



Title	Commercial Interior Design by Sinya Okayama from 1970 to 1973
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Citation	The Journal of the Asian Conference of Design History and Theory. 2022, 4, p. 100-109
Version Type	VoR
URL	https://doi.org/10.18910/91145
rights	
Note	

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Commercial Interior Design by Sinya Okayama from 1970 to 1973

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Abstract

Sinya Okayama (b.1941) has been designing furniture, products and commercial interiors as a freelance designer based in Osaka since 1970. In the mid-1960s and early 1970s, the commercial interior design practice in Tokyo was stimulated by the avant-garde art of the time. Okayama's work is one of the few examples in Osaka.

His works have been published in *Domus* and *Japan Interior Design*, and his collaborations with architect Takashi Sakaizawa and architect Alessandro Mendini have been highly acclaimed in Japan and abroad. However, Okayama's activities have not been studied by design or architectural historians until now. Therefore, this study aims to clarify the concept and method of his design and to explore the significance of his works in interior design. As the first result of this research, this presentation will review his activities from 1970, when he became independent as a freelancer, to 1973, when the practice of commercial interior design suddenly became stagnant due to the oil crisis.

During the period from 1970 to 1973, Okayama designed a lot of restaurants including Shaggy (1970), Ghana (1971), Motani (1971), and Area (1973). The early 1970s was the heyday of so-called minimalist design, including Shiro Kuramata's all-white commercial interiors, and Okayama's coffee shops also reflected such fashion. However, in these shops, Okayama experimented with various shapes, colors, and light in the space in order to break through the preconceived notions of minimalist design methods in commercial spaces. Nevertheless, he never forgot that he should create a space which was comfortable for people. This paper, therefore, based on a literature survey and an interview with Okayama himself, will clarify his method and attempt to verify its significance in interior design.

Keywords: *Sinya Okayama; Interior Design; Shop Interior; Commercial Interior*

1. Introduction

Sinya Okayama was born in Osaka in 1941 and has been working as a freelance designer in the city since 1970 (1). Okayama has designed furniture; products; and commercial interiors such as restaurants, stores, offices, and beauty salons. This study analyzes Okayama's design method and attempts to determine the significance of his commercial interior design work.

In Japan, from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s, many interior designers and architects created experimental commercial interior designs inspired by the avant-garde art of the time. The rise of commercial interiors is a phenomenon unique to Japan. The primary reason is that Japan was in a period of rapid economic growth at the time, which inevitably increased the demand for commercial spaces.

Although Tokyo architects and designers were the main figures in the movement of experimental commercial design, Sinya Okayama is one of the few who tried the design outside

Tokyo. Takashi Sakaizawa referred to the spaces created by Okayama as ‘artist-like ideas (2).’ After working for Mitsukoshi Department Store in Osaka as a furniture designer (3), Okayama became a freelancer in 1970 when the Osaka World’s Fair was held. Since then, he has been working mainly in Osaka. Many of his commercial interior designs have been published in the *Japan Interior* and *Shoten Kenchiku* magazines, as well as in the Italian magazine *Domus*.

However, there have been no serious critiques or academic studies on the Okayama interiors. To begin the study of Okayama, this paper will analyze his design method and explore its significance in the history of interior design. The focus is on his commercial interiors published in the *Japan Interior* and *Shoten Kenchiku* magazines from the year of his becoming a freelancer (1970) to the year of the first oil crisis (1973). The reason for limiting the period is that the oil crisis caused stagnation in shop construction and affected the activities of designers.

Okayama’s interior design from 1970 to 1973 is discussed from the following three perspectives:

- Interior design in a single space
- Subtle elements to create a unique minimalist space
- Interior design focusing on furniture

2. Interior design of a single space

In Japan, commercial spaces are often a single room in a building, and the average area is as small as 50–100 square meters. This has led to the development of design methods that use the entire shop space to create a single expression or to provide a single view. In the late 1960s, the concept of ‘environment’ was introduced to such spaces by the plastic artist Katsuhiro Yamaguchi and others (4), and avant-garde designers often covered ceilings and walls with illustrations, grids of tiled joints, piles of pipes, and other single expressions. Such an ‘environment’ is, so to speak, a minimalist spatial design. In 1970, Kuramata’s series of ‘white spaces’ took minimalist interiors to the extreme (5).

Okayama’s interior design is also basically a minimalist design of geometric abstraction, and this character has not changed from 1970 until now. However, if we look at Okayama’s interiors from the early 1970s carefully, we could say that he took a different approach to minimalism.

First, Okayama attempts to design a single space with many colors, which is a feature not seen in many other designers. He uses color in two ways: to create a space with color gradations and to scatter fragments of color into the space. In both methods, elements other than the color are non-decorative, so we could say this is a minimalist design accentuated by the ‘movement of color.’

The first example of a single-space design in color is Coffee Shop Shaggy (Nishimomiya, Hyogo, 1970) from November 1970 (Fig. 1). This coffee shop is a rectangular space of 56 square meters, with a 7meter-wide glass front facing the street. Okayama divided this rectangular space into five smaller spaces using temporary walls (Fig. 2) and created the four gradations of color, area, volume, and floor level. Let us read his comments on the shop:

The main theme of this interior is the psychological effect of gradation.

I divided the given space into five sections and tried to increase the effect of the four gradations of color, area, volume, and floor level by relating them to each other. For the color, I changed the color from white to dark brown (from bright to heavy); for the area, I made the blocks facing the road wider and narrower as they became deeper, and for the volume, I gradually lowered the ceiling in accordance with the gradation of the area and reduced the volume. I also lowered the floor level at the back of the space by 300 millimeters from the ground level (6).



Figure 1: Coffee Shop Shaggy, Nishimomiya, Hyogo, Japan, 1970. Interior design by Sinya Okayama



Figure 2: Coffee Shop Shaggy, floor plan

As the drawing shows, the five spaces (blocks) are vertically continuous from the front toward the back, and the blocks become smaller as they move toward the back. The colors of the blocks become darker as the blocks become smaller. The result is an interior design that uses the entire single space to visually and three-dimensionally express the gradation. When the automatic glass door opens, customers may feel as if they are being sucked from a bright place into a dark place.

The second way he designed a single space using color can be found in Coffee Shop Fine (Fuse, Osaka, 1971), which was constructed in June 1971 (Fig. 3). The shop, which is on the first floor of the building, is a long and narrow space, 5 meter-wide and 20 meter-long, facing the street (Fig. 4). The strip-like space is divided into four areas by partitions, so it is not a single space, but each area is continuous because the partitions are arranged in a left-right direction. The seating is composed of geometric abstract motifs of rectangles, triangles, and semicircles, colored in various colors, except for the white color on the sides of the tables and the triangular chairs. Okayama wrote about the shop as follows:

The theme here was not to use color to express space, but to use space to express color.

The long and narrow shop was divided into small spaces with flat surfaces, and the space was further divided into frames with small walls attached to the tables. The resulting many surfaces

were thought of as a three-dimensional canvas, and I chose eight of my favorite colors (mainly neutral colors) and painted them freely (7).

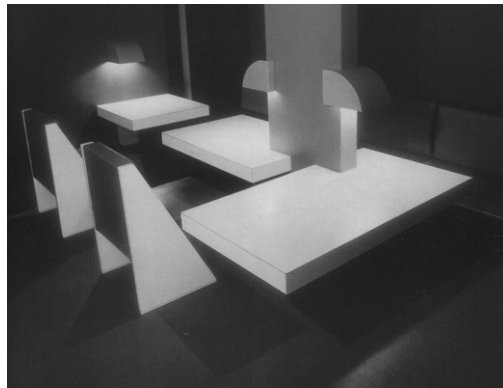


Figure 3: Coffee Shop Fine, Fuse, Osaka, 1971. Interior design by Sinya Okayama

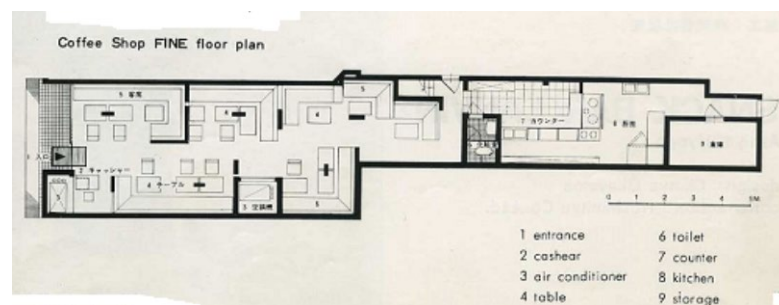


Figure 4: Coffee Shop Fine, floor plan

As Okayama mentioned, this interior uses color to express space, rather than using space to express color, and the very space becomes as if it were the inside of the tableau painting of geometric abstraction—that is, color planes of yellow, white, dark brown, matcha green, orange, blue-green, and other colors are scattered throughout the space.

In Japan, around 1970, minimalist interior design featured little color. In this respect, both Shaggy and Fine can be seen as exceptional approaches to minimalist interior design in Japan.

3. Subtle elements to create a unique minimalist space

As we have seen, Okayama's design approach is different from the ordinary minimal interior. We have seen his way of using color. In this chapter, we will see how he effectively used simple design elements to make his interiors unique.

The interior of Snack Bar Lanvin (Ashiya, Hyogo, 1971) consists of 14 white square tables of different heights placed around the kitchen (Fig. 5). The accumulation of these square tables is actually an image of a dismantled and reconstructed bar. Okayama conceived this design after re-examining the bar function. He wrote as follows:

Here, I tried to go back to the essence of the function [of a bar]. I believe that no matter how long it is, it is a series of width lengths that each person uses. Therefore, I divided the bar into the width lengths necessary for one person to use it, and gathered them together organically according to the shape and function of the bar-room.

The ceiling, floor, and chairs are beige monotone, and the bars are dark green on the sides and white on the rest to emphasize the theme (8).

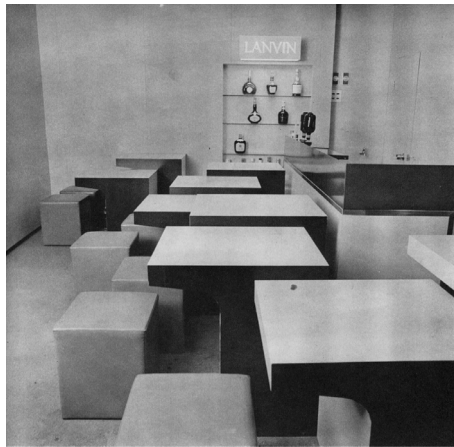


Figure 5: Snack Bar Lanvin, Ashiya, Hyogo, Japan, 1971. Interior design by Sinya Okayama

Although this could be an approach of ‘form follows function,’ what is unique about Okayama is that he saw the function from an unusual angle and developed his thoughts about the function into a unique form. In other words, the creation process began when the function was considered, and the idea of the form was born out of it.

In Lanvin, the different heights of each table and the dark green color of the side of each tabletop make this interior different from ordinary minimalism. What Okayama tried here was to bring subtle movements to the minimal space by designing minor elements such as the side of the tabletop.

In Coffee Shop Motani (Tenmabashi, Osaka, 1971), a single element accentuates a minimalist space. (Fig. 6). Okayama wrote about Motani as follows:

The four pillars in the center of the room are light fixtures. But they are rather important elements of the form that are indispensable to this space. The pipes attached to the chairs and tables are not necessary for the function. They are just attached as an auxiliary motif to the four pillars... If the four pillars were removed, it would be very ordinary. In other words, the theme of this exhibition is an attempt for the individual to dominate the entire space (9).

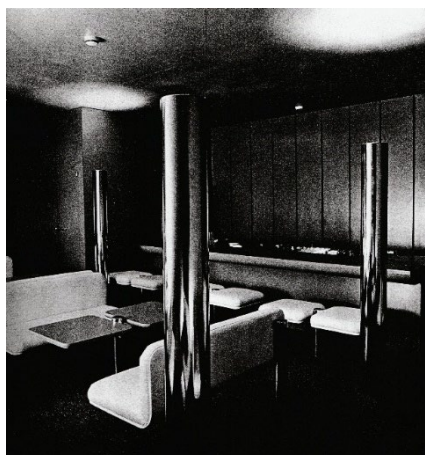


Figure 6: Coffee Shop Motani, Tenmabashi, Osaka, 1971. Interior design by Sinya Okayama

An ‘attempt for the individual to dominate the entire space’ was one of the established methods used in many commercial spaces around 1970. In most cases, the monumental sculpture or sculpture-like furniture or lighting fixtures dominate the space design. In Motani, however, the four pillars of pipes are not what we would describe as ‘monumental’ but just an ordinary cylindrical form. As Okayama wrote, ‘if the four pillars were removed, it would be very ordinary,’ which makes Motani different from normal minimal interiors. The Motani experiment was about seeing how a subtle element of form could make a room stand out.

Similarly, Tea Room Loca (Tenjinbashisuji 6-chome, Osaka, 1973) is an inorganic, minimalist space, but one element brings a sense of movement to the space (Fig. 7). In this case, the element chosen was not an object but light. Okayama wrote about Loca as follows:

The important thing in this interior is the light and the light source...

One thing I wanted to express in the design is the intense glare illuminating customers. The customers have to confront the backlight.

The other is that when you sit in a chair across the table, the light passes in front of your eyes, illuminating the tabletop, but not directly piercing your eyes...

I tried to use glare, which is considered taboo in coffee shops (10).



Figure 7: Tea Room Loca, Tenjinbashisuji 6-chome, Osaka, 1973. Interior design by Sinya Okayama

In Loca, Motani, and Lanvin, the ‘individual’ that dominated the space was not a monumental object with its individuality, as is the case in the interiors of other designers. It was instead primitive design elements, such as lights, cylinders, and narrow sides of tabletops. However, the mere addition of these elements brings individuality to the minimalist space. This is the minimalism in the Okayama style.

4. Interior design focusing on furniture

Japanese avant-garde interior designers sometimes look at commercial spaces as scenes or landscapes. This is probably because the design of commercial spaces requires the placement of the furniture in a given space. Likening a commercial space to a natural landscape often leads to the creation of unusual and fictional spaces. The interior of Kokage Coffee Shop (Higashi-Osaka, 1972) by Okayama is an example of this (11) (Fig. 8).

The many FRP chairs arranged in the square shop have curving backs reminiscent of the long necks of water birds. The tree-like form of the lighting integrated into a pillar also plays a role

in creating the scene. Nevertheless, the scene is fictional, with artificial materials and geometric forms.



Figure 8: Kokage Coffee Shop, Higashi-Osaka, 1972. Interior design by Sinya Okayama

However, in the Restaurant Area in 1973 (Kideracho, Nara, 1973), Okayama tried to break away from the idea of imagining a landscape (Fig. 9). The area is a two-story building of 330 square meters, with a lounge and coffee shop on the first floor and a restaurant and conference room on the second floor. Let us read Okayama's comment on this area:

...It is very difficult to create a total design for a store that requires multiple functions. Therefore, the floors, walls, and ceilings of the first and second floors are made of the same material to create two spaces... I wanted to create a relationship not between the architectural space and the people, but between the furniture and the people.

The restaurant on the second floor was also designed based on this intention... Three large spans are placed for lighting and to block the view to some extent, and chairs and tables are placed within the range of the lighting (12).

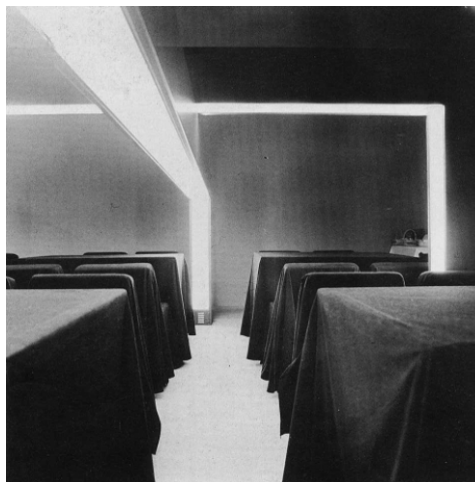


Figure 9: Restaurant Area, Kideracho, Nara, 1973. Interior design by Sinya Okayama

Okayama intended for the Restaurant Area to express a relationship between furniture and people, not between architectural space and people. Indeed, the customers in the restaurant sat at the table, found themselves confronted with a series of tables covered with black cloths, and felt the glare from the black-colored lighting beams just above them. Why did Okayama focus on the relationship between furniture and people in this way? He said that he was interested in science

fiction at that time, which may have influenced the design of this interior (13). Perhaps he wanted to create an infinite space like the universe. As he wrote, ‘chairs and tables are placed within the range of the lighting,’ the customers’ vision was blocked by the glare from the beam. They could not see the walls and ceilings of the room and were left feeling as if the space was infinite.

Interior designers cannot change the shape, area, or volume of the original space. Imagining landscapes in designing an interior is a common method used to transform the original space. Okayama’s Kokage and Area show how he tried to overcome the limitations of the original space in designing commercial interiors.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we looked at examples of Sinya Okayama’s commercial spaces from 1970 to 1973. He is clearly a minimalist, and at first glance, his works may seem to be no different from the minimalist interiors of Japanese avant-garde designers of the same period. However, a closer look at each of the examples reveals that Okayama attempted to establish methods such as minimalism and functionalism (‘Form follows function’) not in an established way but with different approaches.

The mainstream method of minimalism can be described as ‘subtraction.’ It is a method of reducing as many design elements as possible. However, in the case of Okayama, he dared to add colors, as in Shaggy and Fine, or simple forms, as in Motani. These colors and forms are really modest form elements, but as soon as they enter a neutral space, they bring ‘movement’ to the interior. This should be regarded as an alternative approach to minimalism that is different from ‘subtraction.’

Okayama also attempted an alternative approach to functionalism. As seen in the bar design in Snack Lanvin, the form is ‘dismantled’ and its fragments are ‘reconstructed’ as a result of a re-examination of the essence of function.

In Kokage and Area, Okayama showed how interior designers could overcome the original space of the shop. The Kokage restaurant interior was an imagined landscape, but he tried to go beyond this idea in the Area restaurant. In Area, furniture was seen as something that people would confront, and this confrontation made people feel as if they were in an infinite space, not in a normal space made up of a ceiling and walls.

Thus, the commercial spaces by Okayama from 1970 to 1973 demonstrate various ways to overcome the established design methods for commercial spaces. His subtle ways truly have significance in the history of commercial design.

Notes

1. 岡山伸也, the designer’s name in Japanese, is written as ‘Shinya Okayama’ in the Hebonian Roman alphabet. However, his name is registered as ‘Sinya Okayama’ at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, which house examples of Okayama’s products. The notation of the designer’s name in this paper follows these precedents, unless a magazine uses ‘Shinya’. See ‘Vase, 1986, Sinya Okayama’ <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/485064?searchField=All&sortBy=Relevance&ft=okayama&offset=0&rpp=20&pos=2>. ‘Kazenoko’ Stool, designed by Sinya Okayama <https://www.philamuseum.org/collection/object/82067>.
2. Takashi Sakaizawa, “HINO DENTAL CLINIC,” *Japan Interior Design* 162 (September 1972): 36-39. Takashi Sakaizawa (1919-2001) and Sinya Okayama collaborated on the interior

design of several restaurants, starting with Restaurant & Club Bourbon-Z (Akita, Japan, 1971). Okayama also participated in the design group Poe-Form, which was formed by Sakaizawa in 1979, and presented his furniture and other works in four exhibitions held between 1980 and 1986.

3. Sinya Okayama in discussion with Keiko Hashimoto at Café Belle, Sheraton Miyako Hotel Osaka, Uehonmachi, Osaka, August 17, 2021. After leaving Mitsukoshi, he ran a design company, Osaka Interior Design, with his friend who was a graphic designer. The company's works included graphic design for Matsushita Denki.
4. The concept of 'environment' refers to the conditions that physically surround us, such as those created by the American art of 'action painting' and 'happening' in the 1950s and 1960s. In Japan, this concept became popular around the time of the exhibition 'From Space to Environment' held at Ginza Matsuya in Tokyo in November 1966.
5. 'Speak Low' (Roppongi, Tokyo, 1970), 'Market One' (Ginza, Tokyo, 1970), and 'Vogue' (Harajuku, Tokyo, 1970) were designed by Shiro Kuramata and are examples of 'white spaces.' In these interiors, the ceilings, walls, and fixtures were unified in white, and in some cases, the materials were the same. See Deyan Sudjic, *Shiro Kuramata*, London: Phaidon Press, 2013, Catalogue of works [written by Keiko Hashimoto]: 265, 267.
6. Shinya Okayama, "COFFEE SHOP <SHAGGY>," *Japan Interior Design* 144 (March 1971): 47. The quotation was translated from Japanese into English by Keiko Hashimoto.
7. Sinya Okayama, "Coffee Shop fine," *Shoten Kenchiku* 16, no. 10 (October 1971): 107. The quotation was translated from Japanese into English by Keiko Hashimoto.
8. Shinya Okayama, "COFFEE SHOP <FINE>, SNACK BAR <LANVIN>," *Japan Interior Design* 150 (September 1971): 45. The quotation was translated from Japanese into English by Keiko Hashimoto.
9. Okayama, "Coffee Shop Motani," 119. The quotation was translated from Japanese into English by Keiko Hashimoto.
10. Shinya Okayama, "TEA ROOM <LOCA>," *Japan Interior Design* 172 (July 1972): 64. The quotation was translated from Japanese into English by Keiko Hashimoto.
11. Shinya Okayama, "<KOKAGE> COFFEE SHOP," *Japan Interior Design* 162 (September 1972): 57.
12. Shinya Okayama, "RESTAURANT <AREA>," *Japan Interior Design* 175 (October 1973): 70. The quotation was translated from Japanese into English by Keiko Hashimoto.
13. Sinya Okayama in discussion with Keiko Hashimoto, August 17, 2021.

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Author Biography

Keiko Hashimoto

Keiko Hashimoto received BA (English Literature) from Keio University, Tokyo, MA (Art History) from University of East Anglia, UK, and PhD (Design History) from Kobe University, Japan. After working as a Curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, and the Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Art, she became an Assistant Professor at Kobe Gakuin University, Kobe (2011-2106) and Associate Professor at Kindai University, Osaka (2016 to date). Her field of research is History of the 20th Century Art and Design, and she is currently working on commercial interior and furniture design by Shiro Kuramata and other avant-garde interior designers in the late 20th century Japan. She recently wrote; 'Book 2: Catalogue of Works' in Deyan Sudjic, *Shiro Kuramata* (London: Phaidon Press, 2013); 'Kuramata, Shiro (1934-91)' (book chapter) in *The Bloomsbury Encyclopedia of Design*, ed. Clive Edwards (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016); Kuramata entries of *Atlas of Furniture Design* (Weil am Rhein: Vitra Design Museum, 2019).