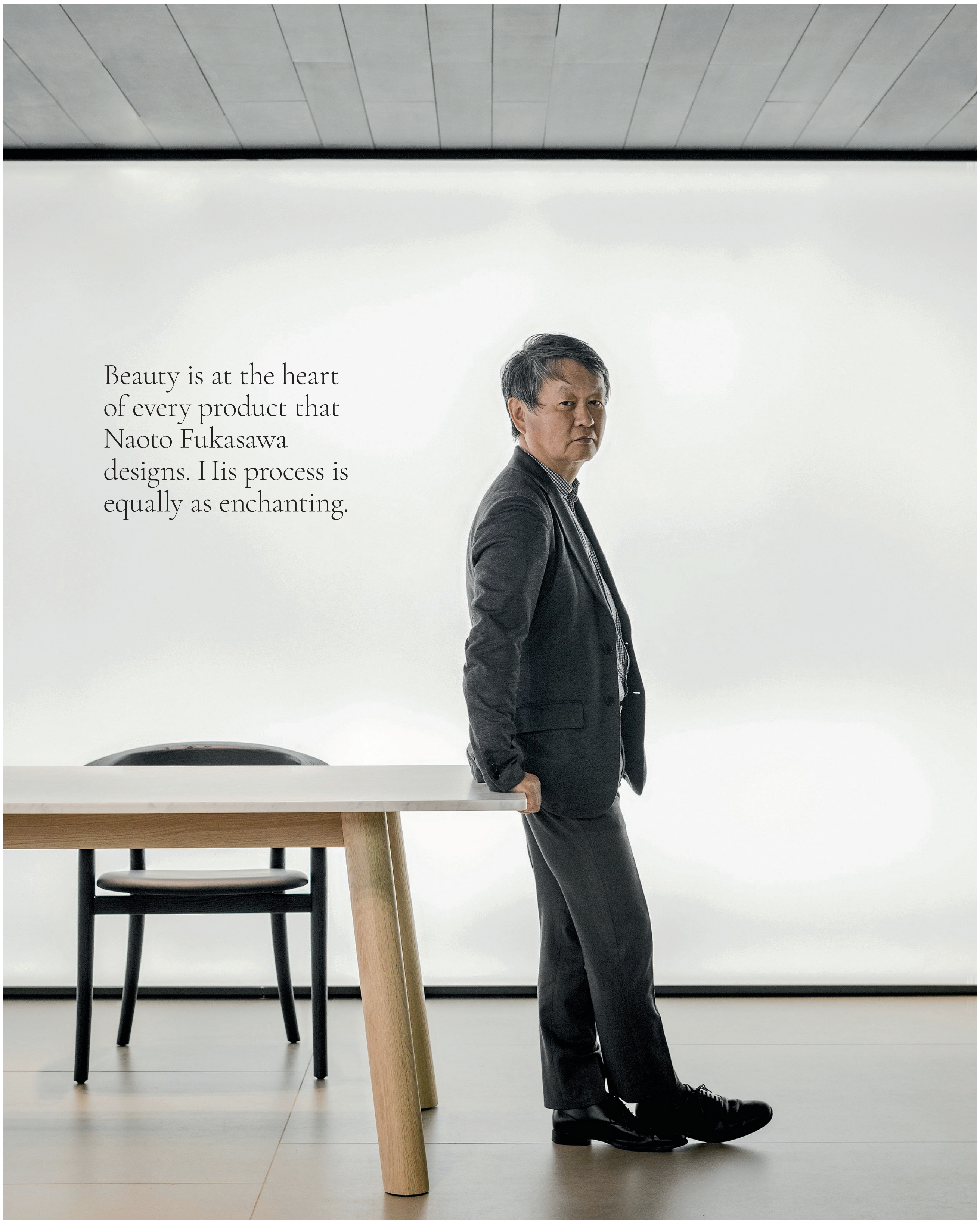


Beauty is at the heart of every product that Naoto Fukasawa designs. His process is equally as enchanting.

SPACE SHAPER

STORY BY **STEPHEN TODD**

NAOTO FUKASAWA CLOSES HIS EYES AS HE speaks, and I imagine words forming like the outlines of objects on his mind. Japan's most esteemed industrial designer is summoning up phrases to explain his process, the means by which he arrives at some of the most formally reductive yet paradoxically evocative furniture, lighting and household appliances on the market today.

"Design is about the integrity of things," intones Fukasawa-san, finally.

I close my eyes and think of things – like his sinuous Grande Papilio chair for B&B Italia, its fluid outline carved from the trunk of an inverted foam cone and zipped into a textile sheath. Then I think of his Drawn coffee tables for Glas Italia, the edges of the rounded glass slabs like curvaceous lines traced in space. His collection of Monolithic saucepans for Chinese homeware brand Jia springs to mind: the aluminium vessels rounded like pebbles, robust handles gently tapered to help users intuit tactility.

"As a young designer I was always thinking about making the shape, the form, creating things of beauty that express my ideas, manifest my mind," says Fukasawa, now 64.

"But around 30 years ago I totally changed. I realised that my designs should be more objective. That I needed to think about why people like one thing, perhaps not another. I felt I needed to be able to get inside people's minds."

Today, he says, he doesn't focus so much on minds, "but on people's actions."

It's a process he calls "design without thought" and it began with a series of observations of daily human behaviour. Of the way we tend to nudge an umbrella spike into a groove in the floor in order to stand it up straight, say, or wedge a boot under a door to hold it open. Bottle tops used as impromptu ashtrays he finds "really interesting"; windows propped up by wooden coat hangers, no less so.

"Your body is more honest than your mind," Fukasawa insists, referring to American psychologist James J. Gibson whose theory of "affordance" describes the way an environment offers random values to animals – including humans – creating a subtle two-way interplay between organism and environ.

"It's now interesting to me how people can, without thinking, exhibit the same actions, the same behaviour without any environmental or ambient interruption," says Fukasawa. "Not having to think about it makes the relationship between a person and an object more seamless. Finding ideas in people's spontaneous behaviour and realising these ideas in design is what 'design without thought' is about."

Design without thought is clearly not the same as thoughtless design.

"I see Fukasawa as a kind of designer-philosopher," says Aric Chen, curator-at-large of Hong Kong's new M+ museum, which seeks to reframe design history from a pan-Asian perspective. "He takes esoteric ideas about design and makes them real. He has a very poetic and philosophical way of looking at things, and he translates that vision in a visceral manner for the rest of us."

Naoto Fukasawa was born in the Yamanashi prefecture, south-west of Tokyo, in 1956. He studied product design at Tama Art University, graduating in 1980 during the early effervescence of Japan's tech-led bubble economy. His first job was with Seiko Epson where he developed wristwatches and a series of micro-printers. This might be understood as his formal design phase, during which he expressed himself through products of an undeniably refined beauty.

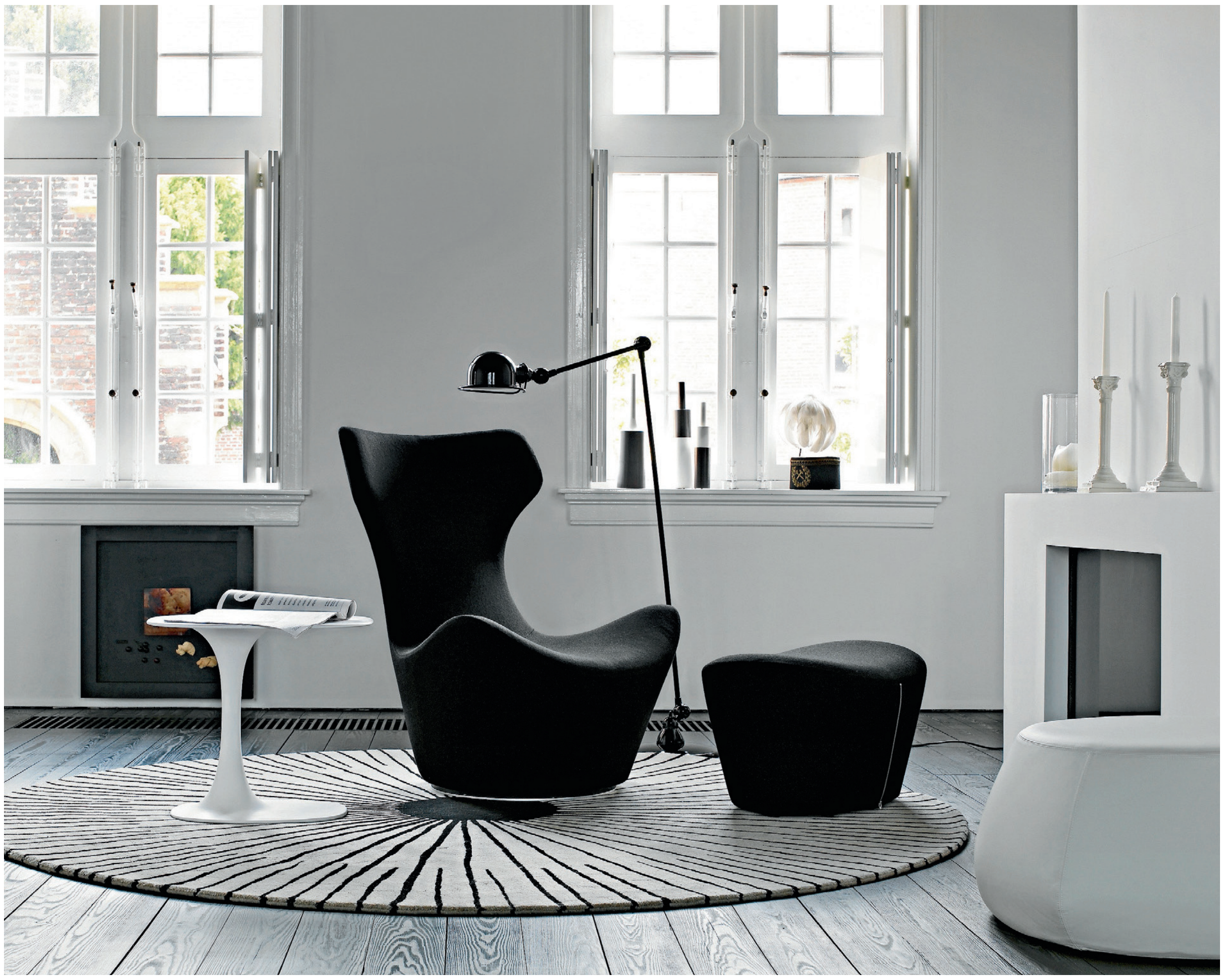
In 1989 he moved to San Francisco to join ID Two, the predecessor of IDEO, the company widely acknowledged as the birthplace of the now ubiquitous idea of design thinking – and its gimmicky offspring, "human-centred design". It was around then Fukasawa began to feel the need "to get into peoples' minds" as he worked for Silicon Valley ventures including Apple, where he collaborated with Jony Ive on the Twentieth Anniversary Macintosh – one of the brand's rare flops.

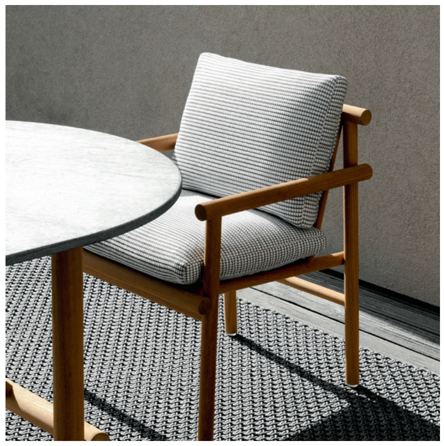
In 1996, he returned to Japan to establish IDEO's Tokyo office and began consulting to local industry. Not long afterwards, he inaugurated a series of workshops for young designers called Without Thought.

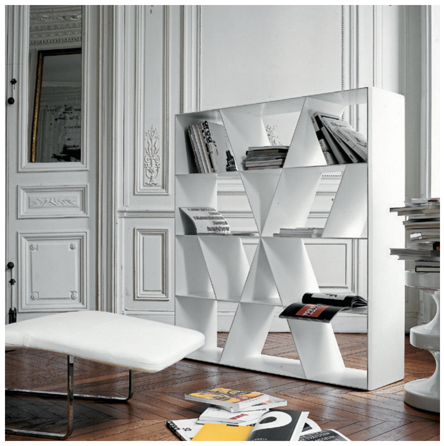
"People think that design is something that appeals to their emotions, but in fact we are linked to things every day in our environments without even being aware of it," says Fukasawa, who established his own agency, Naoto Fukasawa Design, in 2003. "This 'unthinking' state makes actions smooth. Whereas, if we think closely about what we're doing, our actions become awkward. Designs that make us feel this kind of simplicity don't stand out, but entwine with people's actions and with the environment, too."

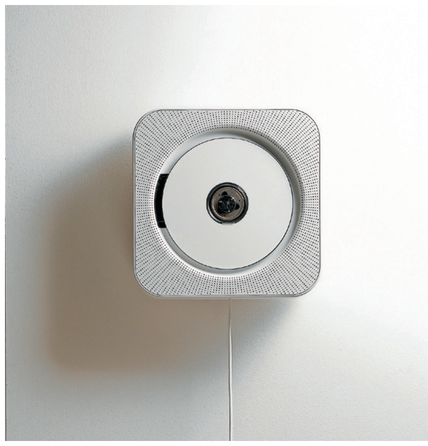
It was during an early Without Thought workshop that Fukasawa came up with the idea for a wall-mounted CD player that mimicked the cord activation of a standard-issue kitchen fan – an object we intuitively know how to operate. Produced by Mujirushi Ryōhin in 1999, it marked the start of a continuing relationship with the brand known the world over today as simply Muji.

Mujirushi (no-brand) Ryōhin (quality goods) began as a product brand of the Seiyu supermarket chain in 1980. The range was developed to offer affordable quality products and









Clockwise from main: Grande Papilio chair; Ayana chair; Shelf X storage unit; Muji wall-mounted CD player.

were marketed using the slogan "Lower priced for a reason". Wrapped in clear cellophane with red writing on brown paper labels, Muji household products quickly gained a cult following. In 2002 Fukasawa was appointed to the advisory board and soon became the de facto ambassador for the more than 7000 products sold in more than 650 stores, including Australia.

Products Fukasawa has himself designed for Muji include the Real Furniture series which features a solid timber dining chair he describes as "archetypal": a four-legged frame with curved half-arms to gently coddle the body, and a slightly concave slab for the seat. The Hardcase Trolley luggage collection is identifiable by the rugged ridges which are in fact the reinforced under-structure, exposed as an identifying design feature. The Stand Light is composed of a circle of pleated fabric (the shade) perched atop a block of solid oak.

"It really is an ordinary light, but it achieves Muji's sentiment of 'this will do just fine'," Fukasawa says, paraphrasing the official company slogan, "Muji is enough".

More than just enough, 10 of his products – including the CD player for Muji, a doughnut-shaped polycarbonate humidifier for his Plus Minus Zero brand, and a slew of sleek mobile phones for Infobar are in the permanent collection of New York's Museum of Modern Art; the design world's holy of holies.

As elevated as his work may be, Fukasawa refers to his output, at its best, as "super normal". That's because, reduced to their essence, his designs are about the most common of outlines. For Fukasawa, design is not just about minimal form-giving as it is about designing the unnoticeable, shaping the very space in which an object exists.

"An outline is the boundary that delineates an object and its surrounds," says Fukasawa, "and since that which surrounds an object is air, the outline of a hole in the air that is shaped like an object is the same as the outline of the object itself."

This air, to his way of thinking, is composed of the ephemera that exists around the object. Ephemera such as people's experiences and memories, customs and gestures, time, circumstance and sound, technology, culture and history.

"My job," says Fukasawa, "is to determine this outline and to design something that slots right into it."

For instance, in designing Ayana, the latest outdoor furniture collection for B&B Italia, which is sold through Space Furniture, Fukasawa started with an observation about the way timber tools have been used for centuries, even millenniums (thus history, experience, collective memory). The way branches fallen from trees were co-opted to create hand tools (technology, gestures, shared culture), the way the natural form of the tree branch is round, and how this simple shape could be assembled in a manner that is at once timeless and timely.

The series of teak sofas, armchairs and tables uses no metal hardware, the arms and legs are joined by a system of hidden wooden pins; the back armature is left exposed. It is designed to be walked around, appreciated from all sides.

Effectively, it's a 3D essay on Fukasawa's way of thinking today as he shifts, he says, from being somebody who crafts objects to somebody who crafts human relationships to objects. (Of the Grande Papilio, of 2009, Fukasawa has said: "I wanted the chair to look naturally comfortable, to have the same shape that relaxation would have if it were represented by an image.")

"You have to realise that Fukasawa is coming from a tradition where ideas like 'ma' – space-time – are quite prevalent and have informed a certain way of being that he is able to translate in real time," Chen explains. "The concept of negative space becomes positive space and it's constantly moving so nothing is static at the same time."

So, what looks like formal minimalism is actually maximal meaning within a reduced outline.

Chen refers to the oft-quoted reflection that "form is emptiness, emptiness is form". (It is a fundamental principle of the Heart Sutra, a foundation stone of Zen Buddhism.)

Fukasawa phrases it another way. "My philosophy is to embody things according to form that people are unconscious of, and to produce a thoroughly beautiful product," he says. "The Japanese tend to gestural restraint although this is underscored by a complexity of codes that can be difficult for a foreigner to understand."

Yet despite the complexity of philosophy and depth of process, Fukasawa strives to attain the essence – the integrity – of a thing. "At the end of the day," he shrugs, "a pot has to be a pot." ●