



# Yohei Ishikawa : Pacific Furniture Service

Interviewed by Zen Tsujimoto  
Photographed by Ryan Lindow

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**W**ith a business brewing steadily since 1988, Yohei Ishikawa; founder, designer, and president of Pacific Furniture Service (P.F.S), has been carving a humble path in the furniture industry in Tokyo. Eschewing commercial mass production, and the emergent “throw-away” culture, Ishikawa and his team of craftsmen are completely hands-on, building every piece in their own small factory. Ishikawa encourages his customers to consider how well made, high quality products can improve ones lifestyle, leading him to expand beyond furniture to offer an in-line collection of goods ranging from clocks, linens and even light fixtures. His elegant and meticulous designs have garnered the attention of fellow designers, leading to special collaborations with the likes of Engineered Garments and nonnative as well as a burgeoning interior design business for retail and residential spaces throughout Japan. We met with Yohei at his Shibuya storefront to learn about his inspirations, the trials and tribulations of the furniture industry, and the challenges of operating a business in a city where space is considered a premium.

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**What were you doing prior to founding P.F.S in 1988? Do you have any formal training or background in design and fabrication?**

I majored in product design while I was at University. However, to go back further, when the US Military occupied the country, Japan was still in a state of "yake no hara (This poetically translates to "burnt fields")." Consequently, new residential areas needed to be built for the stationed troops, and along with this a new group of people would emerge to start making modernized furniture and houses. Of course, there were constructors and craftsmen in Japan before the war, however under the guidance of the US military, this new group of people would start to make new styles of furniture. I found out about this group when I was at University, and learned how the "modern lifestyle" [in Japan] was largely influenced by the arrival of the US Military. This was actually the basis for my research at university. After I graduated, I was employed at a furniture store and it was there that I had the chance to reinterpret a lot of what I studied, and what it meant to be "modern". From there, I wanted to express my own interpretation of modernism in Japan, and after three years of working at the store I started my own company in 1988.

**How can furniture improve lifestyle?**

A phrase that our company goes by is "A great lifestyle, rather than just great furniture." A person that has their own original lifestyle, tends to have or use things that are beautiful, no matter what it is. Even if it is not our furniture, I think it's great if a person can find a real connection to what they choose to have in their homes, even if it is cheap or different. If someone has a well-established personal lifestyle, then it doesn't matter what clothes or furniture they buy, it becomes a product of them. In the end, I want people to gain confidence and establish their own lifestyles. I think it's great if they can find out what kind of lifestyle they want to live, through coming into contact with our furniture. How they want to wake up in the morning, how they want to eat their meals, how they want to go to work and come home. These are all the things I want people to figure out for themselves, when they see our furniture. Instead of being influenced by our furniture through magazines, I'd prefer for people to come to our store and see things like American style sports lockers lined up next to furniture, feel an impact from this, and consider whether this combination works or not. It's through these kinds of instances that people gradually come to figure out what kind of lifestyle they want. People can find themselves, and figure out their personal lifestyle preferences through understanding furniture. That's where things like honesty come into play, and you can start excluding yourself from products that you deem fake or commercial. This is the sort

of process that helps you acknowledge whether you want to associate yourself with certain things, and deciding how you want to live. I want people to find themselves by questioning why they like certain things. I really dislike companies that try to force you to like a certain product, with an attitude of "It's really great, buy it." In the past, companies like Porsche or Mercedes-Benz didn't do things like that. They would work very hard, make very beautiful products, and it would finish there. There wasn't this whole commercial attitude of "Buy it, buy it!" I'd like for this sort of thing to disappear in today's society.

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**P.F.S furniture is completely independent with in-house control of design, creation, and sales. Why is this business model so important to you? What are its limitations and advantages?**

I really didn't like the typical Japanese business style, and thought the only other way was to do things independently. We truly thought the only way to do things was by ourselves. Rather than wanting to do it this way, we really had no other choice.

In Japan, land is generally very expensive, this is probably the biggest limitation when it comes to making furniture. In order to make furniture, you first have to transport all the materials to the workshop, dry it all out, construct it, and lastly sell it at the shop. It's different to







fashion and marketing businesses, because it requires an abundance of space. To make furniture in Japan, you are already running a great risk since property is so expensive. That's why a lot of furniture businesses in Japan usually operate at big factories in the outlying regions, where land isn't as expensive. In the end, that's where mass production generally takes place. The land in Tokyo isn't going to become cheaper anytime soon.

**Are there any designers, movements or eras that you admire or look to for inspiration?**

I never liked the "lifestyle" of 1970s-1980s Japan. I really don't like it, as a matter of fact. In other words, I only had a bad impression of things that were designed in Japan during the time. If I had to say, I've actually been more influenced by bauhaus and the design style of mid-century modernism with designers like George Nelson and Jean Prouvé. The interior industry of Japan during the '70s and '80s were really only copying what they saw from the US or Europe, and I think my generation were the first to apply our own originality to our designs. However, in all honesty, I've been more inspired from other creative fields; by photographers and film directors and the like, as opposed to products.

**Does travel influence your design?**

I think it's the same wherever you are, whether you're in Japan or overseas it's really the same to me. The things that really inspire me are more concerned with nature. I'm inspired by many things of course, but just because I'm overseas that doesn't necessarily inspire me. For example, I really like the climate in Japan right now, so various situations can influence your way of thinking. The things that inspire me the most are probably the products that were made in the 1960s. I basically like things that are made with the utmost effort. It could be anything, like an automobile, the craft and engineering of the time was the peak. After this period, there were many unnecessarily "added value" things that changed everything. I see the 1960s as the top, the '70s and '80s was an era where a lot of excessive or superfluous products came about. The most basic designs often come from the '60s, and that's why I like it. When you walk into our store, you might feel like there's an influence from that time.

Not just the States, I also like things that were made during the '60s in Japan like Honda motorcycles. I really like the architecture in Japan during that time, like the architect Kenzo Tange. I have a feeling that the world was at some kind of peak during the 1960s. When people started to see concrete, steel and glass being constructed together. Of course, things changed again from the advance of the digital age with computers and the internet.





**Along with furniture P.F.S now produces a wide range of goods such as lamps, towels, clocks, linens etc. How does the design and development of these other products inform your furniture design?**

I've always liked furniture, but the real reason why I started doing this kind of furniture store is because there was simply no furniture available that I wanted. In other words, I wouldn't be able to find a towel that I wanted, so I would make it. I wouldn't be able to find a clock that I liked, so I would make it. There wouldn't be a certain type of lighting fixture that I wanted, so I would make it. The point is, when I couldn't find anything that I liked, I would often end up making these things in-house. That's why our workshop is the core of our company. Rather than making things we think people want to buy, we are simply making the things that we like.

**Aside from your in-house furniture and home goods, you have worked with clock makers Seiko and French lamp maker Jieldé. Was it always your intention to work with other corporations? What are the benefits and challenges of these joint efforts? How did these working relationships develop?**

Right now, in the interiors world, industrial style products are undergoing a bit of a boom. The Seiko clock and

the Jieldé lamp are both originally "industrial" things, and to return to the story before, didn't belong to the commercial world of "Buy it, buy it!" They are originally tools or instruments that professionals used. Before they became regarded as lifestyle products, they were actually industrial tools and weren't an unnecessary lifestyle purchase. I always wanted to work with and be involved with utilitarian things that professionals would use for their work.

**You have worked with Engineered Garments on a set of armchairs and recently with Dweller by TNP co. ltd [vendor, nonnative] on a collection of home goods. What do you consider when choosing to work with other designers.**

In 1988, at the time when I first started my company, many of my first customers were creative types or designers. A lot of it usually has something to do with word of mouth or friendship. Rather than being strictly business partners, it was often a network or connection to customers from long ago. What do I consider when choosing to work with other designers? That's quite simply a matter of deciding whether I like them or not. When I first meet them, I try to figure out whether they are honest or not. My generation has a kind of punk rock ego, and if there is no honesty there, I can't really commit to anything.



That's probably why I haven't had much to do with larger corporations. There have been offers in the past from big companies, but I haven't taken much interest to them.

**In addition to furniture and goods production, P.F.S also offers commercial and interior design and has worked for Nozy Coffee and Anachronorm on their Tokyo storefronts. How does this branch of P.F.S influence your furniture production?**

It's not as if I do these projects intending to grow my business, it's really just whether a friend asks me to work on something with them. If the feeling is right, and a friend wants to do an interesting store, then I'll do it. It's never really been about making a big profit. If the project seems interesting, then I'll go for it. I do have several assistants, but for most of the projects, the direction of the interior is usually left to me. At the end of the day, it is business, so there will of course be certain demands or requests to adhere to. The reality is, there isn't anyone else in P.F.S of crucial importance when it comes to designs, I even end up doing the graphic design.

**Your products are crafted primarily from solid wood and metal rather than composite or synthetic materials. Is there a reason behind this decision? What role does sustainability and long-lasting quality play in P.F.S's values and design process?**

In Japanese, a word we use a lot is "*fukakachi*" which means "added value." And to sell things these days, there always seems to be unnecessary gimmicks added to a product. I wanted to do away with this. If you shave off these superfluous components, you essentially end up with solid materials like wood and metal. There are also ecological thoughts that go into the process, so I prefer to work with solid materials that can be maintained and used for two to three generations, rather than continuously using temporary things all the time. It's not as if I deliberately choose materials like solid oak from the outset just because I think it's cool. These are just the materials you eventually end up working with as a result. Of course, there are times I use plywood and plastic, I want people to use these things with longevity.

**The Operation A and B tables are particularly striking pieces in your current collection. Tell me about the design and development of these items.**

Specifically for tabletops, using solid wood is better than plywood. Whether you're eating in the morning or at night, there is more of an affectionate attachment with solid wood for these occasions. The limitation is that when using solid wood, the price becomes exceedingly higher. When I thought about how I could lower the price for a solid wood table, I realized that using the solid wood

meant for flooring would make it less expensive. From past generations, there was always a stigma against using solid wood for a tabletop that would originally only be used for flooring. People didn't want to eat their meals off wood made to be stood on. However, younger generations didn't seem to have the same way of thinking. I wanted to make a solid wood table with an affordable price, so that's why I made A and B. Now A is bit different, but when they both debuted they were made from the solid wood that was meant for flooring. The legs and the top also fold, so therefore ideal for tight spaces in Japanese residential areas. It was always a difficulty to transport and deliver tables to small Japanese homes. I called it the Operation Table because they were both able to fold and be transported like operation tables used in the military. Also, I didn't like the idea of receiving a building kit from a company like IKEA (laughs).

**Your company operates and sells primarily within Japan. How does this geography and marketplace influence your creative and business process?**

There have been offers from the past to work internationally, but the logistical costs are very high when delivering heavy wood. When you transport by ship, the environment is very different, often causing the wood to crack. The level of humidity in Japan is also very high, so even within Japan there are challenges with the wood cracking. When you deliver to places like Europe or America, it's difficult and expensive to repair or offer maintenance services, once the product is overseas. That's why for a time I didn't work with wooden furniture. I've thought about working with shops overseas but I think it's just a bit tricky if it's furniture. If they are smaller goods that don't have a problem being exported, then that's fine. There's also the option of licensing overseas, but I would be too concerned about the quality. Up until now, I haven't really thought about making furniture overseas.

**Who do you imagine as the typical P.F.S consumer?**

In the beginning, during the '80s and '90s, there were a lot of creative types and designers. However now, it's expanded to people who have a sense of an established lifestyle. These days, there are a lot of consumers who have a sense of their own personal lifestyle. Age and ethnicity really don't seem to matter anymore; there are many different types of consumers now. If you know the things you like, and have an individual sense of lifestyle, then it really doesn't matter how young or old you are. Our customers can come from anywhere; they can be Asian, European or American, if they have their own sense of personal lifestyle then they tend to be our customer.

**What differences do you see between the industry**







**over 25 years ago and how it operates today?**

Personally, for my company, we first built a factory and since then the factory has grown a little. We also built a shop, and the shop has also since grown too. Little by little the company has been growing, but what we've been doing hasn't changed one bit. The line up of furniture hasn't changed to any great extent since twenty-five years ago, we're still selling the same tables and chairs that we designed back then, and we haven't changed ourselves either. On the other hand, the market has seen an industrial movement, and we have been receiving attention as a result of this. Things with an industrial taste mixed together with wooden furniture might seem to be gaining popularity now, but we haven't changed at all.

**Has your philosophy or approach to P.F.S and its**

**products evolved over the years?**

Not one bit. It hasn't changed at all. I don't think things have changed for me since I was sixteen years old (laughs).

**Any exciting future projects or developments?**

In September, we might be exhibiting our smaller products at a design junction in London. I'd also like to start doing entire residential houses in the future, as a step forward from furniture. As mentioned earlier, I enjoy doing the design for shop interiors, and in this case, exporting furniture isn't a challenge since it's more concerned with design work. It would be great to start working more with overseas partners, in this respect. I've started working a little like this in Taiwan already, but it would be great to



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start working more with people who enjoy my style of shop or interior design not just in Japan, but internationally too.