

# A CHINDO GU MUST EXIST

by Evan Ratliff • photos by Julie Marquart

Don't Laugh: Those Wacky Japanese Inventions Are Making a Comeback.

## THUMBZIPPING

**Designer:** Ryan Moore

**Problem:** Thick digits incapable of snatching zipper.

**Solution:** Loop facilitates easy grab.

**We'd be millionaires.** Our idea was bigger than our Handy-Sun palm-shaped sunscreen applicator or Jesucles Christian-themed Popsicles. The device: a thin piece of clear plastic embedded with what appeared to be broken glass. Stashed in the trunk of a car, it could be rolled out into a neighborhood parking space upon departure, deterring fellow drivers from nabbing coveted spots. We branded it the Shatter-Park. We would patent it. Pay dirt would follow.

The Shatter-Park, it turned out, was no idle barstool concoction. It was a Chindogu, in the same class as breakthroughs like the Hay Fever Hat (which dispenses toilet paper for nose-blowing), the Soap Recycler (a vice that mashes leftover bits together), and the Portable Stoplight (a hand-held traffic signal for pedestrians). These and hundreds more are the brainchildren of Japan's Kenji Kawakami, creator of the decade-old art of "unuseless invention." Literally, Chindogu means "strange tool" (the "unuseless" tag refers to objects that, while not exactly without purpose, barely justify their own existence). In short, they are objects whose designs go to extraordinary—and often ridiculously cumbersome—lengths to solve everyday problems.

In the early 1990s, Kawakami, now 55, dreamed up all kinds of unuseless objects while editing a Japanese magazine that reviewed mail order catalogs. A former scriptwriter for television and designer of the Japanese Bicycle Museum, Kawakami published a few of his inventions and discovered that they were wildly popular among his readers. Around the same time, he crossed paths with Dan Papia, who edited the English-language magazine *Tokyo Journal*, and whose claim to fame was christening the Tokyo Dome the Big Egg. Papia helped Kawakami

## INSTRUCTIONAL PLACEMAT



**Designer:** Emory Krall  
**Problem:** Table setting protocols complex and difficult to remember.  
**Solution:** Provide detailed template.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

# 10 TENETS of CHINDOGU



Adapted from Kenji Kawakami's  
*101 Unuseless Japanese Inventions:  
 The Art of Chindogu*

1ne

### Chindogu cannot be for real use.

It is fundamental to the spirit of Chindogu that inventions claiming Chindogu status must be, from the practical point of view, (almost) completely useless. If you invent something which turns out to be so handy that you use it all the time, then you have failed to make a Chindogu. Try the Patent Office.

2wo

### A Chindogu must exist.

You're not allowed to use a Chindogu, but it must be made. You have to be able to hold it in your hand and think, "I can actually imagine someone using this. Almost." In order to be useless, it must first be.

# “CHINDOGU IS THE ANTITHE PROFESSOR JOSH OWEN.

## TABLETRASHCAN



**Designer:** Shaun Smith  
**Problem:** Energy spent transporting trash from table to receptacle.  
**Solution:** Eliminate distance variable.

### Inherent in Chindogu is the spirit of anarchy.

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Chindogu are man-made objects that have broken free from the chains of usefulness. They represent freedom of thought and action: the freedom to challenge the suffocating historical dominance of conservative utility; the freedom to be (almost) useless.

### Chindogu are tools for everyday life.

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Chindogu are a form of nonverbal communication understandable to everyone, everywhere. Specialized or technical inventions, like a three-handled sprocket loosener for drain pipes centered between two under-the-sink cabinet doors (the uselessness of which will only be appreciated by plumbers) do not count.

### Chindogu are not for sale.

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Chindogu are not tradable commodities. If you accept money for one you surrender your purity. They must not even be sold as a joke.

assemble his oddball ideas into a book. Though it was to be published in English, Papia thought a Japanese name would give it credibility. “I wanted it to sound like an ancient art,” he says. The book, *101 Unuseless Japanese Inventions: The Art of Chindogu*, appeared in 1993. Spurred by healthy sales, Papia and Kawakami issued *99 More Unuseless Japanese Inventions* two years later. The books spawned the formation of Chindogu clubs around the world and led to the founding of the International Chindogu Society—the paperback of the first edition claims the organization “10,000 strong”—and turned Kawakami into a minor celebrity in Japan.

After the second book’s publication, though, Papia and Kawakami were split over the movement’s philosophical direction. In the U.S., talks with David Letterman’s *Late Show* fell through, and plans for *101 Unuseless American Inventions*, never got off the ground. Though Papia had already begun moving on to other things, he was chagrined by the winnowing of interest. He had big plans for Chindogu, envisioning it as a participatory design revolution for the masses. “My goal was to get the word into the dictionary, like *karate* and *karaoke* and other Japanese words,” he says. “I wanted to see it catch on as an art form,” whereas Kawakami, Papia complains, “wanted it to just sort of be his.” Not long after the second book came out, Papia returned to the States, where he enrolled in film school and started a new life as a screenwriter. Meanwhile, Kawakami rode out his notoriety in Japan. Chindogu seemed confined to the Table Trash Can of history.

Not entirely. In the classrooms of American design schools, the art of unuseless design is enjoying an unexpected revival. Josh Owen, a professor of industrial design at the University of Philadelphia, employs Chindogu as a teaching tool to force students to solve everyday problems with everyday materials. Chindogu, he says, “is the antithesis of the style-driven approach. Students are freed from market research, from ‘taste-based user scenarios.’”

In their projects, Owen and his students adhere strictly to the 10 Tenets of Chindogu, laid out by Kawakami in his first book (see sidebar, page 49). Among these: “Chindogu cannot be patented or sold,” “Chindogu must exist,” and “Chindogu are never taboo.” Most important, they must be “tools for everyday life” that embody a “spirit of anarchy—the freedom to be almost useless.” In Owen’s thinking, a Chindogu is “that long-winded ‘better mousetrap’ that takes too many steps to produce an effect.” Indeed, Owen and his students carefully vet each

## WATCHVIEWJACKET



**Designer:** Trina Lefevre  
**Problem:** Sleeve blocks view of watch.  
**Solution:** Permanent window allows unimpeded access.

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**Humor must not be the sole reason for creating Chindogu.**

The creation of Chindogu is fundamentally a problem-solving activity. Humor is simply the byproduct of finding an elaborate or unconventional solution to a problem that may not have been pressing to begin with.

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**Chindogu are not propaganda.**

Chindogu are innocent. They are made to be used, even though they cannot be used. They should not be created as a perverse or ironic comment on the sorry state of mankind.

8ight

**Chindogu are never taboo**

The International Chindogu Society has established certain standards of social decency. Cheap sexual innuendo, humor of a vulgar nature, and sick or cruel jokes that debase the sanctity of living things are not allowed.

## TIEBIB



**Designer:** Jarrett Seng  
**Problem:** Saucy foods splatter fancy work clothes.  
**Solution:** Stealthy bib folds out of unassuming tie.

More  
Chindogu,  
please.





**STAYDRYPLUNGER**

**Designer:** Marc Caccavo  
**Problem:** Risk of splashes during plunging action.  
**Solution:** Allows for plunging while toilet lid is down.

**Chindogu can never be patented.**

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Chindogu are offerings to the rest of the world—they are not therefore ideas to be copyrighted, patented, collected, and owned. As they say in Spain, *Mi Chindogu Es Tu Chindogu*.

**Chindogu are without prejudice.**

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Chindogu must never favor one race or religion over another. Young and old, male and female, rich and poor—all should have a free and equal chance to enjoy each and every Chindogu.

**CHINDOGU**

proposed Chindogu to make sure it's not too useful. Some of the projects that made the cut include the Watch Window Jacket (with a section cut from the sleeve for reading your watch), the Table Trash Can (with a hole at the center for waste disposal), and the Carpet Remnant Carpet (created by fastening together scraps and samples). "The tenets," Owen says, "are extremely effective in dictating a procedure for making an object that is really devoid of any sort of superficial style."

Owen incorporates the spirit of uselessness into his own work, which often features renewed takes on common objects. His latest creation, the Knock-Off Lamp, sold by Bozart, is a bowling pin light that turns off when tipped over. "That's where product design gets fun," he says, "when it causes you to rethink the ordinary." Don Norman, a professor of computer science at Northwestern University and the author of *Design of Everyday Things*, recommends Kawakami's books to his students. "It appeals to my bizarre sense of humor," Norman says. While Chindogu are useless, or nearly so, they hit a *Seinfeld*-esque, design-about-nothing nerve—think Kramer's coffee table book as coffee table—highlighting the absurdity of daily life. "You can't come up with these things without actually having thought about what people do throughout the day," Norman says. "It exposes real problems, often through silly solutions."

A decade after the first Chindogu book appeared, it has become required reading among industrial designers. "The wonderful thing about Chindogu is you think to yourself, 'Well, that could work,'" Owen says. Kawakami, meanwhile, has produced several Japanese-language follow-ups to his first edition, and of late has been working with Hollywood producers on a live television show à la *Iron Chef*. Papia, for his part, now presides as president of the International Chindogu Society. He still receives submissions and has been collecting them for another book. Greatest hits thus far include Exercise Chopsticks for strengthening fingers and Pitstopper sponges that keep your armpits dry.

The art of Chindogu perseveres, but so far the fortunes from our Shatter-Park have yet to materialize. The truth is we never got around to making it. But in a remarkable example of spontaneous generation, one of Owen's students did. He created a broken glass-like rollout called the Space Saver made from a special rubber developed by a Hollywood props company. Faithful to the spirit of Chindogu, he never marketed it. 🍷



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