



'ABOUT KIYOTOMO SUSHI BAR', RICHARD SCHLAGMAN FOR NEAR EAST. A TALK WITH PATRIZIA SCARZELLA, MILAN, 13TH APRIL 2016

As Art, architecture and design. The visual arts were my life at Phaidon and I had decided to make a publication on Kuramata. Other than a few Japanese publications there was nothing available. Unfortunately I never had the chance to meet him, he had already passed away. However, Mrs Kuramata and I had talked about the book, and I while visiting Japan, she invited me to a sushi restaurant. It was an early interior by Shiro, dating from 1978. It was a very nice place, but its language was not pure Kuramata. The space could have been by any number of very good architects and not immediately recognisable as a Kuramata work.

Kiyotomo is different. When you first walk in, you know immediately that it's by him. It couldn't be by anyone else. It was made at the height of his powers in 1988.

Going back to my visit with Mrs Kuramata, we went to eat at Shiro's first restaurant, Umenoki. She didn't mention anything about another restaurant, and I certainly didn't know about the existence of another one.

Later in London I met up with a friend, Deyan Sudjic, who had also recently been to Japan. I told him I'd been to the

restaurant with Mrs Kuramata. He said that he had also been, and we started comparing notes. He talked about the granite counter. I said: "No. The counter was in wood". Our disagreement about details continued for some time, and we were unable settle the issue. A few weeks later, Mrs Kuramata visited me at my home in the Ticino. I asked her to resolve the difference between mine and Deyan's recollections: was the counter made of wood, or stone? She said that there were two restaurants, and that she took Dejan to a different one. Fearing that I might have missed out on something, I said immediately "why did you take us to different ones?". She explained that Kiyotomo had closed down and that the chef / owner got into financial difficulties and disappeared, and that it would be destroyed and the space turned into a Korean restaurant. I said, "Don't let them destroy it, I want it!". My reaction was completely impulsive. It was well outside my area of expertise. But I was determined to help the space survive. I had a discussion with the landlord, acquired it, and was now responsible for this sushi place.

My initial plan was to reopen it as a sushi restaurant. At first, it seemed uncared for, and not in a good state. It was dirty, dark and smelly and the old staff had just ran off and left their belongings behind. After a few minutes, it became clear that here was something great. So I set my plan in action, made several trips to Japan, met many of the great architects. Taniguchi, Maki, Ando, Shigeru Ban, Ito, and Sejima. I wanted to hear what everybody thought. One or two said they were embarrassed that it took a foreigner to save it. Everybody agreed that it was the right thing. Some, I recall Isozaki for one, went out of their way to try and

help me. I met many people in the design, architecture and also sushi world. I met top sushi masters and discussed how to reopen the restaurant. It took an enormous amount of time and effort. Eventually we found the right person but at the very last moment he had an accident, cut his finger off and said he didn't want to proceed.

I realised the challenge I had taken on was going to be too difficult. When you go to Japan from the West, everything seems to take time. A meeting in Europe lasts one hour, in Japan it lasts four hours. It wasn't just that everything needed translation, but the subtleties and cultural understandings were very different and the entire process was slower. I eventually realized that opening a high quality sushi restaurant in Japan on my own was going to be too complicated.

I started to think about the possibility of collaborating with someone. I talked with Alain Ducasse, who loved the space but his idea was different to mine. He spoke about making a very exclusive club that would only have one hundred members, who could visit once a year. I also spoke with Ferran Adrià. Ferran thought I was completely mad. He said that it was impossible to compete at the highest level with sushi masters in Japan. I respected his view and at that point I really gave up. I also realised there was a problem with the location. When the restaurant first opened, the neighbourhood was good, but with time the character of the area had changed and was no longer an ideal spot for such a place. By this point I could see no way forward and even considered removing the furniture and selling it at auction. But I couldn't quite bring myself to do that.

I left it empty for few years, at which point I saw that people were beginning to buy and sell moveable architecture. I looked at some Jean Prouvé installations—the Serpentine Gallery in London had started to commission a temporary pavilion by a different architect every year. This gave me the idea that perhaps Kiyotomo could be moved. A friend, Marc Benda, who operates an important design gallery, put me in touch with the M+ Museum in Hong Kong who were looking to create a new collection of Asian works and were searching for something special.

Dismantling Kiyotomo took some four or five months. It was like a surgical operation. Actually, you can see an online film, published by M+, of the Kiyotomo story which shows, in some detail, the dismantling exercise. I don't know M+'s precise plans for installing Kiyotomo in the new museum, which is currently under construction, but I understand that it will not be used as a working restaurant; rather, it will be displayed in a way that allows people to appreciate Kuramata's creativity and the exceptional qualities of the design.



See the full interview with Schlagman on pg. 476

Opposite: KIYOTOMO SUSHI BAR. 'The most obvious thing about the Kiyotomo sushi bar is that it is one of the very few Kuramata interiors that survived out of maybe 400 he's designed in his lifetime... it is a slightly different interior in the sense that he was more overtly trying to reference traditional Japanese materials and teahouses; with wood and granite — which were not materials he often used. There is a long history of museums doing period rooms and things like that, so collecting an entire interior is not such a radical idea. In this context, I think Kuramata really thought of his interiors as spatial objects. They are very sculptural and compositional in a way that really does make them very poetic, and makes them distinctly Kuramata.'

ARIC CHEN, UNLEARNING IN THE EAST, pg. 16.

"What does it mean to put artificial flowers in an acrylic chair? It's totally radical, and it is totally non-modern, but I think Kuramata's emphasis was more on the poetry of it. It was more about the narrative than making a dogmatic statement, which is the way 1980's post-modernism has often been described in the west."

ARIC CHEN, curator of design and architecture for M+, on Kuramata and the NON MODERN versus the POST MODERN, pg. 15.

Pictured: BAR OBLOMOV, MITSUMASA FUJITSUKA, 1989. Courtesy of KURAMATA DESIGN OFFICE (12 FEBRUARY 1986) Re-published in Phaidon's book of SHIRO KURAMATA by DEYAN SUDJIC, 2013.

PATRIZIA SCARZELLA Shiro Kuramata and Ettore Sottsass were friends and each liked the work of the other. Kuramata was attracted by the freedom of Sottsass' design and said that Memphis helped him to get rid of his intellectualistic part; Ettore loved the abstraction and perfection of Shiro that he wasn't able to achieve...

RICHARD SCHLAGMAN In the Kiyotomo sushi bar, Kuramata had designed and kept a table for Sottsass in a corner. It was a purple/pink table. All the other tables were black. It was Memphis, Japan style. Like Sottsass, Kuramata would often put disparate elements together that created an unlikely but complete whole. At Kiyotomo Kuramata blended east and west, tradition and modernity, reality and dreams. Kiyotomo, could be mistaken for a western design but, once you spend time with it, you observe that every single detail is a move away but, nevertheless, grounded in Japanese tradition.

ps Magic, perfection, dreams, poetic vision. These are some of the elements in Kuramata's projects. Are there any architects/artists that could be compared to him?

rs I don't think there's anyone else quite like Kuramata. He developed a unique poetic rigour in his work and could, in a completely seamless manner, develop a piece of furniture, an object, or an entire interior out of a dream or free roaming imagination. Great designers do not copy a master, they find their own language. Tokujin Yoshioka, at times, can remind me of Kuramata, so maybe there is a link there, and there is perhaps a common thread with Issey Miyake.

Kuramata worked very closely with the fabricators who made Kiyotomo. Kuramata's principal manufacturer Takao Ishimaru set up a contracting company to handle his interiors. I am certain this continuity and proximity with the maker enabled rich and ground-breaking experimentation and innovation with commonly used materials such as acrylic, chipboard or metal mesh that became precious in his design. Kuramata regularly used the same makers and specialists and he worked closely with them. Today things are different. Projects usually have layers of administrators and project managers through which the ideas have to filter before they become reality, inevitably diluting the end product.

Kuramata had a skill for craft and a respect for materials. He was also like a painter or a sculptor in the way that he used colour and form. What is interesting is that he pushed the boundaries of design beyond functionality but he never left it behind.



JAPANESE CULTURE

ps You like Kuramata and wear Miyake clothes... They were close friends and their work has many similarities: continuous experimentation, the pursuit of perfection, either creating space or wrapping the body.... How much your personal and professional life has been influenced by Japanese culture?

rs I love Japanese culture. I don't understand why but maybe in another life I was Japanese! Food, clothing, architecture, design, gardens, some art, even the language. I'm very bad with languages, and don't speak any, other than English, but Japanese is the one I like to hear. I can sit and listen to people talking Japanese, fascinated, without understanding a thing. There's a music in the language. And I'm crazy about sushi! I am intrigued also by the people, the way they think, the mentality – even if, often, it's hard to fathom.

DESIGN

ps Who are the designers you like the most?

rs Most of the mid-century modernists. Hans Wegner is a standout. Working today, among others, Jasper Morrison, Konstantin Grcic, the Bouroullec's, Naoto Fukasawa and James Irvine who was a great designer (not yet fully recognised) and a good friend. These designers all have their own approach, but to my way of looking there is some connection between them – perhaps it's just the consistency of their output. Of those that I see as more elaborate, I go for Jaime Hayon and Hella Jongerius.

ps Are you a design collector?

rs I'm not a design collector. I live in a house by Marcel Breuer and the furniture that he designed specifically for it.

PRESENT AND FUTURE

ps These are probably the questions you want to skip... What don't you like in our contemporary era?

rs Yes, probably.... I don't very much like the state of the contemporary art market. The expectation of young artists is super-fast recognition and high prices. This means that they often make the art they think the collector-speculators want to buy, and not what they might have made in a calmer, less frenzied environment. I may be old-fashioned, but I like artists who are compelled to follow their ideas, whether they sell or not.

ps You are a very private person. How would you define yourself? And how you feel in this moment in your life?

rs I'm a private person...I don't really like to talk much about myself... I can tell you that I'm a father now - a very late first-time father. I have a child of 5 and a child of 3 years old. Being a father has completely changed my life. It's a cliché to say it and I resisted it, but children do take over your life. It's undoubtedly a great pleasure and enormous fun but I understand now why you are supposed to undertake this when you are younger, when you have the energy. On the other hand children demand so much of your time and I'm much more available now than I would have been at 25 or 30, busy building my career. My life is art and music, and I probably did something wrong with my older boy, taking him to concert rehearsals and visiting museums and art galleries from only three months old: now he refuses to set foot in an art gallery or a concert hall. I suppose, he will come around.

ps Which are now your projects after Phaidon?

rs I'm working on some new projects. I have some publication ideas, but right now, I'm not sure if they will come to fruition. I'm also working to advance some design products, but it's too early to talk about those.... They are at an early stage of development.

My way of working and progressing ideas is to be very thorough. I have always been like that. I am willing to be slow. This is contrary to the premium people attach to speed. As with the Kiyotomo restaurant project, I spent ten years before I found a good solution. Once the decisions are taken, they are, hopefully, well grounded.

ps Then we can make another appointment later... Thank you very much!

