

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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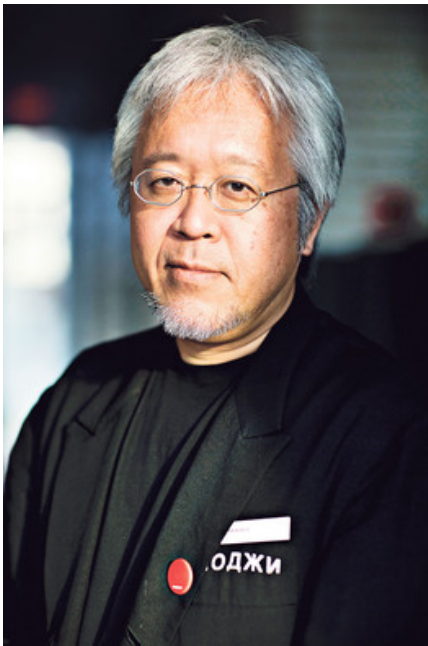
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20 ODD QUESTIONS

## Kenya Hara

The man behind Muji on his vision for hotels, house slippers and homes (human and canine)

Dec. 14, 2012 4:52 p.m. ET



Kenya Hara IMPRINT VENTURE LAB

**TOKYO-BASED** Kenya Hara may be Japan's most internationally famous, and humble, designer. Artistic director of the cult Japanese housewares brand Muji since 2001, Mr. Hara has curated numerous international exhibits and designed the opening and closing ceremonies of the 1998 Nagano Winter Olympics. He runs the Hara Design Institute (a "design think tank"), and is a professor of the science of design at Tokyo's Musashino Art University. A frequent traveler and lecturer, Mr. Hara celebrates well-made quotidian objects, and frequently explores what he calls "the importance of emptiness" and the many layers of human perception. In his 2007 exhibit "Tokyo Fiber: Senseware," he used cutting-edge textiles to highlight the interaction between clothing and the body.

This month, at the Design Satellite of Design Miami (an offshoot of Art Basel), Mr. Hara unveiled his latest project, Architecture for Dogs, for which he

invited a dozen architects to build innovative structures for canines. (For their human owners, he created a website with free, downloadable blueprints of the designs:

[architecturefordogs.com](http://architecturefordogs.com).) Next March, Mr. Hara will debut his contribution to the Tokyo exhibition "House Vision," a showcase of the various components—from medicine to home electronics—that coalesce in Japanese homes. Mr. Hara, 54, designed his own house with his wife, Yumiko. They have one son, Yusuke, a developmental biologist specializing in fruit flies.

**Airplanes** are really good for original writing. I write assigned essays, drafts of design theses, text for exhibitions, answers to interviews and everything else on my MacBook Air on the plane.

**For my future travels**, I'd like to go around Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and Myanmar. I want to take a closer look at the heart of Asia.

**My personal style** involves doing as little as possible and simply cleaning up.

**I wish people** would better appreciate design culture and histories, and use them as a resource. For example, at the time of the Meiji Restoration [1868-1912], the Japanese institutionalized tradition and aesthetics. It would be good to bring back those practices again when thinking about the future home.



大宮  
OMIYA  
BONSAI

Poster for Omiya Bonsai, designed by the Hara Design Institute. TAKASHI SEKIGUCHI



Lime Perrier F. MARTIN RAMIN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



Muji slippers F. MARTIN RAMIN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

**The best gift** I've ever given was a risqué drawing I made and sent to a friend. It was a fantastic drawing called "The Red Face." In high school I was really into the Vienna School of Fantastic Realism: Fuchs, Hausner, Hundertwasser.

**My biggest mistake** is having never lived abroad.

**My wife and I designed** our home together. She's a die-hard fan of Takarazuka, an all-female Broadway-like theater revue, so her tendencies are a far cry from my own "minimalist" perspective. For example, the tissue boxes in our house have lace covers.

**In my fridge,** you'll find Lime Perrier.

**My favorite Muji object** is house slippers. Only in a country where you must take your shoes off at the foyer could something like that have evolved.

**The most overrated concept** in architecture and design is "newness."

**My workplace** is spare. My desk takes a page from Jean Nouvel's concept of "less" and is very minimal. I can't listen to music while working.

**One way to develop** your capacity for emptiness and to awaken your senses is to look at well-made things. See as many places for the first time as you can. Eat unknown delicacies.

**If I weren't a designer,** I'd be an oceanographer.

**My favorite architect** is Peter Zumthor. I love his Saint

Benedict Chapel in Sumvitg, Switzerland, and his hotel Therme Vals in Vals, Switzerland.

**I especially admire** the sculptor Isamu Noguchi. I admire his Akari lighting technology and his sculptures made of a single length of granite.



Mr. Hara's plywood doghouse HIROSHI YODA

**I collect** classical Asian art, particularly from the Chinese Song Dynasty, and anything between the Muromachi and Momoyama eras in Japan.

**If I could design** a structure for anyone anywhere, it would be a resort hotel for this "new nomad" breed of hard workers, where they can work and relax all at once. I'd start with a large arboretum and place the occasional high-tech cottage nearby, and I'd build it in Indonesia. On an island near the equator would be nice.

**I designed architecture for dogs** to recapture our collective sense of smell and tactility from a dog's point of view. Ultimately this is not about pets, but

how we perceive things. I might work on architecture for sleep or swimming, which would give us new ideas about the subconscious and about movement.

*—Edited from an interview by Jackie Cooperman*

