

デザインの
仮説と仮設
廣村正彰十

Prototyping and Proposition
Masaaki Hiromura +

Masaaki Hiromura +

Architectural spaces are designed by predicting the “addition” (+) of human behavior and environmental changes to their basic design. Masaaki Hiromura gives meaning to spaces through design and impresses upon our consciousness.

Hiromura says: “Design is discovering a new consciousness within the unconscious flow that is daily life and the society within which we live. It is about creating compassion and attachment through people’s interactions with design in their daily living and work environments.

Design also exists to accelerate the brain’s ability to predict, so we can sense what is on the verge of our understanding.”

The experiments based on Hiromura’s design hypotheses are wide-ranging and extend to directional wayfinding signage that affect spaces. Through design, Hiromura adds visual color to our “routine” daily lives and the almost-forgotten memories of “days gone by”, which influences our feelings and behavior.

This brings back a sense of nostalgia, arouses an affection for people and things, and leads to a deeper appreciation of our everyday environment. Compassion in the form of design can arouse a sense of thoughtfulness and new values... and has the potential to give birth to new relationships between people, things, the environment, and the landscape.

It is said that 80% of the brain’s cognition is based on visual information. Hiromura designs spaces with the aim of 70% sense of “satisfaction” in people’s understanding. What will capture our hearts and excite us in the next era? Hiromura seems to have his sights set not only on people, but also on the living things and landscapes in our lives. The “+” in the title refers to the environment, people, materials, and the future.

This exhibition presents an overview of 32 designs explored through five hypotheses proposed by “Hiromura +”: “Memories and Impressions” “Letterforms and Aesthetics” “Silhouettes” “Arrows” and “Think Temporary.”

As you engage with these hypothetical provisional spaces, you will inevitably find yourself becoming part of that “+,” and the landscape of information you “routinely” see will begin to transform.

Design is... surely for making the future even more beautiful.

Michiyo Okabe
Director, Gallery A⁴

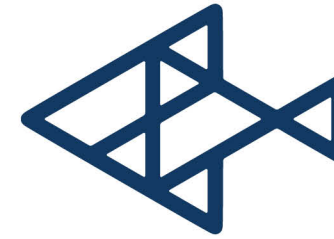
Hiromura Design, Here and There

It has been 37 years since Masaaki Hiromura established his own practice at the age of 32 in 1988.

Since then, he has focused mainly on graphic design, as well as on art direction and wayfinding signage design across various fields.

You have probably seen his designs somewhere before.

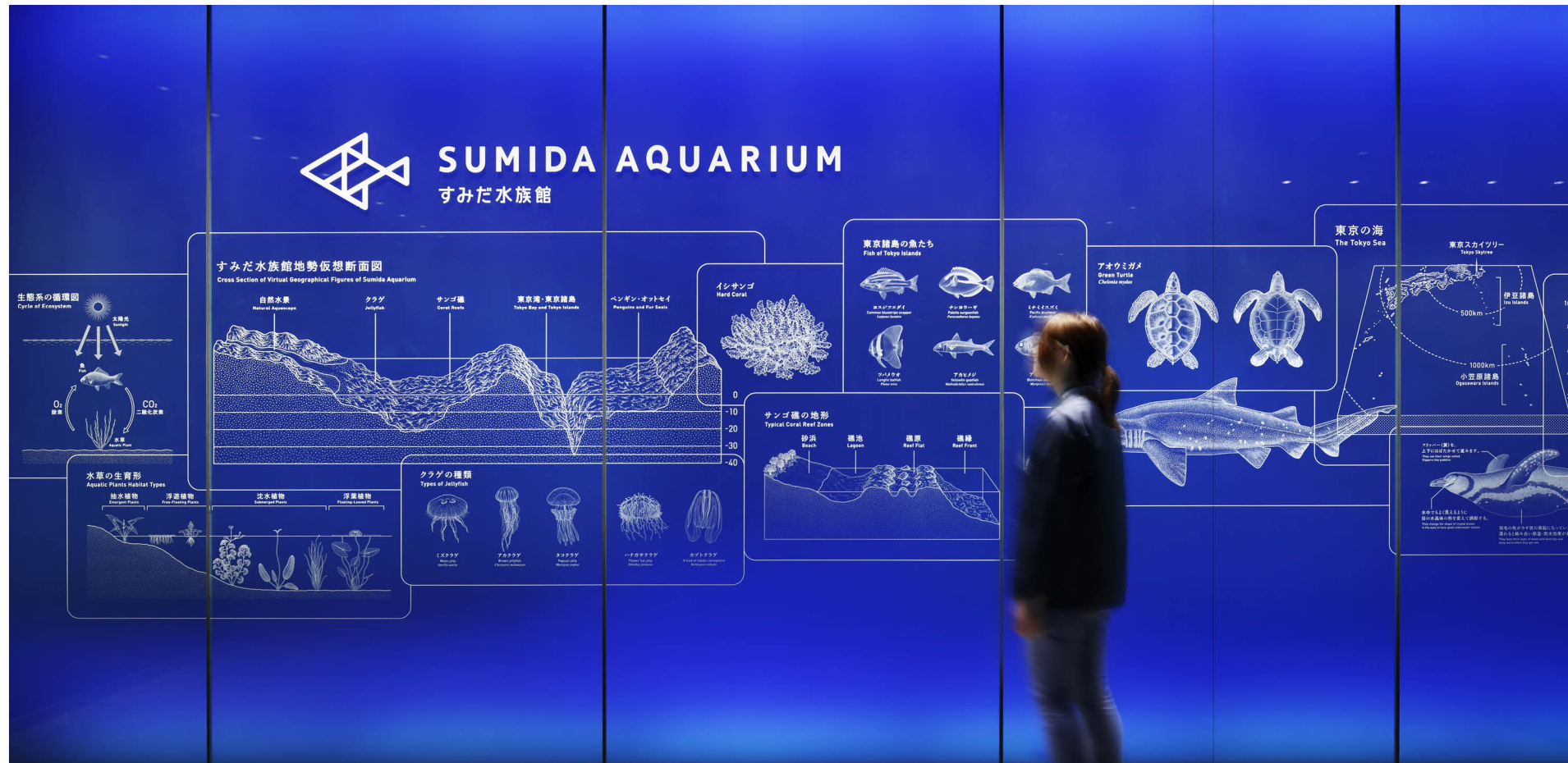
Here, we would like to introduce just a few of his works.



Sumida Aquarium

The Sumida Aquarium has been open at the TOKYO SKYTREE TOWN®. The concept for the wayfinding signage design is “Sense & Knowledge,” aiming to create an aquarium where visitors of all ages can deepen their understanding. Using stippled illustrations of aquatic creatures on panels and nameplates give the design a timeless quality like an encyclopedia or illustrated book.

2012





Shibuya LOFT, Ginza LOFT

The “Gearloft” (photo below) is a redesigned version of the object that was placed at the entrance of LOFT store in Shibuya. The LOFT logo is lodged into a structure made up of 19 cogs of various sizes that rotate to deconstruct the logo, which then returns to its original form in 40 seconds, symbolizing the dense and rich world of hobbies. The Ginza LOFT (photo top right) is the new flagship store. The painted column signs are functional while also enlivening the space. To enhance the enjoyment of exploring the store, signage inspired by road markings has been installed on the floor.

Shibuya Store 2012 Paper Bag 2016 Ginza Store 2017

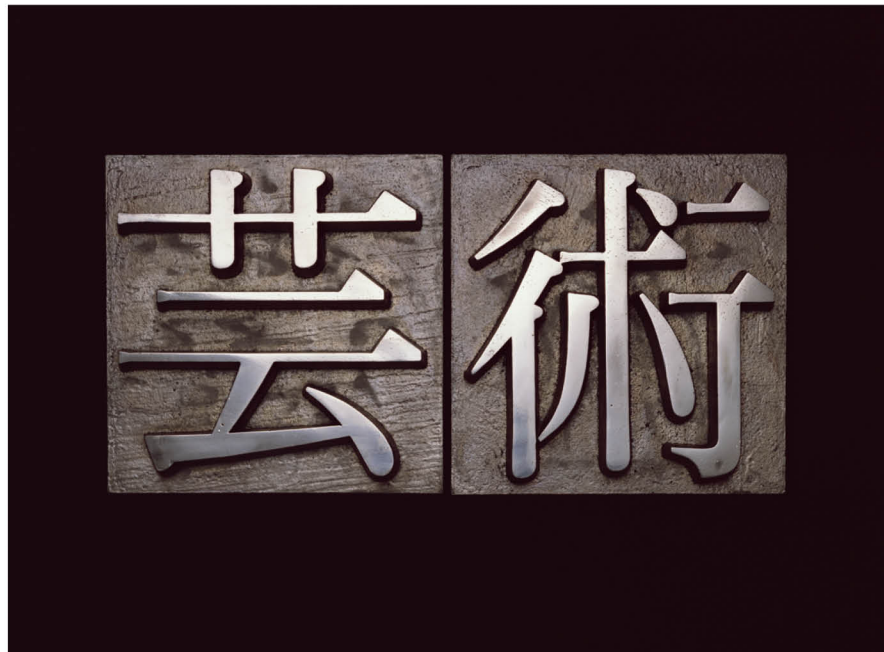




MARUZEN

A long-established bookstore located in Tokyo. We proposed a redesign of the visual identity as well as a wayfinding signage design. By making slight adjustments to the monogram and logotype, which had been in use for about 100 years, we revived them as a stronger and simpler design. The book classification signage was made from cast aluminum plates, evoking traditional typefaces.

2004 (photo taken at the time of opening)



Kitasenju Marui Shokuyukan

Visual Identity and wayfinding signage design for the restaurant area and the food floor/Kitasenju Marui Shokuyukan. The visual identity was designed to communicate across generations and countries, with children, the elderly, and non-Japanese customers in mind.

2004



Masaaki Hiromura, in 5 words

Masaaki Hiromura was born in 1954 in a farmhouse in Anjo, Aichi Prefecture. As a high school student, he decided to pursue a career in design “because I was somewhat fascinated by furniture and other designs,” but after a year of studying, he somehow ended up in a school for graphic design. In 1977, at the age of 22, he joined Ikko Tanaka Design Studio. Tanaka says, “If you work three times as hard as other people, you will be able to make a living,” and as he completed an enormous amount of work under his mentor, he gained experience like learning the concept of design in your body. In 1988, he established Hiromura Design Office, which got off to a smooth sailing start in the aftermath of the bubble economy. However, as he entered his 40s, he found himself at a “stalemate where nothing he did seemed to resonate,” although he continued to receive a steady stream of work requests. It was then that wayfinding signage design work brought a new perspective. Hiromura’s signage design blends seamlessly with the space, as if it were designed by the architect who created it. They are easy for anyone to understand and have a hint of warmth and cuteness. Where does it all come from? We have extracted five words from the interview to get an insight into his work and personality.

Using ‘empathy’ as an entry point might not be a bad idea.

Looking back to the 1980s, when he started his career as a graphic designer, Hiromura says, “Japanese graphic design evolved in isolation (what is called “Galapagosization” in Japan) and swept the world with its unique expressive power.” The characteristic of Japanese graphic design can be succinctly described as ‘cool design that communicates visually without words and appeals to the masses.’ While he admired and tried to follow this trend, he felt there was some distance between himself and it.” When the bubble economy burst and the economy began to decline, there was less room for playfulness in the design world, and people began to demand more practical products that could actually sell. As he says, “It is often said that design doesn’t have to hit home runs, but it has to keep hitting singles. The sense is that the batting average should be about 70%.” Facing reality, Hiromura began working on signage design while searching for an approach that felt authentic to himself. Wayfinding signage in public facilities is usually designed to be easy to understand for the general public. Yet “understandable” is a profound concept: even if a large, vivid sign reaches the retina, it does not necessarily lead to recognition. How, then, can design create a true entry point for people to “understand”? After more than a decade, Hiromura found an answer in the signage design for the Yokosuka Museum of Art with the character “Yokosuka-kun” (2007, p.33). The human-shaped figure of “Yokosuka-kun” is heartwarming and endearing. It is unobtrusive, yet it suddenly captures attention and gently guides people. This kind of empathetic signage—gentle, warm, and comforting—is what he wishes to pursue further. It is more than simple guidance; it evokes an emotional response. That may be the essence of recognition.

“The good thing about graphic design,” says Hiromura, “is that it’s two-dimensional, so there are no limits to expression. But in three-dimensional signage design, restrictions inevitably arise—location, materials, and above all, budget. Yet as I worked more in signage design, I realized that the more restrictions there are, the clearer the path becomes. It’s like mountain climbing: the constraints define the most natural route.” He continues, “Our role as designers is to help the client understand the new space and, in turn, who they are. We begin by carefully listening to the architect to grasp why the space was created as it was. Then, staying true to that intention, we design signage as a small but meaningful addition—something that makes the space more legible and approachable to its many visitors.” Out of this mindset and process comes Hiromura’s signage design, which blends seamlessly into the space without being obtrusive.

Wayfinding signage design is a tool for better understanding a space.

Observing people’s expectations and fleeting “outpourings of desire” in daily life.

Design work begins with the client, but ultimately it is important that it be accepted by the consumer. “It’s impossible to know whether a design meets people’s expectations until it is released to the public,” says Hiromura. He often watches people on trains or in cafes. This is because he can sometimes clearly see what might be called an “outpouring of desire” in their actions. Incidentally, three years after joining Tanaka’s studio, staff were sent alone on an overseas training trip—not as a reward, but more as a trial. Hiromura’s destinations were Paris and London. When he reported his experiences and discoveries to Tanaka, he was rebuked: “What have you really seen?” Reflecting on this, Hiromura says, “I learned from Tanaka that design begins with observing the world, people, and culture—and then conveying those observations to others in an inspiring way.”

I am not good at interacting with people, and I was quite unskilled at presenting my work when I was younger. When I was just starting out on my own, I once tried my best to explain to a client that I had no idea what I was talking about. Although I am not a dexterous person in general, I have always worked with the question in my mind, “What should design do? When he encountered the phrase “Let it be as it is” at D.T. Suzuki museum in Kanazawa, Hiromura was shocked and has kept it as his motto ever since. I know it may not be what D.T. Suzuki meant, but I take it to mean, For now, it’s better to put your current problems aside for a while. If I run into a problem that I can’t move no matter how much I think about it, I give it a rest and start working on something else. In the process, he sometimes opens up his perspective and reveals a new path forward.

Let it be as it is

It would be nice if each day had a little more of that “temporary” feeling.

There’s a saying that some things are meant to last a lifetime, and longevity is often seen as a virtue—but Hiromura is questioning this. For example, rather than pouring a lot of materials and funds into an event that only lasts a few days, why not design it with the idea of temporariness? “If everyone thought, ‘This is good enough,’ wouldn’t it make things easier,” he says. For CO-OP Sapporo’s packaging design, he put each product’s features using typography instead of costly photographs: “*Mild Milk Karinto-White, made with Hokkaido milk*” and “*Simple, pure white CO-OP tissues*” This simple, straightforward approach aligns with CO-OP’s philosophy and reflects a “temporariness” way of thinking. We think about “what design can do,” but first, we should focus on “what design should do.” More specifically, we should ask, “Is design really necessary here?” Hiromura’s work always starts with that question.

Prototyping and Proposition

Masaaki Hiromura +



The works in the exhibition “Prototyping and Proposition: Masaaki Hiromura+” are divided into chapters with five themes, and further into “Study,” an experimental work that opens the theme, and “Project,” an actual example of work connected to the Study. Here we introduce some of them, and we hope you can decipher the flow of Hiromura’s thinking by comparing the Study and the Project.

In Face of Uncertainty—Prototyping and Proposition

Masaaki Hiromura

We all exist in a state of constant change. The future remains unpredictable and beyond our control. Yet, as humans, we strive for control and stability in our day to day lives; to achieve this, we form biases based on beliefs determined by past experiences and interpretations. Design is a process that involves comprehending and examining these biases and combining them with our knowledge and experience. This enables us to develop theories and hypotheses we can present to society through tangible creations. When these designs manage to initiate emotional connection, furthermore, inspire joy and profound feelings in people, they fulfill their entire purpose. We recognize that design is

rooted in suppositions and propositions; it can also be viewed as prototyping—temporary and incomplete in nature. In today’s society, there is growing skepticism towards relentless production. While permanent and ultimate designs have their place, simple “prototypes” are often sufficient—and sometimes even more desirable—than final products. This book delves into the effects hypotheses and propositions have on design and the emotions they can evoke. It further explores the potential for embracing “prototypes/temporariness” as a new, flexible value system. Drawing on various studies, experiments, and reflections on past projects, the contemplations seek to illuminate new possibilities in design.



1. Memories and Impressions

Emotionally resonant design is like glue that connects people with each other.

Study 1-1

The setting is the manufacturing plant of Mitsubishi Pencil in Yamagata from 1944. We created an experimental work on the theme of "Memories and Impressions." The pencil signboard attached to the gate fence seems to tell the memory of the factory's familiarity with the city. The little pencils collected at the elementary school were used to create a corner listing company events and a sign (see next page). The old manufacturing plant of Mitsubishi Pencil in Yamagata from 1944.



I have some very clear memories of my childhood. The smell of an open fire, the railroad crossing on my way to school, my worn-out training shoes, the pencil stumps in my pencil case. It's quite intriguing even for myself how I remember all these trifling things. But it's only natural when you consider that the human brain is said to develop up to about 90% by the age of three, and normally it's fully developed before reaching adult age. It seems to be easier for a young brain to memorize all kinds of daily occurrences, which then define the framework for a person's further growth in life. Now it happens that a certain trivial sight triggers in me some of those memories of my childhood. A swing in a park brings back memories of those early summer evenings in the park, the sunlight on my desk reminds me of my desk in the classroom, and when I see the white mist of my breath in the cold air, I remember visiting a shrine on New Year as a child. There are things that seem to connect to anyone when talking about past memories. No matter how and where people grew up, sharing a

memory of a personal experience usually triggers an "Oh, I know that!" kind of response. Such things that evoke good memories that a lot of people can relate to, can be powerful energy sources for working out designs. Emotionally resonant design is like glue that connects people with each other.



← Project 1-1

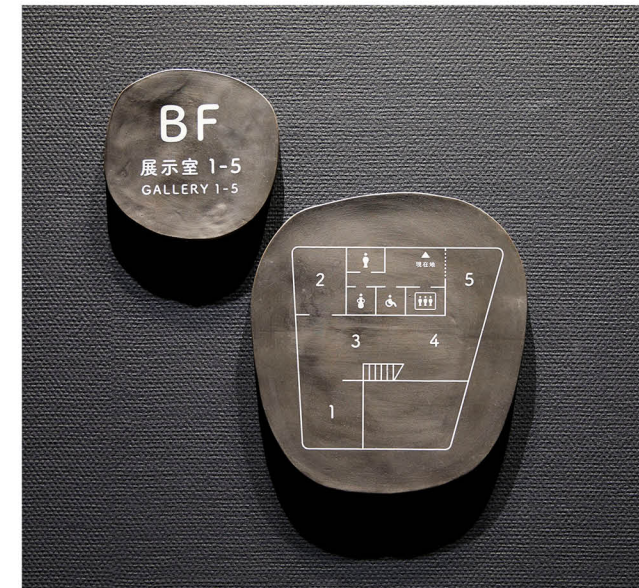
Wayfinding signage for Mito City Civic Center. We proposed a design that symbolically incorporates wooden textures. Installing signage made from the same materials as the building itself results in a sense of affinity with the surrounding architecture. As time passes, the color of wood ages and blends in with the space.

↙ Project 1-2

The YOKUMOKU MUSEUM, which holds a collection of Pablo Picasso's ceramic works, features ceramic wayfinding signage created with a ceramic artist. The finished signs take the form of ceramic tiles, showing traces of human hands working with clay and resonate with the museum's collection.

↓ Project 1-3

The specialized household goods store "Loft". Tenjin Loft, Kyushu's first store, has moved to a new location for the first time in 15 years. Inspired by the idea to highlighting the local flavor, I came up with a character named "Loftora" (tora=tiger), taking hints from "Hakata hariko" (papier-mâché), a traditional crafts product of Fukuoka Prefecture. A design calligrapher from Fukuoka was commissioned to add the finishing details to the tiger.



2. Letterforms and Aesthetics

The visual appeal of letterforms

Visual aesthetic is a vital aspect of Japanese calligraphy culture. Handscrolls and manuscripts made in the Heian period, with waka poems and other texts written on exquisite, beautifully colored paper in various designs, are works of breathtaking beauty. Since the introduction and popularization of letterpress printing in the Meiji period, many people have come to consider and cherish letterpress printing as the “archetypal form of printed text.” Text information is recognized differently to pictures or other visual elements. This is because the visual information of “pictures” and the semantic information of “texts,” are processed by different parts of the human brain. However, looking at things like illuminated manuscripts from Japan, informs us of the fact that this separation is not as easy as it seems: here, “pictures and text” are treated as a whole. By considering letterforms and text themselves as aesthetic elements, and seamlessly integrating them into visual designs, the Japanese people have been attempting to unify letterforms/text and aesthetics since ancient times.

Study 2-1

We fixed characters cut out of acrylic onto the bamboo trees one by one, and photographed the sceneries of characters floating in the bamboo forest. The photo on the right is a poem by Hayano Hajin. We placed individual characters of haiku poems in a bamboo forest, assuming that this would “spark imagination” based on the uniquely Japanese sensibility of processing “pictures” and “text” at the same time.





Study 2-2

Wayfinding signage shaped like books might be an interesting idea. Those who enter the library are first greeted by a book titled “The Library.” Visitors can search the different categories of books by flipping through the pages of a “genre & classification” book, and there are also book signs put up to inform about codes of conduct, locations of lavatories, etc. Once I had freed myself from the preconceived idea that “signage must stand out,” it felt to me as if I had learned a thing or two about “the essence of things.”



Project 2-1

The Ishikawa Prefectural Library features a mortar-shaped Great Hall. What is also unique is the “Twelve themes for encountering books,” which the library uses to categorize its books. Multilingual wayfinding signs were designed to float above the shelves and indicate the themes, for visitors to intuitively find their way to the books they are looking for.

Project 2-2

For the wayfinding signage at Toda Corporation’s new headquarters, TODA BUILDING in Kyobashi, Tokyo, I envisioned a design in which 60 quotes related to architecture and creation are distributed across the building. “Architecture is intrinsic to time place and man.”—Frank Lloyd Wright, etc. These quotes inspire the people who work there to deepen or change their way of thinking.

Project 2-3

The hovercraft shuttle is a unique ship that moves forward as if it were flying. We designed wayfinding signage for a hovercraft terminal in Oita. The letterforms slightly protrude from the pillars to which they are mounted, peeking out like a hovercraft appearing and disappearing between the waves.



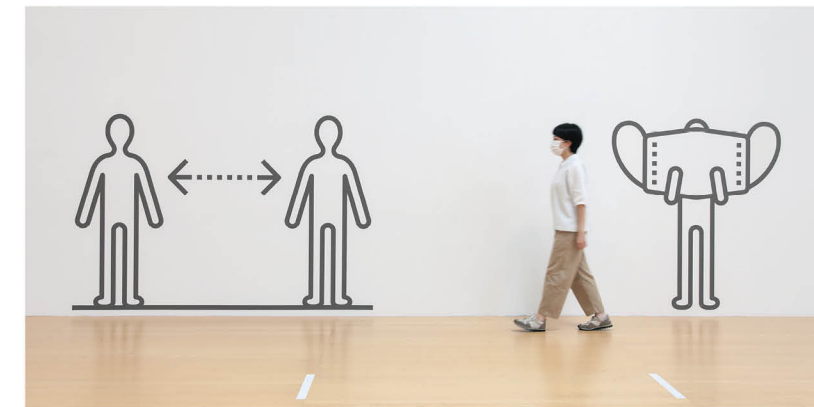


3. Silhouettes

People react instinctively to the human form.

People are somehow frightened of human silhouettes. We flinch at a shadow of a person suddenly appearing around a corner, or step on the brakes when we notice a police mannequin during a nightly drive. In all kinds of daily life situations, our subconscious mind is on alert for “people” in one form or another. When clouds look like animals, or stains on the wall look like ghosts, we are experiencing a phenomenon called Pareidolia. The Simulacra phenomenon, also a form of Pareidolia, is when the brain recognizes a face from three basic elements. Electric outlets in the wall begin to look like faces if you stare at them for long enough, and so do manholes, alarm bells in public buildings, and even

pansies. This is how sensitive people are to the presence of others, and to “faces” in particular. There are theories that explain this as a skill that humans have acquired over the course of evolution, in order to quickly detect and avoid danger; reading the facial expressions of the group, and choosing cooperation over conflict, is said to have increased the survival rate of humankind. Some designs make creative use of this effect in order to evoke a sense of familiarity—sweets packages or logos sometimes incorporate elements resembling human faces to inspire feelings of affinity and affection towards the company or brand.



← Study 3-1

The “Tobidashi Bōya” traffic safety awareness mascot reminds drivers that there may be children around. Then it must be the shape—the silhouette of a child—that is acutely triggering our consciousness. We should be able to alert people by using only shapes—without relying on color. This inspired me to make white warning signs modelled in the shape of a child.

↑ Project 3-1

The wayfinding signage for the Yokosuka Museum of Art is a silhouette of a “human-shaped figure”. The ideal signage design works in a way that guides people intuitively, regardless of nationality or age, I thought it would be a nice, visitor-friendly touch for a museum to have some kind of “human” guide like this. Though it had a rather humorous silhouette, it did not have any facial expressions. After a while, he had a name: Yokosuka-kun.



4. Arrows

Symbols that radiate energy and will

There exist various theories about the origin of the arrow sign. In ancient times, the arrow was used to symbolize masculinity or divinity, and it did not carry any notion of pointing. According to one theory, compass needles took on an arrow-like shape around the 13th century, and thus the arrow came to be used as a symbol indicating direction. Arrows were then included in maps, and it is said that this use became more wide-spread during the Age of Discovery. From this we understand that the arrow sign has undergone various transformations before arriving at its present, generally established meaning. Today, we see arrows frequently used in art and design. One particular design that had an enormous impact on me, was a poster I saw at Ikko Tanaka Design Studio where I had a part-time job back when I was a student. It was a poster made in 1959, titled “World Commercial Design Exhibition,” showing countless white arrows teeming on a black background. More than 80 arrows, all different in terms of design and size, all pointing in different directions, but together they looked like one big mass of energy. Even though the individual arrows were all different and unique, all of them together seemed to be radiating something like determination. I had never imagined that I would be so overwhelmed by a simple symbol. That was the moment I understood the power of design.

Study 4-1

The pareidolia phenomenon was described in the previous chapter. We tried to see if people react in the same way to symbols such as arrows. We picked up a branch in the park, painted the parts we recognized as “arrows” white, and then put it back and took a picture of it. These arrows don’t look at all artificial, owing to their organic shapes. It thus became temporary wayfinding signage, suited to relaxed, immersive settings where blending into the environment adds a touch of obscurity.

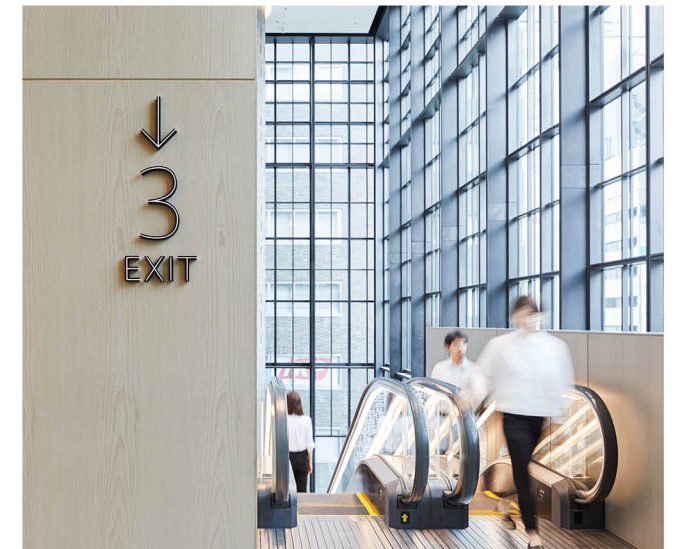


← Study 4-2

The experiment took place at the Tokyo Zokei University in Utsunukimachi. About 40 students were given helmets bearing arrows. When they all walked in the same direction, there was a large movement like a flowing river. When half of the students went in opposite directions, the impression was of confrontation. When each moved freely during the break, vibrant chaos ensued. Where each individual moves in the direction of their own interest, the interplay of energies creates a highly dynamic chaos.

↑ Project 4-1

The Artison Museum in Kyobashi, Tokyo, consists of six floors. The lighting in the museum is subdued; to guide visitors up and down through the facility with ease, we proposed ultra-slim “slit light” LED signs; custom-made arrows and pictograms that have light-emitting parts only 1.5 millimeters in width, extending right to the edges—realized with tremendous support from the sign manufacturer DAIKAN. The floating lights are gentle beacons, leading the way for visitors.



5. Think Temporary

Flexibility Creates New Value.

Temporary housings are not designed for permanent residence, and temporary enclosures are only there for a limited time. No matter how “pleasantly” these structures are designed, using plastic ivy or images of forests, ultimately, they will be removed; hence I had once disregarded them as insignificant. Nowadays, the established notion of permanence being the optimal solution, is undergoing a change. Even social structures and values once considered as permanent are currently in flux. In this day and age, flexible thinking and adaptability to changing conditions are indispensable. In order to survive in a diverse and sustainable society, one must cultivate a more positive attitude towards “temporality,” accepting transience and fluidity as given states. Rather than pushing forward with the established path of defining “permanence” as supreme, adopting flexible designs that presuppose changes and updates, will perhaps result in the creation of entirely new value concepts. Not “approximately” but “appropriately.” Not “easy” but “concise.” It is imperative for design to continue developing these ideas while flexibly responding and according to social changes.

Study 5-1

I gave an assignment to the new graduate who will be joining us next spring: to make something on the theme of “temporariness”. He eventually designed a garment in the style of a haori, an overcoat worn over Japanese kimonos. It consisted of a segmented body and sleeves with individual parts joined together using Velcro, making the garment easy to put on, take off or modify. The PVC-coated fabric is lightweight and has a uniquely lustrous surface. Replacing the idea of “substitution” with that of “temporariness” by way of design, is perhaps the assignment that I have been given.





↑ Project 5-1

In 2023, the World Design Organization's "World Design Congress" took place in Japan for the first time in 34 years. As the event only lasted for three days, I wanted to keep the venue guides and event timetables as economical as possible, focusing on reinforced corrugated cardboard as the base material. The signs were leaned against a wall or placed on a table or pedestal—changing, removing and adding was easy. The design scheme was a direct response to one of the conference's subtopics: "Planet—Designing for Environmental Problem Solutions."

→ Project 5-2

The 2003 Icograda Congress Nagoya·JAPAN took place in Nagoya in October 2003. We were commissioned to design wayfinding signage for the venues, at a time when I had just started thinking about the notion of "temporariness." The format that we eventually came up with was balloons. My first thought was that signs should be simple and not produce much waste. The only drawback was that they had to be refilled with helium every morning.





Masaaki Hiromura

Graphic Designer. Born in Aichi Prefecture. Established Hiromura Design Office in 1988. While his general focus is on graphic design, his work spans various fields, including art direction, wayfinding signage design, and branding. He is also involved in design direction for domestic clients, serves as a judge for the design of international events, and gives lectures.

He was a professor at Tokyo Polytechnic University (2008–2018), and has been a guest professor at Tama Art University (2016–) and Nagoya Zokei University (2019–).

Publication: JI BORN (ADP), From Design To Design (ADP), Prototyping and Proposition, Kokushokankokai etc.

Prototyping and Proposition Masaaki Hiromura+

July 11, 2025 (Friday)-October 16, 2025 (Thursday)

Organizing Public Interest Incorporated Foundation Gallery A⁴
Michiyo Okabe, Kei Tokuhira,
Yuria Fukazawa, Chiaki Nishida,
Akimichi Yamaguchi, Yoriko Manabe,
Kazumi Futo, Hideo Kitahara,
Yasutomo Ishii

Cooperation Mitsubishi Pencil Company, Limited,
Kanazawa College of Art,
Daikan Co., Ltd.

Support Koto-ku

Publishing Public Interest Incorporated Foundation Gallery A⁴

Editing Shiori Kitagawa

Design Hiromura Design Office

Exhibition Construction N-tec Corporation

Advisor Tadayasu Sakai (Former Director, Setagaya Art Museum)
Naoyuki Kinoshita (Director, Shizuoka Prefectural Museum of Art)
Masako Wake (CEO, AWP Co. Ltd.)

Related Events

Dialogue 1
Date July 30, 2025 (Wednesday) 16:30-18:00
Lecturer Masaaki Hiromura (Graphic Designer)
Kaoru Kasai (Art Director)

Dialogue 2
Date August 28, 2025 (Thursday) 18:30-20:00
Lecturer Masaaki Hiromura (Graphic Designer)
Riken Yamamoto (Architect)

Dialogue 3
Date September 19, 2025 (Friday) 16:30-18:00
Lecturer Masaaki Hiromura (Graphic Designer)
Kazuko Koike (Creative Director)

Both locations are Toyocho green+2F Hall
(2-5-14 Minamisuna, Koto-ku, Tokyo)

Photo

Nacása & Partners Inc. p. 4, p. 5 top, p. 7 upper right and lower right, p. 9
p. 17, p. 27 upper left and lower right, p. 31, p. 37

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Elephant Taka p. 14, 18-19
Mohey Ooigawa (Hi-Bush) p. 24-26, 28-30
p. 32-33, 38-40

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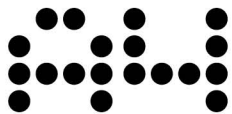


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