSION**

Following the trip, the students continued to work on their group projects and they had clearly absorbed what they had learnt in Japan.

One group had planned to work on a lighting project and during their research process the students had investigated and compared Japanese and Chinese traditional lamps, looking at their design structure, materials and function. They had studied and had been inspired by Kita’s pendant lamp “Kyo”, “Tako” wall lamp and “Aoya” washi paper lamp.

The solution this group arrived at they named “Cozy”, lighting for a modern family, and in their presentation they illustrated the harmonious elements of each lamp in different settings, such as living room, bedroom, dining room, kitchen etc. The students had focused on simple forms and had applied natural materials such as wood in their design. They were very impressed that Kita had managed to retain elements of traditional Japanese paper lamp designs and handcraft techniques within his contemporary products.

A second group was inspired by how Kita strived to make people feel happy and satisfied. The students in this group designed a tableware product, which they named “Circle”. This spherical tableware set, when disassembled, included a fork, spoon, soup tureen, relish dish, main dish, glass, bowl, plate and antipasto platter and was aimed at a single user. Its design was kept simple, pure and natural. This design well addressed the customers’ needs and cleverly played with the motif of the circle – the symbol of wholeness and perfection.

The students all admired Kita’s design talent. In discussion some commented that they believed his work has been well thought through from the initial idea through to the end product. Others declared that he is not a businessman; he cares deeply about the natural environment, traditional craftsmanship, and raw materials, and also cares deeply for the customers’ happiness and needs. The students were impressed by how Kita focuses his attention to each of his products in turn. This is the third part of Kita san’s design philosophy – harmony. The products need to be ‘open’, the kind of products that would easily find a place in someone’s home and would improve their quality of life. Kita’s designs are friendly and are easily absorbed into our lives.

The experience of this trip was a further demonstration of how valuable student cultural study trips can be in supporting and enlivening design and cultural studies classes. The direct engagement with another culture and the experience of meeting designers can mark a turning point in a student’s life and set them on the track to create their own successful career.

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