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Lead: Industrial designer Naoto Fukasawa is reshaping our relationship with technology through his unadorned, functional and quietly beautiful work.

By Stephanie Gartelmann (now Oley)

Multi-award winning designer Naoto Fukasawa has seen the future, and its interface is refreshingly simple.

It's not just that his products have sleek, barely-there proportions or the luxurious sheen of high technology. It's that they function in such an intuitive way you wonder how you had ever put up with other appliances, cluttered with their buttons and beeps and LED displays.

He's a career industrial designer with a portfolio spanning three decades of impressive work. But since launching electronics and homewares brand plusminuszero (± 0) in Tokyo in 2003, Fukasawa has emerged as one of today's most sought-after international designers. Clients as diverse as B&B Italia, Hitachi and New York's Museum of Modern Art have commissioned him, and Fukasawa has won more than 50 design awards, including the American IDEA Gold Award and British D&AD Gold Award.

The inspiration for Fukasawa's appliances, furniture and accessories come from his keen observations of the minor dilemmas of city-dwellers. When he sees ordinary people fumble for makeshift surfaces, receptacles, knobs or light sources to help accomplish ordinary tasks, Fukasawa designs products that afford these actions simply.

There's his umbrella for plusminuszero, for example, designed in 2003 with Chie Noda, with its notched handle allowing weary commuters to rest their shopping while standing at a bus stop. The chair for Muji whose profile mimics that of a matching bed, giving the user an impromptu bedside table. His vacuum cleaner for Hitachi whose belly glows red when full, "as if it's eaten too much", in the designer's words, eliminating the need to manually check the vacuum bag.

And judging from the whimsy of these designs, there's the sense that the softly spoken, personable guy wants us to see the funny side of our material needs.

"With Naoto... you get a sense of organic seamlessness from object to person to the world that is almost magical," says Paola Antonelli, curator of architecture and design at MoMA, who has tracked Fukasawa's progress since 1990. "I'd rank him among the world's best five designers, because of the elegance of his thought process and his solid training as a designer."

Yet Fukasawa's emergence as a solo force came at the relatively late age of 40, after years of designing in-house for Seiko Epson in Tokyo and maverick firm IDEO (then ID TWO) in San Francisco.

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Born in 1956 in rural Yamanashi, he had revealed an early knack for art. "I loved making things," Fukasawa explains. "My father worked for a small electronics firm and I was fascinated by all the old electrical cables and tapes there; things kids wouldn't normally play with." He laughs: "I'm the kind of person who sees a real vitality in a roll of tape. As a kid, I would unroll them and then try to roll them back up."

He didn't yet know the meaning of 'design', but one day a Porsche drove through his town. "I thought it was beautiful, and not just from a boyish obsession with cars. I looked it up and found that Porsche was synonymous with beautiful design," he says.

After studying product design at Tama Art University and graduating in 1980, he was hired by Seiko Epson. He spent the next eight years there designing watches and printers, working to a rigorous 1:1000 scale. "That really shaped my foundations in form-making," Fukasawa recalls.

If his Japanese training had given him depth as a designer, then the following decade in America was to give him breadth. In 1989 he joined industrial design firm IDEO, working with an international team of product designers and engineers on sports watches, computers and heart-pump controllers alike.

"In the US, I learned to approach things logically and simply. I saw that design is really a solution to a problem," he says. "San Francisco has a very people-friendly environment: the water's good, the food is plentiful, the cultural mix is well established. It wasn't serious like Japan, where you always had to wear a suit. It was an intelligent working environment."

Fukasawa began questioning the flamboyance in product design, and grew attracted to notions like affordance, coined in the 1960s by psychologist James J Gibson. The term describes how forms in our environment 'afford' certain actions – the way a low fence invites sitting on. He also revisited the Japanese word *hari* (meaning 'flexed' or 'taut'), and began designing more according to relationships – the "push" and "pull" of forces between products and their surroundings.

"The outline [of a design] is determined by all the factors that make up the environment, including human emotions and behaviour, time and light and air; it is in constant flux," Fukasawa explains in his new monograph, *Naoto Fukasawa* (Phaidon 2007).

His book provides a very readable account of these philosophies and his genial engineering and imaginative skills, which have inspired some 100 Fukasawa products and a handful of art pieces.

Of his celebrated CD player for Muji, now archived at MoMA, Fukasawa writes: "One day, I thought how a spinning CD reminded me of a pull-string operated fan," and describes prototyping the CD player that operates on that guilelessly simple principle. He explains the unusual

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counter-balancing devices, colour choices and moulding technology that mark his designs.

And he reveals why he's increasingly interested in products one doesn't notice – like his recent bathroom wall light for a major Japanese manufacturer, indistinguishable from the surrounding tiles when switched off.

"I have the strange sensation that Naoto has gone through some barrier, that he thinks in a world that hasn't yet arrived for all of us," marvels designer Jasper Morrison, who collaborated with Fukasawa on the 'Super Normal' exhibition series in the UK and Japan.

In the decade since returning to Japan – founding IDEO Tokyo in 1996, and plusminuszero in 2003 – Fukasawa has grown in stature as a design figure. He has a professorship at two universities and is co-director (together with Issey Miyaki and Taku Satoh) of the new 21_21 Design Sight Museum in Tokyo. For some ten years, he has also led the 'Without Thought' series of workshops to encourage intuitive thinking at Japan's big-name manufacturers.

"The energy generated by these workshops could potentially overturn Japanese design completely," comments organiser Takashi Kawashima, "ridding Japan of accusations that its products are well-made but boring."

As if in response to this growing public role, the designer increasingly cherishes his solitude. Weekdays are a non-stop flow of clients and projects, but on weekends retreats to a peaceful spot in the mountains, where he has built a rough hut "with a simple, childish shape". But he never switches off. "I don't escape who I am, even there. I might not be with clients, but I always immerse myself in what I do." His latest energy outlet has been gathering rough stones to make a low, crude wall there.

At press time, Fukasawa was preparing for the 2008 Milan Furniture Fair and expanding on his Deja-vu furniture designs for Magis. He had also completed a pen for Lamy, its three-edged profile and considered weight giving it an optimum ergonomic grip and a shape he describes as: "Simple, strong, familiar".

The Noto ballpoint pen came about after Dr Lamy contacted Fukasawa directly in 2004. Several designs emerged from their collaboration. With its barely-there self-suspended clip and matte all-plastic finish, the pen has a no-nonsense practicality befitting the "plus, minus, zero" mantra: more function and less embellishment for a beautifully balanced result.

The Noto 282 comes in two demure tones – light grey and black – and two brights, orange and sky-blue. "Yes, I've included some cute colours," Fukasawa says with a smile, dodging suggestions that sky-blue has become his signature accent colour. A slightly weightier version, the Noto 283, features a matte silver-lacquered tip. The pen will be released later this year.

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Next on Fukasawa's agenda is a vision to delete many modern-day conveniences from sight altogether.

He is developing new-generation floors, walls, doors and cabinets with in-built sensors and controls. "There's a proliferation of oversized appliances like Plasma TVs at the moment, but in the future these will become incorporated into walls. Music systems and air-conditioners will cease to exist as separate units," Fukasawa explains.

It's a boon for a designer this passionate about designs that fit our natural behaviour. But what will happen to Fukasawa's beautiful watches, phones, lounges?

"They won't disappear," he says reassuringly. "We'll always need things like tables and chairs. But I'll be able to concentrate on designing the actual environment between people and things." If Fukasawa has his way, we can expect a very seamless built environment in the near future.

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