

life & style

# What it means to be 'Made in Japan'

Architect and writer Naomi Pollock shares her favorite aspects of Japanese design

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SPECIAL TO THE JAPAN TIMES

**M**ade in Japan is a such a simple phrase, yet it instantly evokes an image of exceptional design and high-quality production. Japan today is known for creating some of the most stylish, innovative and whimsical products in the world.

Tokyo-based architect and writer Naomi Pollock spent the last two years immersed in Japanese product design, conducting hundreds of interviews and reviewing countless products. In a recent interview with The Japan Times, she talks about her new book and what she finds so exciting about product design in Japan.

**You're an established architecture critic who has helped bring Japanese architecture to the world through your reports in Architectural Record and other international publications. Why this switch to products?**

It's not actually a switch. Writing about product design is a natural extension of reporting on buildings because so many architects also create products — everything from teapots to chairs. After seeing prototypes in their offices, I began to think about writing about product design.

Initially, I had a book on architect-designed objects in mind. But when I realized the bounty of good design out there, and how little information was available in English, I quickly broadened my scope.

**Tell us about the book. What will we find inside?**

The book begins with a comprehensive introduction that reviews the history of recent Japanese product design and places contemporary work in its broader social, cultural and geographical contexts. This sets the stage for profiles of 100 new products, each of which includes beautiful color photos and a brief essay.

In these texts I explain the development of the products, and talk about the people who make and use them. There are also short biographies of the designers whose work appears in the book, including Naoto Fukasawa, Tokujin Yoshioka and Toyo Ito.

**With so many great products, how did you narrow it down to 100?**

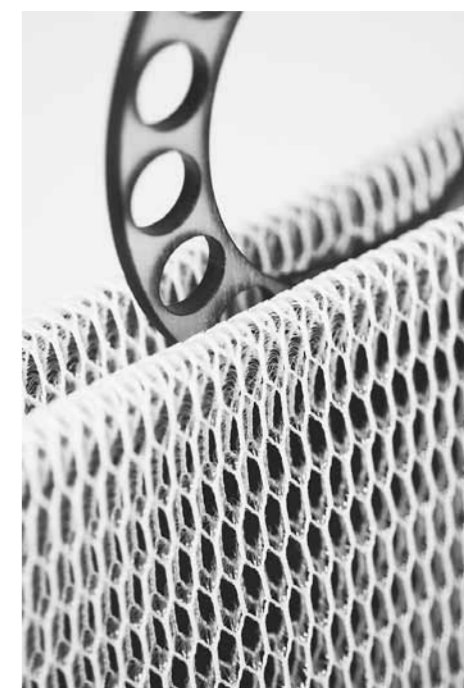
I wanted to inform the reader about contemporary Japanese lifestyle through the lens of product design, so the first criterion was whether the product had a story to tell about some aspect of Japan.

I also wanted the personality of each designer to come through in the product profile. This meant that I had to be able to speak directly to each designer.

Finally, I was looking for new work: most of the products in the book were designed within the last five years.

**Is there something unique about Japanese product design?**

Yes, definitely. In Japan, even the machine-made or mass-produced object often embodies the craftworkers' ethic of *monozukuri*. This traditional idea is



**Arresting style: Naomi Pollock (far left), with Masako Ban at the designer's Moto Azabu store Acrylic. Pollock is holding up Ban's Acrylic, Honey-Comb Mesh + Bracelet bag (detail above).**

©MASAKO BAN/ACRYLIC  
Below left: H-Concept Yasuhiro Asano's Splash umbrella stand.  
©H-CONCEPT CO., LTD.

Below right: Pollock's new book "Made in Japan." ALL PRODUCT IMAGES ON THIS PAGE ARE COURTESY OF "MADE IN JAPAN: 100 NEW PRODUCTS" BY NAOMI POLLOCK



All-round bowls by Sotaro Miyagi  
©MIYAGI DESIGN OFFICE / CHERRY TERRACE

probably the most important influence on contemporary Japanese product design.

**Monozukuri? Making things?**

Yes, but it means so much more. It is the commitment by the designer and manufacturer to do their best possible work by refining and redesigning repeatedly.

A good example is Splash, an umbrella holder designed by Yasuhiro Asano that resembles a raindrop hitting the pavement. It started as a cast-aluminum container with a tapered shape, but after numerous revisions, it came to market in a completely different material — brightly colored rubber that will cheer up even the darkest of entry foyers.

**How does the lack of space in Japan impact design here?**

It's a huge influence. Because living space is tight, there is demand for compact objects and household goods that are easy to store, like Allround Bowls, a set of kitchen accouterments designed by Sotaro Miyagi to nest neatly one inside the other. The lack of space has also yielded miniature versions of everything from cars to kettles.

**Any other traits that define Japanese design?**

Portability is another area in which Japanese designers excel. Japan has a long history of building homes with multipurpose spaces that can be adapted to the season or function by moving furnishings around. Even today, many

Japanese consumers prefer products that are easy to move and store when not in use, whether the product is a humidifier or a dish-drainer.

**Can you relate something special you learned in the course of your research?**

One observation that made a deep impression on me was that a wide range of designers coexist amiably in Japan. At one end of the spectrum are large companies with in-house design capability. At the other end are the solo practitioners I call "cottage industrialists." These tiny companies design, produce (or outsource production to the many small manufacturers that still exist in Japan) and often market their goods on their own, either through small shops or online.

A good example is Masako Ban, a designer who creates jewelry and handbags from locally made industrial materials not usually associated with fashion goods, including acrylic and metal mesh.

**After writing this book, how would you define "good design"?**

There are lots of characteristics of good design. Among them, an object should function well and look good. But many designers in Japan seem to be after something more.

A constant refrain that I heard was their desire to make sustainable goods. For some this means using environmentally friendly materials and manufacturing methods. For others it means making objects that will not



be cast aside or, worse yet, discarded. In Japan, a country with a seemingly insatiable appetite for the new, this goal is particularly challenging since it entails overriding the deeply entrenched habit of replacing something with an updated version even if the old one is still usable. But if someone truly loves an object and enjoys using it, they will keep it for a long time, perhaps even their entire life. This is not only the true meaning of sustainability, it is also an essential quality of good design.



Naomi Pollock will be speaking about the making of her book to the Society of Writers, Editors and Translators at 3 p.m., Sun. Oct. 21, at the Wesley Center, 6-10-7 Minami Aoyama, Minato-ku, Tokyo. For more information, visit [www.swet.jp](http://www.swet.jp). Her book, "Made in Japan: 100 New Products," was released Sept. 18, and is available from online booksellers or the publisher, Merrell Publishing, London and New York.

# Second homes may be cheap, but they are often in disrepair

Finding a retreat from the city, whether it be in the woods, right by the beach or hidden in the countryside, is not hard — it's finding one that doesn't need a lot of renovation that is

## HOMETRUTHS

Philip Brasor and Masako Tsubuku

**Atami**  
The ad said the property was 2 km from Ajiro Station on the Ito Line, but it was difficult to tell how far we were traveling in the agent's car. Most of the trip was up a steep, winding road into the hills above Atami on the Izu Peninsula, an area developed in the 1970s by the Tokyo Corporation for *bessō*, or second homes. The realtor talked the whole way. "The songwriter Yu Aki had a large house over there," he said, making a hairpin turn. "But since he died his family has had a hard time selling it, even at ¥40 million."

Most of the homes didn't look that grand, especially the one we were interested in: two stories, 78 sq. meters of floor area on 247 sq. meters of land. The neighborhood looked like a typical Japanese housing development except for a magnificent view of the Pacific to the east. The house was built in 1969 and had been bought by a different real estate company from a man whose main home was in Tokyo's central (and chic) Shibuya district. The company was renovating it, but not today. We stepped over piles of lumber to inspect the interior, which looked as if it hadn't been occupied for years.

The price, including the renovation, was ¥8.5 million, which was reasonable, but as with many *bessō* communities there were no amenities in the area — no stores, gas stations or even vending machines. And the drive down that hill wasn't for the faint-hearted. We asked about the management fee and were surprised to learn it was only ¥20,000 a year. Tokyo took care of things such as garbage collection and road maintenance. In more exclusive *bessō* areas, like Karuizawa in Nakano Prefecture or the five lakes region near Mount Fuji, management fees are ¥60,000-70,000 a year.

Then again, Atami levied its own special *bessō* tax: ¥650 per sq. meter of floor area a year, which a resident could get around by registering the property as their main domicile and paid *jūminzei* (local taxes).

Some of the houses were clearly vacant even though it was the middle of summer vacation, and some lots just had sheds on them, "structures" erected for property tax purposes. If land is zoned for residences and remains empty, it is taxed at a higher rate. This is supposed to discourage speculation, and the agent told us that people bought land here in the '80s as investments, expecting the value to increase, but prices plummeted instead. They hung on in the hope the price would go up, but it never did and never will. Even on the other side of the hill, a much higher-class development called Minami Atami, properties that sold for ¥200 million in 1990 are now worth less than half that amount.

**Onjuku**

Despite the suit and tie, the agent who showed us around Onjuku, a resort town on the eastern coast of Chiba Prefecture, was obviously a surfer first and a real-estate man second. He said he moved to Onjuku from his landlocked hometown in Gunma Prefecture for the waves, and then married a local girl. We were there to look at resort condominiums, most of which were built in the early '90s. They were in buildings of five to 15 stories and faced the beach, which described a gentle inward arc.

"Most people who buy a vacation condo near the shore want to be on a higher floor because of the view," he said. "But the higher the floor, the stronger the breeze. They have coffee on the terrace for the first week and then never go out again." The breeze is also fraught with salt, which does more damage the higher you go. After a few years, window sashes and railings start to corrode.

We looked at three units, all of which got lots of sun but looked merely functional: a



Escaping the city (clockwise from above): A second home in a picturesque wooded area of Nikko, Tochigi Prefecture; a block of apartments on the beach at Onjuku in Chiba Prefecture; and a home facing the sea in Atami on the Izu Peninsula. PHILIP BRASOR



place to sleep, a place to bathe, a place to cook. Resort condos, the agent explained, were truly for weekenders. Owners could live in them, close to the beach, and they weren't expected to become members of the community with all the attendant social obligations. That's why *bessō*, wherever they're built, tend to be isolated in their own communities, away from the locals.

The apartments were in the ¥5-¥10 million range for about 50 sq. meters, but instead of the yearly management fee you usually pay for *bessō*, resort condos charge a monthly management fee, in addition to a monthly repair fee. Those in Onjuku totaled on average about ¥30,000 a month. The agent said prices had remained flat for seven years after falling for more than a decade. Sales were good now. Onjuku is gaining a reputation as a surfing alternative to Shonan in Kanagawa Prefecture.

Onjuku is lucky. The resort condo was

born in 1987 when the Diet passed the Law for the Development of Comprehensive Resort Areas, making leisure facilities a national project. Local governments and developers were given incentives and property laws were relaxed. Hundreds of thousands of resort condos were built, especially in the mountains because there was a ski boom at the time.

The boom didn't last. Yuzawa, in Niigata Prefecture, the home of the Naeba ski resort, erected 58 buildings comprising 15,000 units, most of which are now empty. The average price was about ¥14 million for 30 sq. meters when they went on sale. You can now have one for as little as ¥40,000, but you have to assume the accumulated unpaid management fees and property taxes, which can run into millions.

And it isn't just ski resorts. There are condos on the Izu Peninsula coast in Shizuoka Prefecture that originally cost

between ¥40-¥50 million and are now going for a few hundred thousand yen plus assumption of the much larger management debt. It requires money to maintain hot-spring baths, swimming pools and elevators.

**Nikko**

The realtor worked out of a prefabricated shack near the Daiya River, from where he also administered fishing licenses. He drove a big Range Rover that had no problem going uphill through the snow, which in mid-April remained on the ground in abundance.

The *bessō* we looked at was a one-story house in a wooded area developed and managed by the Tobu Corporation, which owns and operates a train line that connects the tourist enclave of Nikko in Tochigi Prefecture to Tokyo. The house was well laid out, but even though it was only 10 years old the interior was in disrepair. Winters are

A second home means extra utility bills, some of which can be extra costly

*Bessō* developments are like regular housing developments in that they usually come with infrastructure such as sewage and gas lines; water supplies, too, though that tends to be more of a problem. Local governments have to build large-scale water-delivery systems to accommodate a part-time population, so they usually charge more for water to people who live in *bessō* communities.

In Tsumagoi, Nagano Prefecture, the basic monthly water fee for permanent residents is ¥500, while for *bessō* residents it's ¥1,400.

The local government in Hakone, Shizuoka Prefecture, also charges *bessō* residents more for water, but it doesn't charge them a basic fee during months when they use no water at all.

One *bessō* community in Hokuto, Yamanashi Prefecture, sued the local authorities over its inflated water bill, saying it was unfair, and the case went all the way to the Supreme Court, which ruled in favor of the *bessō* owners.

harsh there, and the laminate floors and kitchen fixtures needed refurbishing. The owners were an elderly couple from Tokyo for whom the trip up had become a burden.

We heard a similar story from a different realtor who showed us another *bessō*. He explained that most of the owners in the hills were people from the city who had a little extra money and bought second homes simply because they could. After a number of years the appeal wore off because getting to Nikko is such a chore. Meanwhile, they pay fees and taxes but probably aren't maintaining the property. There were dozens of *bessō* for sale in the area. Some had been on the market for more than a year.

Philip Brasor and Masako Tsubuku blog about Japanese housing at [www.catforehead.wordpress.com](http://www.catforehead.wordpress.com).