

COMMENT

DESPITE THE GROWTH OF THE CHINESE ECONOMY, JAPAN IS STILL THE JEWEL OF ASIA'S DESIGN AND MANUFACTURING CULTURE, SAYS PRODUCT DESIGNER DAVID TONGE

If you are old enough to remember the Eighties, you may recall the fascination with Japan during its economic bubble, or 'baburu' as the Japanese say. Since then, many designers have been inspired by its combination of craft culture, technological innovation and its insatiable, but now somewhat unfashionable, desire for consumption.

Fast-forward to 2007 and China has eclipsed Japan in its popularity with the West as academics, businesses and designers get excited about the potential future revenue from its rapidly growing economy. In addition, there is much talk of how difficult Japan is to 'break into', and how difficult Japanese companies can be to work with. So you might ask, what makes working in Japan worthwhile?

I started to work with Japanese companies more than 10 years ago in San Francisco. After visiting almost every month, hundreds of hours of Japanese study and an embarrassing amount of time mooching around the streets of Tokyo and Osaka, I finally feel like I am beginning to understand its culture and mentality.

Like many designers working in the UK, we need to travel to find companies with which to collaborate, and, for me, Japan is still the jewel of Asia's design, technology and manufacturing culture. It accounts for approximately 20 per cent of the world's research and development investment; its GDP is the same as the rest of Asia's combined and despite people's perceptions, there are projects for foreign designers. Okay, it may take up to four years of relationship-building beforehand, but once this is achieved, and assuming you remain patient, projects will come.

When working with the Japanese, you will find an obsession for newness that is driven by competition and consumption, an inbuilt desire for technological progression and from a design perspective, a history that is more about 'just doing', than it is 'process and planning'. In practice, this can mean that design is nothing more meaningful than the short-term creation of form and detail, resulting in in-house designers being viewed in a poor light and Japanese brands never clearly establishing where they should be going.

For this reason, alongside tremendous competition from Chinese and Korean brands, many Japanese companies' briefs to foreign designers are more about learning new design processes and approaches than they are about creating specific design solutions. In other words, the Japanese can detail and

manufacture but often can't innovate and develop products, services or brands in the structured way that we can in the West. Far from this being a negative experience, it is a good opportunity for designers like ourselves to deliver great design at the same time as articulating why and how we do it.

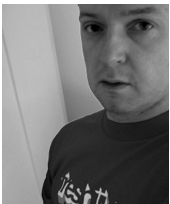
This view of industrial designers as form-makers and the apparent endless supply of in-house designers is perhaps one of the reasons why, compared to Japanese fashion designers and architects, there are relatively few who have become well known outside of Japan. Naoto Fukasawa, Ichiro Iwasaki and Shunji Yamanaka are among the current most notable Japanese industrial designers, all of whom cut their teeth in corporations such as Seiko, Sony and Nissan before becoming independent. They are now consulting with Japan's most successful companies.

Part of their success is that 'grey hair', or wisdom, is valued in Japan. Arguably, it is changing among the younger generation, but the concept of the 'sensei', or teacher with experience of life and some meaningful opinions, is important to the Japanese. On a simple level it's a respect for elders, but at the same time is a desire for leadership and clarity in areas where they may not have the experience themselves. This is especially true for foreign designers who, to the Japanese, not only have an alternative viewpoint but can communicate it directly and with a conviction hard to come by in Japan.

On reflection, this respect is something sadly lacking in our own media-fuelled West, where the 21-year-old designer is led to believe they can become the next Marc Newson or Jasper Morrison with a few pencil strokes and choice appearances on Youtube. This is not only unrealistic, but detrimental to the role of the designer as a professional who can help to improve lives through the patient creation of products, and as a valuable counterpoint for the sometimes short-sighted businessman.

Design in Japan is a serious business. There are some aspects of working there that can drive you to distraction, and after consulting for nearly 20 years, it's the most challenging environment I have experienced. But working there is much more than using your ability to excite in a visceral way. It will ask serious questions of yourself and your colleagues, the way you work, communicate and think about design.

To my mind, Japan remains necessary, exciting and ultimately rewarding in a way that I am not sure China or elsewhere could. In short, if you can survive and succeed in Japan, you can do it anywhere ■



David Tonge is co-founder of the-division. Based in London, he works on a wide range of design and research projects from consumer electronics to furniture. Clients include Nissan, Toshiba, Ricoh and Panasonic.