

# Promise of the Design Age

By Umetaro Nagao

People today expect a good life. They desire an environment comfortable and fulfilling enough to provide both material affluence and spiritual satisfaction. They want, in short, a "life worth living." There is a growing awareness that these needs cannot be met simply within the narrow definitions of economic growth. In addition to the hardware of daily living, there is a growing need for a "software" of lifestyles and satisfaction, a need that is best satisfied not by technological or industrial rationalization, but by design.

Today there is a new awareness in Japanese industry of the importance of design. Design, it is now realized, can create new demand and revitalize industrial and economic activities. At the same time, it can help people cope with the emergence of today's new information-oriented society. Design services have never been needed more.

As a result, sales growth in the design industry has soared. Sales growth averaged only 4.2% a year from 1974 through 1982. It doubled after 1982, however, running at an average 8.6% between 1982 and 1985. This was in sharp contrast to growth in Japan's GNP, which fell from an average 9.1% in the years 1974-1982 to only 5.6% between 1982-1985. Clearly Japan's design industry is past its infancy, and has entered a period of rapid growth.

Design can be defined as creative activities intended to produce a harmonious man-made environment satisfying materialistic and spiritual needs. More specifically, design is the making of decisions on how to give expression to "goods" so as best to accommodate the diverse desires of consumers regarding the functions and compatibility of those "goods" with their living environment, hobbies and tastes. Of course, in order to achieve these goals, design activities must take into account technical and economic feasibility.

Design can be considered a discipline that seeks to "integrate intelligence and

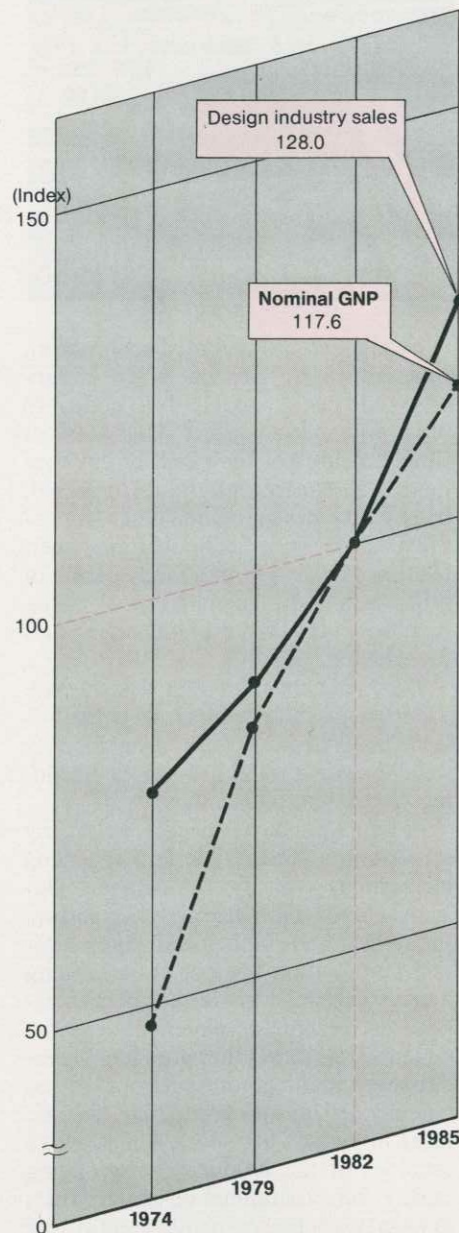


sensitivity." Today, in a time of rising consumer awareness, structural change, lengthening leisure time, a graying population and increased participation by women in mainstream society, the scope of designers' activities has widened. Their responsibility has become heavy indeed.

The Japanese design industry has graduated from its relatively undeveloped postwar stage. Today it is approaching the top level in the world in some fields. In many ways, design must play a new role as an interface linking people's lives with industry. Japan is expected, more than ever before, to become a creator and supplier of designs. Japanese design creation must acquire greater depth, which in turn will aid the formation of Japan's own "cultural identity" and the enrichment of international exchange.

Nor is this only a matter of packaging and advertising. From the standpoint of alleviating Japan's social and economic over-concentration in Tokyo and forming a more dispersed national structure, there is an urgent need to revitalize regional communities through the originality and innovation of local residents. Battered by the strong yen and increasing competition in the domestic market from NIEs as well as an increasing interest shown in the Japanese market by other industrialized countries, regional industries must upgrade their products and switch to new fields of business. It has become increasingly important to pay attention to "grand design" to create attractive communities. In all these areas, the designer's eye is crucial.

Annual Design Industry Sales Compared with Growth in Nominal GNP (1982 = 100)



Sources: "Annual Report on National Economic Accounting"; "Survey of Actual Conditions of Specific Service Industries: Design Industry"





Award-winning entries by schoolchildren in a design competition sponsored by the '89 Design Year Forum. The theme of the competition was making cities more comfortable.



Design has vast potential applications. In recent years, the scope of the designer's vision has expanded from "goods" to "environment and space." This does not simply mean that the need for environmental and space design has increased, but that the design of individual "goods" must take into consideration their relation to "environment and space." In other words, design today must create harmony between the individual and the whole.

The media for expressing design, once confined to those concerned with "vision" and "touch," have diversified as well, appealing to all five senses, including "sound" and "fragrance."

Presentation of "concept" is extremely important in today's design, reflecting increasingly sophisticated demand. Designers must have high-level expertise, the software side of their craft. Specialization and division of labor are becoming more widespread, as is the mechanization of design development support systems. The role of the "producer," coordinating and integrating such specialized and divided design work, has become more important than ever. The scope of activities of the producer is expanding rapidly from traditional design activities to event planning, corporate identity and community building.

International exchange among designers has also picked up, with some de-

signers relocating overseas to engage in worldwide activities.

Corporations are dynamically developing their businesses to accommodate changing consumer awareness and social structure.

There are many different purchase criteria, including comfort, ease-of-use, price, personal attention, and more; and different consumers have different priorities for different purchases. They have also become adept at differentiating among their diverse tastes depending on the circumstances in which they find themselves. In other words, each consumer has coexisting within himself or herself both a preference for quality goods and a preference for simplicity. Moreover, they increasingly desire to express their own individuality.

## Creators and suppliers

Changes in social structure, including more free time, the graying of the population and women's advance into society at large, will expand demand and trigger major structural change in demand patterns. Increased free time will fan consumer demand for leisure activities and for self-improvement. A graying society will require the rest of the population to show greater consideration to senior citizens. Women's enhanced participation in society will stimulate their desire to reduce housekeeping chores.

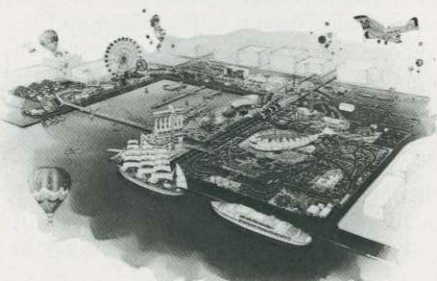
On the side of design creators and suppliers, meanwhile, technological innovation has remarkably expanded the scope for developing new products. Narrowing technological disparities resulting from the rapid diffusion of technology has resulted in increased demand for designs that can differentiate products from similar competitors.

Corporate activities have diversified to deal with these new realities. Companies are striving to correctly gauge the ever-

changing demands of consumers. In order to promptly grasp consumer needs, companies are establishing or relocating information-gathering and design development bases in and around Tokyo, where design information is concentrated. Some firms have established consumer behavior research divisions, in the hope that they will come up with innovative proposals unconstrained by conventional thinking.

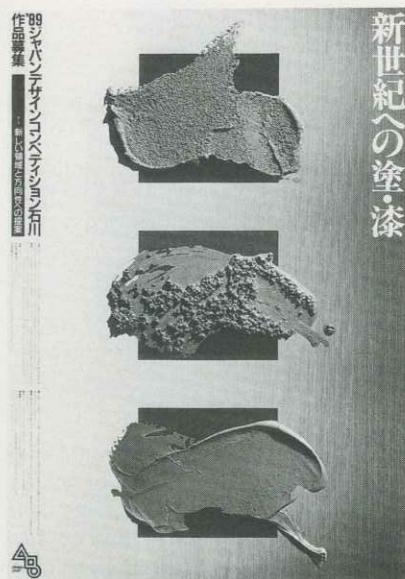
Corporations are also taking steps to strengthen their own design development capability. They are aggressively utilizing designers not only from outside their companies but also from overseas. They are introducing fresh ideas through interchange with companies in different industries and fields of business, through industry-academia cooperation and public contests. Some firms are separating their design divisions from the company proper to give them greater responsibility. And in pace with the rapid progress in expanding business activities overseas, the growth of design activities on an international scale is accelerating. With Japanese corporations using more outside designers, the role of intermediaries has also expanded.

A major development has been the appearance of companies eager to improve their corporate image and contribute to society by publishing quality information



Promotional illustration of the World Design Expo '89 to be held in Nagoya





Posters promoting various design competitions in different parts of Japan

magazines, engaging in active exchange with their local communities, or sponsoring cultural events and projects. These corporate activities are also expected to expand the need for design activities.

## The '89 Design Year

High expectations have been placed on the growth potential of design, and interest has spread through all sectors of the economy and society. Recognizing the need to heighten design awareness, the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) has responded to the recommendations of the Design Promotion Council and designated fiscal 1989 as "Design Year."

MITI is also supporting the '89 Design Year Forum inaugurated on June 1, 1988, and has asked not only designers but all others involved in the design business to take part in the '89 Design Year campaign. The '89 Design Year Forum is headed by Rokuro Ishikawa, president of the Japan Chamber of Commerce and Industry. The Japan Industrial Design Promotion Organization is serving as its secretariat.

Well aware of the problems faced by each sector of the industry, the forum invites people from all over Japan concerned with design to plan and execute independent design projects on their own initiative. These projects, it is hoped, will contribute to improving the quality of people's lives, revitalizing regional communities, raising industrial sophistication and boosting the cause of internationalism. Fields covered by the '89

Design Year campaign range from products, fashion, office interiors, graphics, packaging and crafts to environmental and space design.

The projects are highly varied, and include displays and exhibitions, conventions, conferences, seminars and symposiums, contests, planning for regional community building, and design and environmental development, including improvement of the environment and development projects to be undertaken jointly by industry and universities.

The sponsors of these undertakings are no less diverse, including regional public organizations, economic organizations, industrial promotion organizations, designers' organizations, the press, educational organizations and private corporations. Overall, several hundred projects will be undertaken during the 1989 Design Year. Among the biggest:

### • ICSID '89, Nagoya; October 18-21

The biggest international conference ever to be held by the design industry, with 3,000 designers, both Japanese and foreign, expected to take part. Participants will discuss various problems on the theme of "Emerging landscape: order and aesthetics in the information age."

### • World Design Exposition '89; Nagoya; July 15-November 26

The world's first exposition to be held for design. The theme of this exposition is "Dream, design, humanity—the urban symphony."

### • Fourth International Design Competition

On the theme of "Fire," this interna-

tional competition covers all fields of design. Prize-winning works will be exhibited at the **International Design Exhibition, Osaka '89; November 17-26.**

### • Sony International Student Design Competition

An international competition sponsored by Sony Corporation on the theme of "My Walkman" and "The future of the Video Walkman."

### • First International DESIGN THE FUTURE Competition

An international competition on designs for communication tools or systems employing technology expected to become a reality in the near future. The theme is "Creative communication through the five human senses." Prize-winning works will be exhibited at the World Design Exposition.

### • Design Eye '89

An international competition for students of design. Its theme is "Challenge beyond borders." Winning works will be displayed at the World Design Exposition.

### • International Biennale in Nagoya—ARTEC '89

A world exhibition of high-tech art and design. This will consist of a competition open to young Japanese designers and students, and a competition among selected artists from throughout the world and an exhibition of their works.

*Umetaro Nagao is director of the Inspection and Design Policy Office at the International Trade Administration Bureau of the Ministry of International Trade and Industry.*