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Autonomy for Automaton?

How Masaaki Hiromura's Sign Design Frees the Japanese

BY MAGGIE KINSER HOHLE

"Trained since childhood to follow orders broadcast on loudspeakers, the Japanese today are addicted to public announcements. Hotel lobbies, department stores, and train stations reverberate with taped messages advising people not to forget things, to hand in their tickets, to be careful of this and beware of that, and to walk on the left. Nowhere in modern Japan can one get away from a recorded voice thanking you for coming, giving you information, apologizing for an inconvenience, commanding or warning you—all this accompanied by a chorus of beeps, buzzes, chirps, and gongs."

—ALEX KERR, *DOGS AND DEMONS; TALES FROM THE DARK SIDE OF MODERN JAPAN II*

The Grinch would hate modern Japan. Noise even assaults the eyes. Everywhere there is an incessant cacophony of visual noise: thousands of characters (the kanji) and almost 100 syllabic symbols (the kana) run amok, careening wildly—top to bottom, left to right, right to left—punctuated often by letters from our alphabet expressing English, French, German and more. Even the narrowest street's signs lay siege, directing, entreating, exhorting, insisting: They hover before doorways as abbreviated curtains or hang carved on wood above them; beside pharmacies they flap on gaudy plastic banners; eternally stranded outside restaurants, bars and bookstores they stand patiently, stocky and illuminated, on their short legs. Some startle, then beckon, with rotating police lights of yellow or blue. Others, narrow and adorned with competing logos, type-faces and color schemes, tenaciously climb slender buildings twelve stories high. Tough swinging steel signs like double-headed Hydras, belligerently guard strips of construction work, joined sometimes by live signbearers, uniformed men waving little flags of orange, cheerfully entreating all day long, "Watch your step!"

What of the long tradition, more familiar to Westerners, of minimal, even silent, communication among Japanese? It endures, of course, within the classic arts and the more sophisticated strata of society, but in the streets, where most of us live, it is very much overshadowed by the other. Fortunately, there is a designer—one among a new generation dismayed by the noise, noise, noise, noise—who is successfully defining a new elegance, tranquility and validity in signage throughout Japan. Since he won his first Japan Sign Design Association (JSDA) Award in 1983, Masaaki Hiromura has completed an average of eight major signage projects a year, and has garnered seven more awards. One of them (2002) was for the new National

Museum of Emerging Science and Technology, nicknamed "Miraikan," or "vessel for the future." Hiromura's system for the Museum, a series of black-and-white, back-lit signs embedded in the floor, recalls the pleasure of subtle communication.

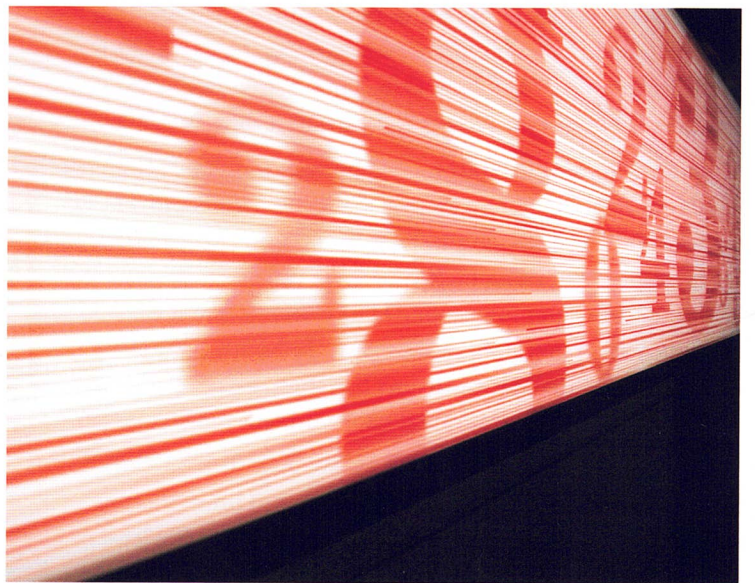
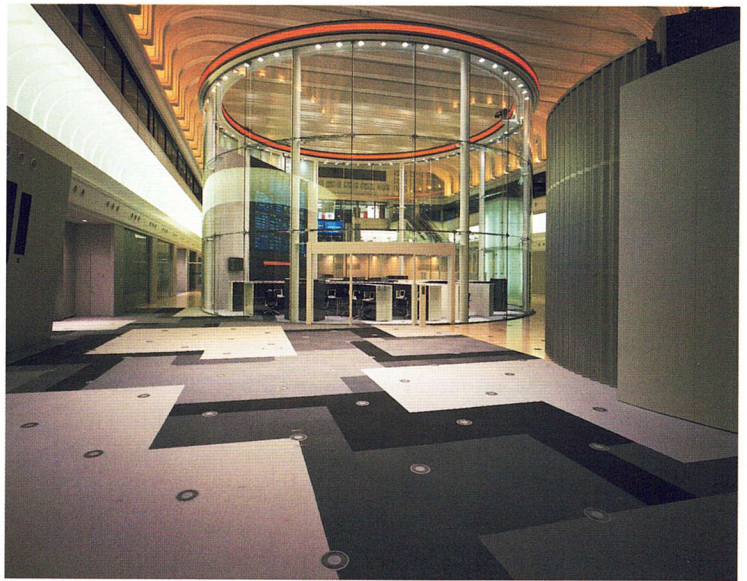
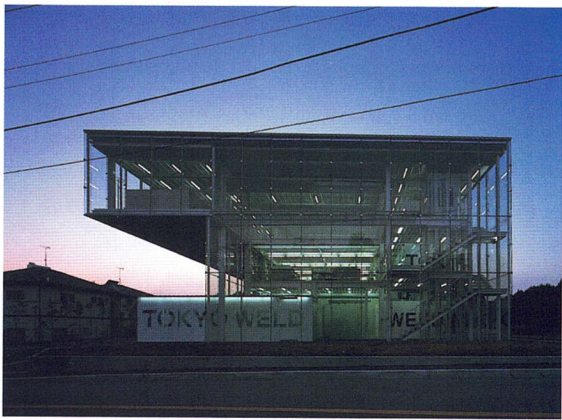
In 1997 the Prime Minister publicly declared that the Japanese "addiction" to orders resulted from the postwar educational system, which "just crams knowledge into children's heads... It doesn't allow them to decide dreams, hopes and targets by themselves." Miraikan, whose foundation is a 1995 law proposing "to make Japan a...creative nation by promoting the advancement of science and technology," is a grand government project designed to help deliver Japan from the automaton culture.

Miraikan's director is the NASDA (National Space Develop-

Captions were provided by author Maggie Kinser Hohle.

Right: "Tokyo Weld Technical Center's immaculate reputation as a developer and manufacturer of systems for measuring, image processing and packaging computer chip components is reflected in Hiromura's signage. Research rooms, necessarily shaded, double effectively as sign boards in this glass box. Sunlight enlivens the building by shifting the logo's shadows and revealing the figures of employees moving about inside. The setting sun reverses the black-and-white logo to light-and-black." Masaaki Hiromura, art direction; Masaaki Hiromura/Yutaka Maeda, designers; Riken Yamamoto, architect; Tokyo Weld, client.

"Entirely computerized dealing means the Tokyo Stock Exchange acts more as an exchange venue for the public, investors and corporate reps. Hiromura's signage, including the 'floating' floors of the cylindrical glass Market Center, balances dynamic imagery and detailed explanation. On the third level, where visitors look through a window onto the trading floor, stenciled graphics on the opposite black wall had to clearly describe the facility's structure and function." Masaaki Hiromura, art direction; Masaaki Hiromura/Yoshifumi Mizuno, designers; Yasuo Kondoh, interior architect; Tokyo Stock Exchange, client.



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ment Agency of Japan) astronaut and scientist Mamoru Mohri, a national hero in Japan and apparently one of the few individuals who escaped the postwar dead zone of education. When he met with Hiromura, they agreed to counteract the overprotective/overaggressive modern urban environment with both programming and design. Mohri suggested that the space, should emphasize the autonomy of human beings. The Museum, he said, while fundamentally about the leading role of science and technology, is ultimately still about people. Says Hiromura, "We agreed to really challenge ourselves, by completely abolishing the ordinary methods." Visitors might be lost without broadcasted or posted directions, but Noriyuk Inoue, head of the Museum's Public Relations Group, opted for tough love. He told Hiromura, "If the signs generate communication, or even if people end up walking around freely, that's OK too. We'd actually like to encourage that."

Hiromura's collaborators on Miraikan were all huge corporations, to whose representatives he had to explain the embedded signs again and again, only eventually winning their support. But when I visited Miraikan, I saw why Hiromura had told me that your average visitor isn't so easy to persuade; I couldn't even see the embedded directions for the litter of hand-lettered signs on easels. They were erected, he said, by the staff. "People complain that it's just like a *ryokan*," he explained, "too hard to figure out."

But Hiromura reminded me that a *ryokan*, a traditional Japanese inn turned into a charming maze by decades of add-ons, is enhanced by the very Japanese experience of *not* being constantly directed. "When you go to a *ryokan*, the master and mistress come out and greet you. They show your room, the baths, the restrooms. That's enough."

Miraikan's sign system, meant to quickly divert visitors' eyes upward into the soaring entranceway, open staircases, the LED globe nicknamed "The Blue Orb," and, symbolically, into space, reminds us that there is indeed such a thing as "enough."

Despite continuing complaints, Miraikan approaches Hiromura's ideal: No signs at all. "Everybody makes up stuff about why signage works," Hiromura says, "but the most effective signage is when there's a person there who says, 'welcome.' A sign only replaces direct communication. The perfect system is the one requiring the fewest number of signs." To Mohri, Hiromura even suggested that the Museum's battalion of young female guides "could exert a little extra effort: explain the sign system to visitors." Repeated visits would surely clear up any confusion.

Resigned to the necessity of visual directors, Hiromura carefully considers the viewer's line of vision and probable level of confusion, grasps absolutely the purpose of each sign, and refuses

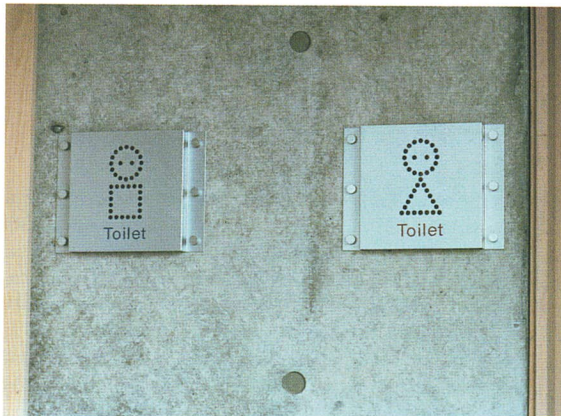
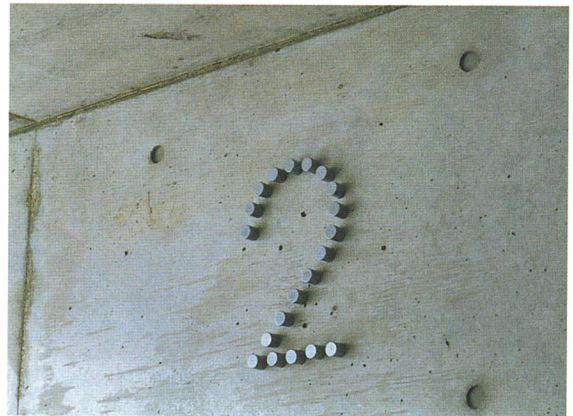
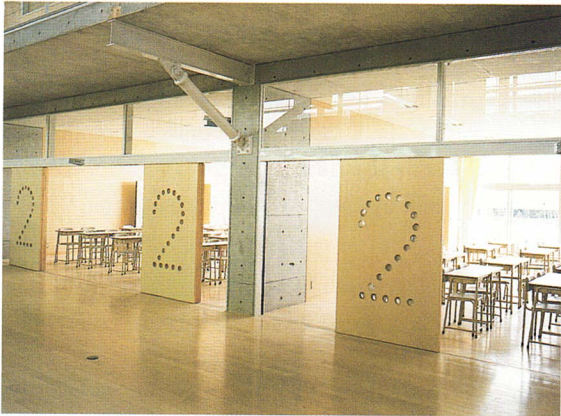
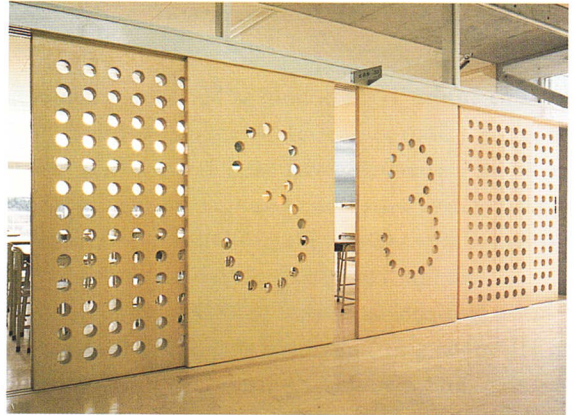
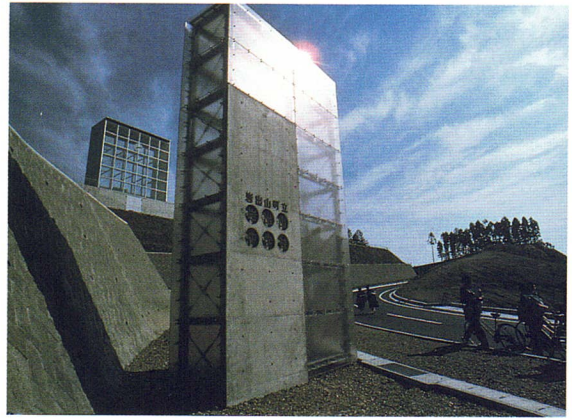
to embellish. It is his ability, of course, to define the appropriate aesthetic that will make a sign an efficient information transmitter, that makes Hiromura the master that he is.

Masaaki Hiromura is a direct creative descendent of the men who founded and shaped the occupation of graphic design in Japan right after World War II, creating the first unified graphic program for an Olympic Games and the first generation of industrial leaders—and a general public that believed that graphic design could shape, and even improve, society. Hiromura worked for ten years at the side of one of these men, Ikko Tanaka (1930–2001). Tanaka was a brilliant typographer, designer, art director and expressor of Japan to the world. Hiromura has Tanaka's sense of direct purpose and exercises the same elegant restraint and thematic control. But the world around design has changed, and Hiromura feels that graphic design, still his bread-and-butter occupation, is somehow behind the times, stuck in a two-dimensional world removed from the collaborative atmosphere of every other kind of design, physical or virtual. The problem with the once-exciting product and the once-revered poster, says Hiromura, is that they do not consider the environment. And now, especially in Japan, people are lonely for some connection to a physical environment.

Besides, the autonomy graphic designers once exercised in the dimensions of a poster is now defused by the "media people" making every job part of a larger campaign, all subject to the whims of a quickly satiated market. Today, Hiromura and others in his generation, Kenya Hara, Kaoru Kasai and Kijuro Yahagi, insist on the worth of environmental design and quiet communication, and in their work find a freedom reminiscent of the early days of Japan's graphic design.

The battles, too, seem familiar. Although transportation signage has improved steadily in readability and clarity since the Tokyo Olympics, Hiromura says the general consensus is that as long as a sign is understandable, it's good enough. "Signage," he says, "is seen as an extra bonus thrown in by the architect." Encouraged tremendously by his experiences with a few flexible architects, particularly Riken Yamamoto, Hiromura has tasted collaboration at its best, and wants to be involved in a project from the beginning; not considered, as has always been the norm, "a subcontractor, called upon at the last minute

Right: Iwadeyama Junior High School. "Hiromura encouraged the students to be creative with the physical aspects of their open-approach school by puncturing the barriers between inside and outside of the classroom, and using different dot materials and forms throughout, some 'innies,' and some 'outies.'" Masaaki Hiromura, sign direction; Masaaki Hiromura/Nobuhiko Aizawa, designers; Riken Yamamoto, architect; Fumio Enomoto/Tsutomu Kurokawa, furniture design; Akane Yamazaki, coordination; Iwadeyama Town, client.



Masaaki Hiromura

to add some graphics to a space.” Even designers are guilty, Hiromura says, of perpetrating the misunderstanding that signage, what Hiromura calls “space graphysm,” is really “just the gradual magnification of posters.”

If graphic designers hurry to develop their sense of space and materials, and train themselves in reading blueprints, Hiromura believes that signage design can develop into a full-fledged occupation before the dull urban planners commission yet more standardized pictograms, against which Hiromura will happily rail any time. “I create different signage every time, depending on the project’s theme.”

At Iwadeyama Junior High School (a Yamamoto project), Hiromura took a dot motif from the architect’s initial plan, in which doors were punctured with large holes, which Yamamoto says was a decorative surface treatment at the beginning, and applied it to the sign system. He produced a unified visual approach that was fun, completely readable and physically realized the school’s “open classroom” approach. As they worked together, Hiromura and Yamamoto abandoned the concept of separate realms, and the building acquired a rare and beautiful cohesion. Invigorated by the collaboration, Yamamoto declares, “I used to introduce decorative elements to joints and other details, but after this school I changed my style.”

The system for Yamamoto’s Saitama Prefectural University, unified by number signs, maps using perspective and varying silhouettes visible from any point, helps students verify their locations on a huge campus, where the university and junior college use identical 200 meter-long buildings that face one another and are separated by a complex of common-use facilities. To identify the classrooms from a distance, Hiromura created huge three-digit numbers that hang from the balcony ceilings. He repeated the treatment on the bookshelves and reading rooms of the library.

On Tokyo Weld, a research center for a precision machine manufacturer, also created with Yamamoto, Hiromura converted the entire building into a sign tower. “Screens” of stenciled paper are attached to the glass of the open building, serving as signs and as protection, and revealing the passage of time; as the sun shines through the logo’s apertures, its changing angle sends letters creeping across the floor. At night the box becomes a lighthouse. The building houses a research establishment performing a clean, efficient operation, and so as a sign need broadcast only this image.

Among Hiromura’s major signage commissions, including Miraikan, there are three or four government projects, which, undertaken not in the optimism of the ’60s, but in the post-bubble shadows of mountains of government scandal on lakes

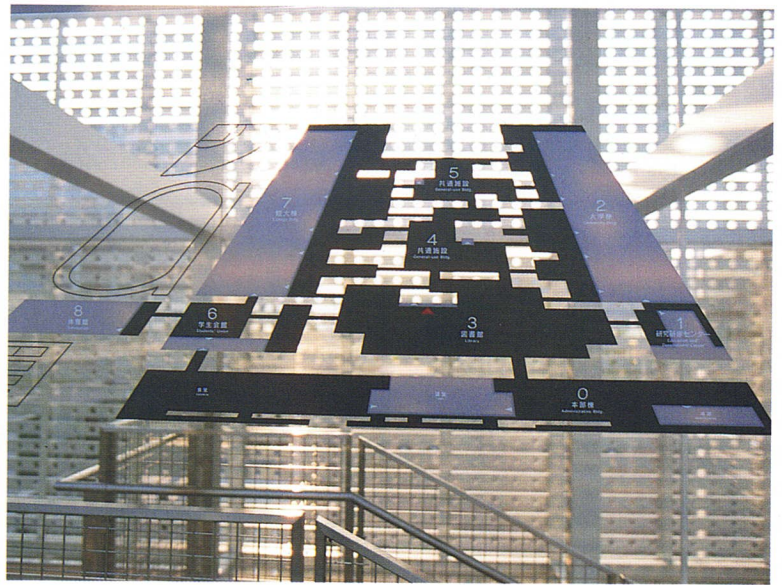
of red ink, are far more nebulous in purpose. The fact is, part of the purpose of every substantial construction project is simply construction for its own sake.

Big Heart Izumo, a cultural facility for citizens with multi-purpose hall and gallery, located in one of the most important historic and Shinto religious centers, may be one of these. Hiromura’s signage, however, created and placed with the utmost care, and developed while the building was under construction to assure proper scale, beautifully connects the past and the present. Basing his imagery on the solemn names of the various rooms, “White, Black, Brown,” etc., written in Chinese characters, oddly rare in today’s Japan, Hiromura then followed the modern lines of the architecture with an angular typeface directly opposed to the flowing lines used for ancient characters. Affixed directly to the doors, these giant characters give the visitor the sense of visiting an old-fashioned bathhouse, where great characters are printed on long split curtains serving as portals between rooms.

Whether his work on Big Heart Izumo will actually help “the historic locality continue to develop into the future,” as Hiromura wishes, only time will tell. And from a critical point of view, we can’t shoot the messenger for delivering the Japanese government’s most recent exhortation to expand the economy. On the contrary, even though the content of monumental public buildings may remain mediocre because they are not always built to fulfill a real need, the forms are extremely stimulating. In fact, in today’s Japan, the architecture and signage may themselves be the substance, the art and the culture promised to the public by these civic edifices, which are otherwise nearly void of content.

There is a Japanese phrase that expresses the essence of Zen: *Ware tada taru shiru*, “I know what is just enough.” His signage, transparent in so many senses of the word, effecting calm through quiet, non-intrusive materials and solutions like glass, lighting, colors and negative space, consistently reflects his philosophy that once we know where things are, or what they are, we don’t need to be told again. Aesthetically evoking this once-common notion of sufficiency, Hiromura tells us again and again that we can trust ourselves; we already know what is just enough. ■

Right: Saitama Prefectural University. “The campus is huge, the rooftops are used as terraces and balconies are ideal for long views. Unique perspective maps and hanging room number signs turn this would-be maze into a simple exercise in three-dimensional orientation.” Masaaki Hiromura, art direction; Masaaki Hiromura/Nobuhiko Aizawa, designers; Riken Yamamoto, architect; Yasuo Kondoh/Tsutomu Kurokawa/Toshiharu Yamanaka, furniture design; Funabashi Zenji, art work. Sign collaboration: Kotobuki Town Art, art coordination; Akane Yamazaki, coordination.



Masaaki Hiromura

This page: "Hiromura had long toyed with the idea of 'non-signage.' Tokyo's new National Museum of Emerging Science and Technology was the perfect place to install his ideal, non-intrusive indicators. 'If 1% of the effort is coming up with the idea,' he said, '99% is discussing, and explaining, to the great numbers of people involved in this kind of public project that visitors will find, understand and get used to, a new kind of signage.'" Masaaki Hiromura, art direction; Masaaki Hiromura/Yutaka Maeda, designers; Nikken Kume Joint Trust, architect; Japan Science and Technology, client.

Right: Big Heart Izumo. "The general information board, covered with a transparent sheet and lit from behind, recalls a dictionary, and immediately puts visitors in a frame of mind appropriate to study and revere their fertile culture in this historic locale. The inclined floors, meant to involve visitors in the architecture, also help differentiate the various spaces despite the regular, geometric characters." Masaaki Hiromura, art direction; Masaaki Hiromura/Yutaka Maeda, designers; Kazuhiro Kojima, Coelacanth and Associates, architect; Takaaki Nakamura, furniture design; Hiromi Hasegawa, landscape; Akane Yamazaki, coordination; Izumo City, client.

