

# Design's soft sell

 By [Terry Levin](#)

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In pursuit of doing things differently, better, or with more integrity in design, you seldom have to look further than the Japanese. With a seemingly endless supply of masters such as Shigeru Uchida. Maybe it is lost in translation, but the title of his presentation - 'Weak Modernity' did not sound particularly promising, yet in reality contained all the secrets of successful consumerism.

It's like this, our current 20th century legacy is influenced by the modern, rationalist design ethic - it's been about power, speed, standardisation, regulation and uniformity - the elimination of weakness. But at the current speed of change we cannot be content with being modern, and if, as even Walt Disney knew, happiness is a very saleable commodity, then where in our post modernist ethic are we going to find it? Successful, new design (although Uchida has been exploring these concepts for 65 years!) is about embracing naturalness, beauty, profundity of purpose, transience, softness and sensory experiences, about the intangible human traits of memory, tenderness, sensitivity, uniqueness, diversity, nostalgia, bliss.

Similarly acclaimed German Industrial designer and speaker, Hartmut Esselinger - with a client list including Sony, Louis Vuitton, Lufthansa, Motorola, Microsoft and Disney - cited his lifetime mission as "to humanise industry" and demonstrated fluffy hand-held gel digital interfaces.

## Fuzzy is the new sharp...

Fading, transparency, fuzziness and flexibility stimulate something in our hearts, says Uchido, as a foil to our over-use of 20th century material which has damaged the earth. New organic systems can lend richness and meaning to our day-to-day life in product design, in interior design, in graphic design. Soft is the new hard. Weak is the new strong. Fuzzy is the new sharp.

Saying it again in a completely different way, is Uchido San's very antithesis - American stand up comic, designer and self-confessed web geek, Ze Frank. Yet ironically his message is similar. He makes participatory websites - where people can collaborate to make (fuzzy) illustrations, (warm and fuzzy) poems or offer images of (fuzzy) toilet paper fashion. As Frank puts it: "Participation is the new currency of loyalty", exhibiting all the principles of the soft - shifting, flexible, customizable. But there's hard evidence to back it up - more than half of Amazon's sales come from outside their top 130 000 titles. The message is clear: consumers define the framework of what works. New designers are explorers, yet how, asks Frank, do you teach courage and resourcefulness? We need to move away from teaching what works to teaching how to find what works...

Someone who might know is Tanzanian born, Renaissance man and architect, David Adjaye, [www.adjaye.com](http://www.adjaye.com). With an impressive list of civic and private architectural commissions, including the Nobel Peace Centre in Oslo, his credentials also include teaching, co-presenting a BBC series on modern architecture, exhibiting and publishing.

He is inspired by the woven textures of African textiles as a metaphor for a market space and uses experimental material such as recycled timber and Polypropylene cladding for aesthetic and functional purpose. Where streets flow into entrance ways and public buildings invite participation via glass and transparency, where boundaries blur and energy consumption is reduced, we again see the principles of naturalness, diversity and inclusiveness demonstrated. With his understanding of stairs and volumes, ramps and the movement of light, it would not surprise me if David Adjaye could rebuild the Pyramid of Giza itself if someone asked him to!

In the same way Africa inspires softly - for Adjaye it is stools, fabrics and the shadow play of a comb, for earlier speakers, Ayse Birsin and Bibi Seck, it was the cut and volume of African masks and the craftsmen of Senegal; while Esselinger's sage advice was to tribalise our industries, to inspire and educate, to connect and experience and to simply - 'be African'.

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