

TEXT MAGGIE KINSER HOHLE PORTRAIT ELIZABETH YOUNG AD IMAGES COURTESY OF GE



iroshi Kashiwagi is the most engaging sort of historian, and one wholeheartedly focused on modern design. Having written books on topics ranging from super-efficient interiors to *The Cultural History of Everyday Objects*, Kashiwagi has recently turned his attention to the history of American modern design during the 1940s and '50s—which had more influence on Japanese product design than one might suspect. A teacher and curator, Kashiwagi finds himself intrigued by the slippery interface between memory, truth, and the mythology propagated by advertising, and his curiosity is contagious.

Born in the international metropolis of Kobe in 1946, Kashiwagi grew up in a Japan occupied and increasingly influenced by “America.” In his eyes, a post-World-War-II Japan, shaken by defeat and apparently lacking the resolve to invent its own future, assumed a complex dream wholly manufactured in the U.S.A. How that dream entered public consciousness and ultimately became his personal dream, too, was the subject of a recent six-month sabbatical at Pratt Institute. *Theme* met with Kashiwagi in a midtown Manhattan coffee shop to ask him about his findings.



# THE AMERICAN DREAM

THROUGH  
**JAPANESE  
EYES**





*THEME: Why are you researching American design of the '40s and '50s?*

KASHIWAGI: I'm intrigued with the power of design to transmit culture. Between 1946 and 1948 (through an interesting collaboration between US forces and Japanese manufacturers), the American government demanded that Japanese companies fill the 20,000 households of the Occupation Forces and their families with "typical" household appliances and furniture. But there were hardly any such appliances in Japanese houses.

To bring (these commissioned appliances and furniture) up to the standards to which Americans were accustomed, the U.S. supplied Mitsubishi and Toshiba with financial aid, design specifications, and engineers. At the same time, all kinds of furniture—also not part of the typical Japanese domestic environment—were produced: tables, chairs, beds. And all of a sudden there were American-style products

in Japan, if not for the Japanese to own, at least to see.

After the occupation, the Japanese companies continued to manufacture these products for the domestic market, and by the 1950s they were becoming part of our own lives. We'd been primed by seeing these products in the PX (a kind of general store for the U.S. military) in Tokyo's Ginza neighborhood, where of course we couldn't buy them, but we could dream. We thought they were so amazing.

*Products like electric blenders and such?*

Oh yes! After World War II, electrical appliances were the symbol of not only a wealthy life, but an American life. The blender was a symbol of the power of appliances, so there were a lot sold; but because the Japanese don't habitually drink juice in the morning, and the blender was introduced as a tool for that, most Japanese didn't actually use their blenders.

The Japanese population became completely enthralled with American culture and lifestyle. Imagine, a few years before, America was the enemy, an ogre in our minds. Now it was not an ogre, but a dream! That's the strength of design; the power of culture is transmitted through design.

It was the same power of culture, and strength of design, that transformed Japan at the end of the Edo period, when we abandoned our policy of national seclusion. As soon as the Meiji era began, Japanese chopped off their traditional top-knots and started wearing western hairstyles. We came to know a new culture, and the power of culture, through elements of design.

*What American icons entered your life as you were growing up? What contributed to your personal "American Dream?"*

Well, the Asahi Shimbun (Newspaper) introduced Blondie, by Chic Young, and we started to see American ads and films. Then the Japanese made their own ads using American characters—there was one ad for a Japanese radio with a photo of Doris Day implying that she liked its sound, but I think they ignored the copyright on that one! I used it as an example in a book I wrote called *Nichiyohin no Dezaian Shiso* (*The Design Concept of Everyday Objects*). [Shobunsha, 1984.] In any case, I started wondering what real American design was like at the time, what peoples' lives were really like, and how design was included. We Japanese truly believed that right after the second World War, American lives were rich beyond compare: Every American lived in a huge house, and every American's life was like a dream.

*I'm assuming your research crushed that image!*

Sure. When I found out that the veterans returned, married, and then had no place to live, I was shocked. And when I saw American ads for houses no larger than a rabbit hutch, I realized how misled I had been. My most recent research deals with Levittown (17,000 houses on Long Island), built under government contract for the civilian population. It was horrible and cheap, they say.

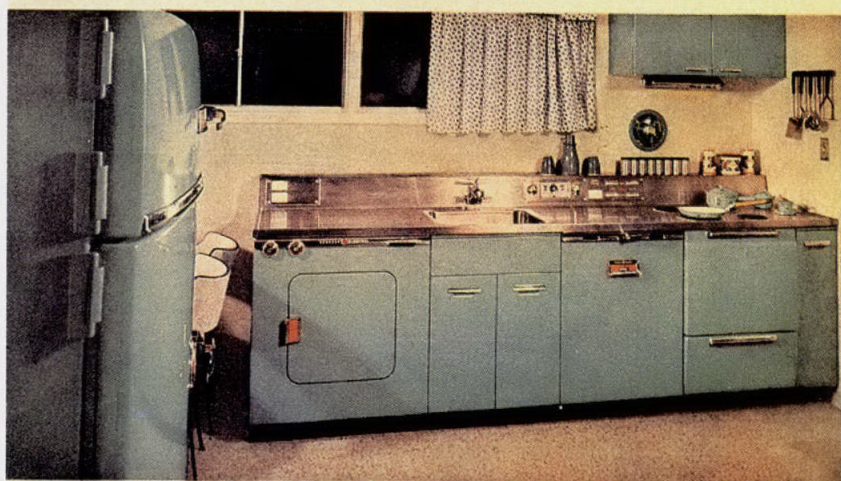
Japanese in the 1950s, seeing the U.S. military ride around in their magnificent cars, and the appliances in the PX windows, had no idea of the real lives of contemporary



**Town-builder LEVITT previews the new 9½-foot wonder kitchen by General Electric**

This is town-builder Bill Levitt, and area map of Levittown, Pa. When completed, this new community (between Philadelphia and Trenton) will house 70,000; contain 17,000 dwellings . . . with schools, churches, shopping centers and playgrounds—all pre-planned.

\$100 a month covers all taxes, interest, insurance and amortization for this beautiful new "Country Club" Levittown house. Complete price: \$17,500. Veterans pay \$1000 down; non-veterans \$2600. Included at no extra cost: new 9½-foot wonder kitchen by G.E., below.



When a woman goes house-hunting, the place she usually heads for first is the kitchen. This is where she spends so much of her day. This is where she's most likely to fall in love with the house, or reject it.

A man who fully realizes the import of this is the world's largest developer, William Levitt. He believes not only in a kitchen that captivates women at first sight, but one that—paradoxically—she spends less time in . . . one that does her tasks so

efficiently that she has extra hours each day for her family, friends or hobbies.

What you see here is the final design of the built-in custom kitchen-laundry center that both Levitt and General Electric agree offers today's woman more than any other conceived during the past quarter-century. (Mr. Levitt's association with General Electric goes back to 1939, the year G-E Refrigerators were first installed in his unique houses.)

The General Electric Kitchen Center will be in-

stalled in Mr. Levitt's finest Levittown, Pa. homes, and it will also be made available all over America, through local builders, G-E distributors and G-E dealers. In the words of one woman enthusiast, "It is the most magnificent, yet most sensible work-saver, space-saver and time-saver ever!"

General Electric Company, Appliance Park, Louisville 1, Kentucky.

**GENERAL ELECTRIC**

Automatic G-E Kitchen Center cooks food . . . flushes away food waste . . . washes dishes . . . even cleans and dries clothes!







IN THE LATE 1950S, DETAILED IMAGES OF THE SO-CALLED "LEVITTOWN LIFE," WITH THE APPLIANCES, THE BIG FRIDGE FULL OF FOOD, THE MOVIES, AND THE FASHIONS STARTED ENTERING JAPAN. THE NEW DREAM WAS "AMERICAN CASUAL," LIKE IN "LEAVE IT TO BEAVER."

Americans. They still don't. You know that scene in *Back to the Future*, when Michael J. Fox visits his parents' past and comes upon Lyon Estates before it was built? That was Levittown! Japanese don't get that scene at all.

There were a lot of fantastic modern designs developed both here in the U.S. and in Japan after the war. Take Charles Eames and Sori Yanagi. It's true that your average American didn't aspire to own an Eames lounge, and he couldn't afford it if he did, but what about Sori Yanagi's butterfly stool? Did they sell in Japan?

In general, ordinary people buy ordinary design; they buy what's conservative and popular. So just as only the design-conscious American consumer bought Eames' designs, in Japan ordinary people didn't buy Yanagi's. In fact, Yanagi's designs only started selling in Japan about five years ago, and that's because it showed up in a lot of magazines around that time.

Japanese after the war weren't really able to appreciate good, modern design. After the bubble economy burst (in the early 1990s), people became a bit more design conscious, and their appreciation has been building, slowly.

*How exactly did the postwar Japanese get their ideas of how contemporary Americans were living?*

In the late 1950s, detailed images of the so-called "Levittown life," with the appliances, the big fridge full of food, the movies, and the fashions started entering Japan. The new dream was "American Casual," like in *Leave It To Beaver*. Kensuke Ishizu, the influential Japanese fashion designer behind the VAN brand, helped spread the American "Ivy" look of the '50s.

*Americans were buying into the same dreams, weren't they?*

Certainly. In 1955 General Motors did an auto show at the Waldorf-Astoria. The film for the demo was called *Designing Dreams*. This was a totally futuristic vision with cars driving on their own, and a housewife in a beautiful dress putting a recipe card into the oven and magically extracting a finished meal. According to Rick Prelinger (who founded Prelinger Archives to collect and preserve historically significant films made by corporations and nonprofits), at the time there were absolutely no women working in the kitchen and looking like this. This film

influenced the melodramas of the '50s too. Obviously, the Japanese believed it was the truth, and hoped to achieve that. For Americans, it was a bit more of a dream! (Laughs.)

*You told me earlier that it was hard to find reliable images and facts about your subject. Why is that?*

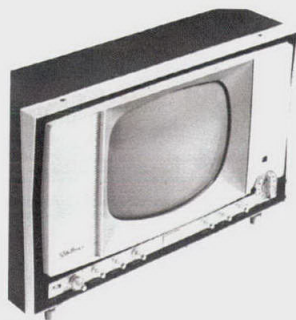
Partly because of my limited time and resources. The original sources for things like the catalog of an important exhibit curated by Donald Albright, called *American Dream*, for the Smithsonian, and a thesis about Levittown, are in the New York Public Library, or in big university libraries, and tracking down magazines and newspapers would take another year. Without these, I'm working only from secondary information.

*How do you find LIFE magazine as a source?*

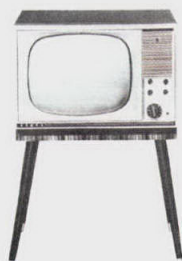
LIFE's reportage and documentary photos are good, and the ads are dreamlike. But I wanted to compare the dream to real life. I wanted to know about the gap, how much of a gap there is between the dream and reality. I've learned just a little.

*The value of your work for those in the design*





17" set  
Fujitsu Electric Co., Ltd.



14" set  
Sonyo Electric Co., Ltd.



14" set  
Tokyo Shibaura Electric Co., Ltd.



14" set  
Tokyo Shibaura Electric Co., Ltd.

IF WE HADN'T MADE AMERICA  
OUR DREAM, IF WE HAD THOUGHT  
TOGETHER ABOUT WHAT OUR  
DREAM MIGHT BE, A DIFFERENT  
JAPAN WOULD HAVE COME ABOUT.



*field is obvious, but does it have a broader importance?*

I think so. I myself believed the American dream that was illustrated through the product design. That dream became huge, and the Japanese worked really hard to achieve it. That's important. Before the war, the influences were Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe. Then the Japanese lost the war to the U.S., and they couldn't create their own dream. Why? Because they made America and the things brought in by America their dream. Independently, we couldn't create our own dream. If we hadn't made America our dream, if we had thought together about what our dream might be, a different Japan would have come about. So Japan's culture, or each Japanese, is 20% American, but based on a mistaken identification of Americans.

Now Japan has a similar relationship to (the rest of) Asia. Our products go to Asia. Our plants are relocated to Asia. And Asians are making Japan their dream,

so they may not be able to draft their own dreams. But inside, their own unique dreams may exist.

The fact is, on an individual level, it's really difficult to define your own dream. We model whatever we see. We never know what we really want. It's a huge problem for everyone.

*So the Japanese dreamed the American Dream. Are they living it now?*

I think the American Dream was realized by the Japanese in the mid-1970s, but after that weren't able to create a unique image of the future. It's the same with the United States though.

*It could be said that the daily domestic design Japanese encounter is far superior to that of the average American. Are the Japanese happy with all the great design that surrounds them now?*

The Japan of today is a land of plenty, but I don't think the people are happy with the design in their daily lives. For ordinary

Japanese, design is in the realm of the subconscious.

*Do you think we're making any progress in closing the gaps that you spoke about?*

We can learn the difference between reality and the dreams of advertising. As for progress, I think some individuals are creating their own dreams now, but very slowly. We'll never be able to completely escape the subtle influence of "manufactured" dreams. ☞