

MUJI

無印良品









MUJI

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Not “This is what I want” but “This will do”

Masaaki KANAI | Managing Director of MUJI

It gives me great pleasure to meditate on the publication of a book about MUJI for a wide, global readership.

MUJI was founded in Japan in 1980 as an antithesis to the habits of consumer society at that time. On one hand, foreign-made luxury brands were gaining popularity within an economic environment of ever-rising prosperity. On the other, poor-quality, low-priced goods were appearing on the market, and had a polarizing effect on consumption patterns. MUJI was conceived as a critique of this prevailing condition, with the purpose of restoring a vision of products that are actually useful for the customer and maintain an ideal of the proper balance between living and the objects that make it possible. The concept was born of the intersection of two distinct stances: no brand (mujirushi) and the value of good items (ryohin).

MUJI began with three steps: selecting the materials, scrutinizing the processes, and simplifying the packaging. MUJI’s concept of emphasizing the intrinsic appeal of an object through rationalization and meticulous elimination of excess is closely connected to the traditionally Japanese aesthetic of ‘su’—meaning plain or unadorned—the idea that simplicity is not merely modest or frugal, but could possibly be more appealing than luxury. By eliminating from products the elements of individual personality and partiality to taste, two things that people were obsessed with at the time, MUJI left room for the individuality of the customers themselves, enabling them to make choices on how they would use the products. Original slogans such as “Lower Priced For a Reason” and “MUJI for Each and Every Person” convey the powerful concept of MUJI that arose from these circumstances, and continue to this day.

Since the very beginning, MUJI has flourished from the support of the many people who identify with its concepts and the products born from those concepts. Clearly, MUJI’s development sprang from its pursuit for items that moderate excess and make users feel the beauty and pride in living a simple and modest life. MUJI has not traveled this path alone, however; through continuous communication with our customers, we have walked alongside each and every one of them.

Our products, which we think of as “mature” or “ripened”, are the fruits of exchanges with our customers over many years. MUJI’s unique products have also evolved through collaboration with designers from around the world. In the beginning, MUJI products arose from conventional products whose materials were reassessed and whose processes were simplified, rather than from a complete redesign. But in the pursuit for ideal products, we have become more aware that



Men's 90 Degree Angle Stripe Socks, 2006.

With their 90-degree heels,
these socks fit perfectly.

instead of 'no design', our products should display extremely sophisticated design that fits naturally into our lives. Designers with outstanding international reputations have granted MUJI the wisdom and insight necessary to produce items like those introduced in this book that are both uniquely simple and useful. In addition, we now cooperate with important manufacturers that boast both history and tradition, such as Thonet. MUJI does not honor the name of the designer of each product we release to the world. This may be why we have been able to naturally establish a mutual understanding of essential ideas with gifted individuals, which I believe result in authentic work.

Looking at the world today, I can clearly see that we are moving toward a time of momentous changes. In the global economy, developed countries have decreased their cruising speed, and in developing nations we see quick progress and expansion. There are plans for new and advanced electricity-centered energy use, and projects promoting the use of renewable resources and more ecologically sensible use of all resources. There is a global awareness and acknowledgement that we need to live reasonably if we are to have a future.

From the beginning, MUJI has held a particular viewpoint on the future of global consumerism, and our vision will not change. Our goals are to suppress extravagant appetites, as expressed in "This is what I want," positing instead a value system in which modest living, expressed as "This will do." This desire for moderation is something to be proud of. We hope to share our way of thinking with as many people around the world as we can.

MUJI carries several thousand products in categories supporting the core areas of life: clothing, household goods, and food. Last year we established a research lab called, "The Laboratory of Superior Items for Living" to communicate with customers through MUJI stores and the MUJI website, to develop products and promote a way of living that is more comfortable, because it is ultimately more sustainable. Our identity is shaped through a continuous assessment of both newly developed and existing products, as expressed by our motto, "Repeat the Origin, Repeat the Future." A residential project called MUJI HOUSE has also been making progress in recent years, and, in some parts of Japan, groups of these houses are beginning to develop into small neighborhoods.

The contents of this book are a curated document of MUJI's activities. The photographs used are those that have been produced for advertising and PR, and the text, written by members of MUJI's advisory board, uses the same words



Remarkable umbrella, 2006.

A personal marker in the hole of the handle turns an ordinary umbrella into my umbrella.

we use naturally in discussions about the vision we have for MUJI. The spirit behind these processes is faithfully represented by the words in this book.

For its thirtieth anniversary, MUJI would like to expand further afield, and not merely in market reach. There are MUJI stores in 18 countries and territories in Europe, Asia, and North America. Our hope is that we will one day be of help to people in many more countries, a resource at their fingertips, much like the water that we all need.

Not "This is what I want" but "This will do" | Masaaki KANAI

MUJI is good for you

Jasper MORRISON | Product Designer

My father was in the advertising business, and one of his clients was the Irish Brewery, Guinness. When I was about eighteen years old, before I went to design school, he arranged a job for me at the London brewery. My job was to design Guinness products for the African market, where it was believed that the beer had the magical power to improve the manhood of anyone who could afford it. The advertising slogan for the company at that time was “Guinness is good for you,” and in fact it had been proved by doctors that Guinness was good for you, so they started to give it to the patients in hospitals. When MUJI asked me to write something about the company I remembered this phrase because there seemed to be some parallels between the beer company’s outrageous claim, which turned out to be an honest one, and MUJI. Can a company be good for you? I think so.

In a world where everything is marketed and calculated to be a best seller (even if very few succeed) it is surprising to find a company which takes an opposite approach with the products they offer. Stripping things down, reducing form and colour and denying them the primary role which they usually have would seem like a sure way to lose sales. Such a ‘philosophy’ could never have been developed in the west, where to sell anything you have to shout louder than your neighbour, and where the marketing department controls everything, including the president. So it’s no surprise to find that this company’s origin is Japan, a country with the strongest tradition of sensibilities in aesthetics and daily life.

There are critics who would argue that the MUJI concept is just another marketing theme, exploiting a niche in the market for those who may be tired of all the other marketing themes. This may be true if you think of the glass of water being half-empty, but to the one who sees it half-full, MUJI is genuine. If you take away MUJI there is a big hole which nothing else can fill. If the MUJI concept is just another marketing theme then how come there are no others copying it as they do every other theme which has originality?

As a public company there’s no question of MUJI operating like a charity, and yet for the consumer there’s an impression of generosity: not just economic, but also conceptual. A typical MUJI product has just a small bit of extra thought which aims to be helpful to the customer, like the marker pen which is wider at one end than the other, signalling clearly and simply the thickness of the marker stroke at each end, or the towel with a detail which divides the whole into smaller squares which allows it to be cut up into floor cloths when it’s useful life as a towel is up. These are just two examples. Other MUJI products may express their concepts less

visibly, and yet in use, over time, show another kind of generosity, the type which comes from doing a job well for a long time without complaint.

So how can MUJI be good for you? Generally speaking, things are not good for us; too many or too valuable and we are corrupted. But, we all need some things (even Gandhi had a pair of spectacles, some sandals, a bowl, a dish and a pocket watch) and to some extent we are defined by our choices of those things. We may reveal to others in our choice of things that we have good taste or bad taste, expensive taste, cheap taste, modest taste, flashy taste, snobbish taste or no taste at all. Between the moment of choosing and paying for something and the day we no longer have a need for it, there are certain exchanges between the thing and us. The service provided by the thing on the one hand and how we feel about being its owner on the other hand. For some, owning a Ferrari may be the most important thing in life, but is owning something which only a few others can afford good for you? I don’t think so.

There is an English importer of wine which has been selling Bordeaux wine in England for more than 300 years, and besides all the expensive wines that they offer, there’s one which they call “Good Ordinary Bordeaux,” which costs much less than the others but which is fine to drink as an everyday wine. Similarly, the MUJI concept is to make things as well and as cleverly as possible at a reasonable price, for the thing to be ‘enough’ in the best sense of the word, and this kind of ‘enough’ is good for you because it removes status from the product/consumer equation and replaces it with satisfaction. The kind of satisfaction that you have when the money you exchange for the thing is in good proportion with the value which you receive from the thing, and the thing itself is good at being itself without any pretension of being anything more special.



Muji: Reinventing the Future

John C JAY | Creative Director

For 30 years, MUJI has defied the conventions of product design and marketing. The founding visionaries who saw a future for everyday products by reducing, rather than increasing, their allure, helped to redefine consumer expectations through the refined lens of Japanese culture.

What is remarkable about the MUJI success story is the longevity and breadth of its philosophy as a business model. This modesty survives today despite serious growth issues as it transitioned into the 21st century. From 1999 to 2001, MUJI was on a downward spiral, losing money for the first time in its history, shaking the self-confidence of its creators and loyalists.

Growth and change will challenge the future of any long lasting brand and how a brand evolves is not for the faint of heart or those who fear new ideas. The ability to initiate risk is the mark of any great leader but MUJI had to rediscover its *raison d'être* in order to move forward.

No living brand can afford to stand still. Culture, consumers, investors and competition will constantly challenge you and if you do not strategically reinvent yourself, the competitive landscape will force change upon you. It is romantic for designers to think that something they created can be relevant forever, but history usually proves other-wise. In our lifetime, there are singular products that can stand the test of time and be considered quintessential. However, MUJI is more than a single item and function; it is a vast collection of ideas based upon a single theme of no branding. The challenge is not simply to exist but to grow in relevance...to continuously lead and be a brand of the future. No degree of philosophical posturing, art school naïveté, intellectual voodoo or hiding your head in the sand can ever take away the truth; evolution and change is inevitable...even for MUJI.

The great irony is of course that the “no brand” idea has spawned a very successful global brand, which remains the darling of the design elite. But the design elite alone cannot sustain its future. Today, much to the chagrin of the purists, Muji advertises on the TV in Japan, sells globally on the internet, while increasing its retail promotions as new doors open in New York. No logo is no longer enough.

The MUJI initiated 30 years ago existed in a vastly different world. It was born on an island. The era was pre-internet, pre-twitter, pre-cynicism, pre-bailout and pre-Uniqlo as we know it today. In 1980, the brand started with 40 products ranging from food to sundry items, from canned salmon to toilet paper. Today, approximately 7000 items bear the no-logo style of MUJI. The challenge is not simply the great number of products in its inventory, but how a growing brand can stay true



The recycled paper notebook is a MUJI staple. The cover is plain, the pages non-directional.

A do-it-yourself planner.
You can start anytime.

to its roots.

MUJI's growth in the United States is an exciting moment for the brand... not simply for the legions of old fans and new consumers but for what this challenge can bring to the longevity and evolution of MUJI's legacy and future. The MUJI-brand clearly is at a crossroad. The New York expansion is challenging but potentially rewarding; this is a city that explodes with creativity through the conflict and power of cultural and economic diversity. To survive in New York, you cannot be meek: the city demands a personal point of view. Here, the real elite are the young and the restless. The city offers the tension that all creative people live for and nothing is as invigorating or inspiring than the chance to fail. For MUJI, the craziness of New York is the perfect kitchen for experimentation and connection to a new generation.

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing MUJI in America is all about price and the important balance of quality and cost. Growth brings the spotlight on MUJI's pricing at a time when Americans are wrestling with the concept of the "new normal." What is a contemporary consumer's threshold for spending for thoughtful design and what is the relationship between value and values? How are the higher prices for MUJI products in the U.S. affecting the consumer's relationship to the brand?

Global brands today need to be proactive; they have to be engaged with society and consumers through their management and advocates. Social media has increased the stakes of brand integrity. Young consumers demand transparency in order to measure a brand's actions versus words, and the dialogue is a dynamic two-way conversation which is immediately global. This is especially evident in areas of social responsibility for any corporation. To propose MUJI as an environmentally friendly company in the early 80's is quite different from the scrutiny and standards of sustainability today in the open access world we live in.

Relevance of any brand depends on culture and the evolution of society. How far can the MUJI brand stretch? The legacy of MUJI will rest on its ability to live up to its founding values while finding new consumers to grow not just in sales but in quality, principles and ideas. MUJI has the opportunity to fearlessly lead a new generation to a higher ground through, not despite, consumerism and design.

MUJI began this 30 year journey by trusting the intelligence of its consumer. That trust will always serve them well.

Happy birthday, MUJI...the future is yours.



Meeting MUJI inspires optimism.

Bruce MAU | Designer

In their honest approach we discover an opening — a way to live with modesty and clarity in the spirit of beauty and intelligence. MUJI began as an idea, and has been exploring and developing this way for 30 years.

As a company, MUJI got it right. They understood that their culture was a design project, and the design of their founding idea would design everything else they would do, including their products.

Since the beginning, they have not only believed in their idea, but also acted on their belief in the holistic possibility of design — a generous practice that connects simplicity and beauty with the intelligent efficiency of material, energy and resources. This approach to the culture of design is not only aligned with the smartest business practice and lowest cost, but also with ecology and nature.

It has been this way since the start. They applied their holistic approach, the MUJI idea, to everything they do, from the embedded intelligence and value in the products themselves, to their elegant and generous approach to communication. It all begins with simple dignity in the idea that the citizen — defined not merely as a consumer — is intelligent and empowered, and deserving of our best.

You may enter MUJI because you support their progressive mandate, or their environmental intelligence. However, you will return to MUJI again and again because you discover that everything they provide is delightful. That's the true genius of MUJI. They embed intelligence in desire. They make smart things sexy. MUJI shows us a better way by demonstrating a new form of exuberant restraint. Advanced simplicity. Simple genius.

By creating a world in this new way, MUJI has been rewarded with a rare kind of loyalty. Because they have quietly created this new way of being in the world, they have been embraced. From 40 to over 6500 products, MUJI has expanded their offering — always true to their idea. They continue to create more and more in this new spirit, building a world of possibility. Not by perpetuating or encouraging a cycle of consumption and waste but, rather, by encouraging a kind of consumption that is sensitive to the act of consumption itself. MUJI allows us to become aware of our own behavior, without judgment, in a way that improves our lives, that demonstrates possibility, and that adds elegance and beauty.

MUJI gives us a glimpse into a world where consumption doesn't equate with destruction, nor pleasure with guilt. It's fashionable to talk about how we can make things smarter but still beautiful, sexy but still environmentally responsible, but MUJI has actually done it. The power of MUJI lies in the fact that you need not know about what lies at the heart of their philosophy. Their products connect to our deepest needs, and by simply choosing to participate in their world we make ours a better place. That MUJI not only exists, but continues to thrive and grow ought to inspire optimism in anyone.



Pine 5 shelf wide unit, 2008.

A shelf unit of pure pine with distinct knots and grain and minimal coating.

A testament to the power and importance of the founding idea is this simple fact: even after 30 years, MUJI is still a pioneer. Not an anti-brand, but a non-brand: an open space in the public imagination, a place where I can live my life as I imagine it. I can define my world in a way that is not dominated by the cultural signal of others. I can hear myself think. I can live free. In a world dominated by domination, this idea is so unique, so unorthodox, that we still have no language for it. MUJI exists in a category all on its own.

Perhaps MUJI is a verb: I love to MUJI.



家の話をしよう

無印良品

住まいをつくる方法は誰も教えてくれませんが、学校でも習いません。上の世代から教わることもあるかもしれませんが、必ずしも現在の私たちの状況には当てはまりません。それはなぜでしょうか。わずか五十年の間に日本人の住まい方が大きく変わってきたからです。経済成長とともに、都市化が進み、地価が高騰し、住宅は集合し高層化していきました。家族の形も変化し、近所やコミュニティのあり方もすっかり変わりました。

一方で住宅はとも高価な買い物になり、融資を受けて土地や家を買うことには大きな勇気と決断が必要です。一戸建て住宅は素敵です。新築マンションも快適そうですが、もう少し合理的な住まいの作り方はないのでしょうか。

これから日本の人口は減りはじめます。住宅の需給バランスにも変化が生じるはず。二〇〇七年の無印良品が提供する話題はリノベーション、つまり建築のリサイクルで、自分にぴったりの住まいをつくる方法です。もともと本音で家に向き合い、型にはまった間取りや、家をステイタスとする堅苦しさから、本気で抜け出してはどうでしょうか。

例えば、新品のマンションを手に入れるという発想を切り替えただけで、可能性は格段に広がります。ヨーロッパの人々は新たなビルを競うように建てるのではなく、古い建物の中身を、自分たちの暮らしに合わせて改装して用います。長く使える建物の骨格を「スケルトン」と呼び、内側のインテリアを「インフィル」と呼びますが、ヨーロッパの人々はスケルトンを大事に再利用し、インフィルを自在に作り替えて生活空間を仕上げていくのです。

長く使う建築は五十年を過ぎたあたりで、ようやく評価が定まってくるという見方があります。日本は一九八〇年から九〇年代に住宅のための建築がたくさんつくられました。つまり「スケルトン」が数多く供給されたわけです。これらは現在「中古物件」と呼ばれていますが、それらの価値をきちんと見極めて利用すれば、望ましい住まいを安価に入手することができます。

イメージしてみてください。ご自身の住まいの理想を。ある人は部屋の真ん中にグランドピアノを据えて、防音壁を巡らした室内で思い切り演奏をして暮らしたいと考えるかもしれません。またある人は、キッチンを中心とした広いワンルームに、お客を呼んで料理を作り、手軽にパーティを楽しめる暮らしを想像するかもしれません。またある人は、日当たりのいい場所に、大きな風呂を据え、のんびりと手足をのばす安らぎを手に入れたいと考えるかもしれません。さらには、部屋中の壁という壁を書庫にして、大好きな蔵書に囲まれて過ごす時間をイメージするかもしれません。そういう、自分自身の住まいを手に入れる方法が目の前にあるのです。まずはよくある間取りを頭の中から取り払い、自分の環境を自分の意志で編集していく積極性を持ちましょう。

旅行でも、団体ツアーを卒業して、自分でチケットを買い、行きたいところを自由に闊歩するプランを実行する人が増えています。住まいも同じこと。計画途上のマンションを購入するよりも、時間を経たずマンションは、環境をじっくり吟味できます。樹木も育ち、建物にも程よい風情が生まれています。床や壁をすべて取り払って、ゼロに戻すのは少しばかり覚悟のことかもしれません。しかしそこに自分たち独自の暮らしの構想が生まれるのです。床を張り替え、壁の素材を考え、照明の質を見定める。暮らしにあった台所を選び、水道の蛇口の使い心地を確認していく。一脚の椅子や、一枚のタオルに気を通わせることで、住まいは自分たちの生き方にここちよく寄り添ってくださいます。

無印良品は合理的な住まいを考え、それを自在に編集していくお手伝いをします。基本は七〇〇〇アイテムにわたる製品を通じてですが、時宜に応じて住まいづくりのアイデアをお届けしていきます。近日常行の本「家」の話をしよう」はその一環。家に向き合う無印良品と本音で話をしてみませんか。



水のようにいたい

無印良品



TAKUMI
TRANSLATION
Artisan Language Transmission
for the Creative Fields