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Philosophos

-Affectionately dedicated to all lovers of wisdom everywhere.

With Junko Nara

‘Designing Space and Life’

Today’s Guest Instructor



Ms. Miyuki Yamaguchi

Interior Designer

Principal / Miyuki Yamaguchi Design Studio

Instructor / The University of California, Berkeley, Extension

The First Graduate / former Sky Business School

Instead of Dr. Jun Nara, I, Junko Nara, will join this Philosophos as an interviewer. Today’s guest instructor is truly an important and wonderful person for Sky Business. This is Ms. Miyuki Yamaguchi, the first graduate of former Sky Business School (Sky)!

When Ms. Yamaguchi was a high school student, she enrolled in Sky to learn English. She is originally from Setagaya, Tokyo. And she finished Tokiwamatsu Gakuen Senior High School in Meguro, Tokyo. Then, she went on to attend the University of California at Berkeley, and graduated with a BA degree in architecture.

After graduation, Ms. Yamaguchi joined design firms such as Gensler and Brayton Hughes Design Studios. She was a senior designer in charge of several projects such as Four Seasons Hotels & Resorts, Fairmont Hotels & Resorts, Lucasfilm, IBM, Chase Bank, exclusive residences in San Francisco and beyond. A few of her projects have also been honored with design awards from IIDA, Boutique Design and Lodging & Hospitality Design .

Recently, Ms. Yamaguchi was invited to take part in the Napa Valley Showhouse, California, by one of the popular interior magazines in the US, 'Traditional Home' and enjoyed the very exclusive design experience. She is also an instructor at UC Berkeley Extension. She currently resides in Napa, California with her husband, Izumi, a son, an undergraduate student at University of Pennsylvania, and a daughter, a middle school student.

This time, we would like to ask Ms. Yamaguchi about her life experiences including lessons from Sky Business School, student life, her job as an interior designer, raising her children, difficulty in surviving in American society as a Japanese-American woman, etc. We will also learn her ideas about how to find new ways of life in the competitive society.

The Lessons I learned from Sky Business School

—Ms. Yamaguchi, please let me call you 'Miyuki' as I have always called you. Thank you so much for joining the Philosophos today! When Miyuki was a high school student, you enrolled in *Sky*. Actually, I opened my small English tutoring school, *Sky*, with only three students. You were one of the three. I remember you were really an excellent student! Would you kindly share your memories of *Sky* with us?

Yamaguchi: Thank you for having me. I looked forward to this opportunity. I have nothing but fond memories of *Sky*. I spent more than an hour and a half commuting to *Sky* by train each way after school but it was not trouble at all. I truly enjoyed the

at-home and relaxing atmosphere at your home to learn how to converse in English although I was nervous from time to time.

— When you were a high school student, you were very sensible and hardworking. Indeed, you came to my class on your way home from high school. It took three hours to come to *Sky* and go back to your home! I think my English lessons were strict, but besides English, what did you learn from *Sky*? Do you think the lessons at *Sky* are still beneficial to your life later?

Yamaguchi: My main purpose of attending *Sky* was to learn English but I had opportunities to hear conversations between you and your other students who were aiming to become flight attendants and your flying experience stories. And I learned some of the must-have business etiquette or proper attitudes for the first time. For instance, this may be very basic but it is important not to be late for your business appointment. Or your 100% focus is critical when studying or learning something new. I clearly remember Ms. Nara, you, talking about your wanting to play at a beach as much as you could during your training days in Hawaii. You paid 100 % attention and absorbed everything during classes so that you did not need to spend any time studying after classes. And you had fun at the beach as you wished. I often recalled that story and realized how important it is to focus on what you do.

— Excellent! You were still a teenager, but you grasped my point. Yes, I'm talking about concentration. Recently, I particularly think that training ourselves means how much we can improve our concentration while doing little things everyday. I started with only three students. This was the beginning of *Sky*. Each of them was pursuing a different career path. As I recall those days, you had a plan to study abroad but you were studying with two other students. It's understandable if you would not be interested in studying the same materials because the other students were studying to become flight attendants. You might think the lessons regarding flight attendants had nothing to do with your future dream. But, you tried to learn a lot from my lessons. You could do it because you had the ability to focus. This is why I say it is important to concentrate on what you do every moment every day. Of course, we should also have some time to just relax and recharge your energy.

Student Life at the UC-Berkeley

— You had your chance to study in the US after high school! Finally, you were a graduate from UC Berkeley. When you attended college, I imagine you had a very hard time studying in English and coursework in your major. How did you overcome your difficulties?

Yamaguchi: I was confident with my English as I was a good student in Japan. However, as soon as I arrived in the US, I was bewildered when I went shopping. I knew how to say “how much is it?” or “I’ll take this, please.” But what I did not learn at school is what to say when a store clerk says to you, “thank you” after you pay. Back then, I was still thinking everything in Japanese and tried to figure how to say what I was thinking in Japanese in English. So if shopping in Japan, you would say “do-mo” in Japanese to the store clerk as you leave the store. The Japanese word “do-mo” is so convenient. It means (*Abbreviation*) thanks; (*Adverb*) much (thanks); very (sorry); quite (regret); (*Interjection*) greetings; hello; goodbye. But I blanked out as I searched for literal translation of the word. Then, all of a sudden, I became very concerned and worried about my English abilities.

While beginning to attend college in the US, I faced the real challenge of studying everything in English. The US history class I took in my very first semester was especially difficult. I had no clue what my professor was saying during lectures. I immediately spotted a student who seemed very smart in the classroom and asked if I could borrow her notes after each class. I copied word to word by hand and memorized every single word and recited all the notes many many times.

It was a pleasure taking architecture design classes at UC Berkeley because I got to design and build models. What was very difficult for me was architecture history classes and other non-architecture classes which were prerequisites to graduate such as sociology classes. I sat at the very front row with my tape recorder device to record the very fast talking professor's lectures. I listened to the tape every night over and over. But then I soon realized that it was also challenging to the local American students as well. Sitting next to me, they also had tape recorders. The lectures were during lunch time. So those US students had a tape recorder on one hand and a sandwich on the other hand. Sitting in the front row, I would never dare to eat in front of my professor during lectures. I found it very amusing. Well, this got off the subject a little bit but anyway, I somehow managed to graduate by figuring out ways for me to overcome the language

barrier at college.

—Me, too (laughter). A Pan Am's flight attendant was the very first job I landed when I just turned nineteen years old. I had to move to the US so suddenly. I also felt many Americans spoke much faster. Everything drastically changed for me. The environment and customs were different. I was so confused that I sometimes could not understand what people were saying in English. By the way, why did you decide to major in architecture? While you were a student, did you already decide to become an interior designer in the future?

Yamaguchi: The merit of going to college in the US is that you can choose your major or you can change your major after you enter college. That is not possible in Japan. I never dreamed of studying architecture while in high school in Japan. Prior to declaring my major at the beginning of junior year, I took an architecture class and I found it very interesting and wanted to study further. Architecture is inter-disciplined and related to many different fields. You are not only required to have design sense but also you need to have diverse knowledge and disciplines in math, physics, psychology, sociology, etc. It was a perfect match for me. I also noticed that architecture students seemed 'cool' and I wanted to be like one of them and fit in among them. It was a very simple reason. I actually enjoyed the other arch students company and architecture projects very much. But also in stead of looking at buildings from the 'outside', I knew that I was more interested in looking at how people live, work 'inside' the buildings. Then I was certain I wanted to become an interior designer upon graduating from college.

—I see. The field of interior design profession sounds interesting!



Ms. Yamaguchi, at the UC-Berkeley Commencement

Surviving in the US Interior Design Industry

—It’s no doubt that surviving in any industries, especially in the US, is really hard. But, in your case, how did you find your job and build your career?

Yamaguchi: It was unbelievably difficult to find a job when I finished college. It was in the midst of the economic slump in the late 80's. Among my college friends, there were quite a few who gave up on finding a job entirely. Some changed their career direction from an architect to a restaurant chef or some went on traveling around the world with a back pack. Then what did I do? I made a list of interior design firms in San Francisco and without appointments I just showed up and knocked on their door and said, “Hi, I just finished college and I would like to work here.” I was brave, fearless and desperate. I could have done that only because I was young. Luckily I landed my first job after the 3rd or 4th office door I knocked on. After the first job, I always challenged myself by seeking the next design firm to work where I could gain more project experience or try and see how I could expand my career at a firm ranked No.1 in the US. I was given a design director or vice president position which helped broaden my project experience.

— That’s an amazing story! You visited some design offices without making an appointment. When you finished university, the US suffered from its economic recession. Some architecture college graduates had to choose other career options. More importantly, it’s surprising to hear that there was an office that accepted your

enthusiasm and talent. In this way, you have built your career.

Yamaguchi: I was extremely happy to get my very first job as an interior designer. Of course, my initial salary was very little. But it was one of the happiest feeling to get paid for doing what I always wanted to do! I am always grateful for the very first job. I can never forget my gratitude to the very first employer.



At the office. Ms. Yamaguchi as a fledgling interior designer.

—Many Japanese like us are not so familiar with the interior design industry in the US. Would you briefly explain about your job? Actually, how do you proceed with your work?

Yamaguchi: My project types vary from offices, banks, hotels, conference centers to private residences. How I work slightly differs from project to project but typically a project team consists of an owner as a client, an architect and contractors. I will grasp the building design and the immediate surrounding's conditions, and propose interior design to meet the owner's request. Sometimes, as a designer, I will establish and present a design concept appropriate for the project. Then I proceed to design further such as space planning, walls/ceilings/floors design, and select finishes and furnishings. Along with samples and sketches, I present the design ideas. Constantly confirming and

paying attention to the budget, schedules, building codes, fire safety regulations, ADA and sustainability, I compile the drawings and design specifications. Sometimes revisions of design, sketches and re-selections are required. I also work with contractors on site and assist purchasing of furnishings for the owner. Upon completion of new building construction or renovation work, furnishings and artwork are installed. It is always my pleasure to see my client smile at the end of the long design process.

—I see. I do believe that, in any job, the ultimate purpose of a job is to make people satisfied and happy. Miyuki, you are very pleased to provide your services to the clients. But, in your point of view, what is the most difficult aspect or the most vital aspect of your job that you must pay special attention to?

Yamaguchi: The job of an interior designer is, of course, to design but it is also a job to satisfy my clients; in other words, of a service industry. It is the most delightful outcome when my clients are pleased at the end of a project. To achieve success in a project, I believe maintaining the team spirit high is the key. There will always be a problem or an issue. But with the attitude to tackle any obstacle, to help one another and to work together as a team are essential to enjoy the project and see the successful result at the end.

— What is the source of your creativity? How do you lead your wonderful ideas to your design?

Yamaguchi: I believe creativity is derived from the memories from every day life. With having my five senses always fully alert, when thinking about my project or client, all of my past knowledge, memories and thoughts are processed and ideas relevant to the project become clear in my head. And I start sketching and gathering samples and my ideas become materialized and become a reality.

—I'm a complete amateur at interior design, but I really love your work. Your design seems to be magnificent yet delicate, hospitable, and noble.



**You can find more interior images by Ms. Yamaguchi at her website:
www.miyukiyamaguchi.com**

—Miyuki, you must have a very busy life everyday, but what type of projects would you like to work on in the future?

Yamaguchi: I would like to focus on projects which enhance people's lifestyles. Through my design, I would love to help enrich people's every day life. In the past, I have designed office spaces and bank branches. But my focus now is project relating to living, nourishing, nurturing and healing and I would like to design to help people live better. I recently started my own design practice to better serve my clients and I look forward to doing so very much.

As Mother, my message to my son and daughter...

—Miyuki, you have your husband, Izumi, and two excellent children. Any mothers in the world always hope their children will academically excel at school. In your case, how do you raise your children, how do you connect or communicate with your children? Are you a so-called education mother like Prof. Amy Chua (Yale Law School)'s book '*Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*'?

Yamaguchi: I leave responsibility of studying to my children. Grades are generally the reflection of their learning so if their grades are not so great, I will question whether my children are understanding what they are studying or they are neglecting to learn and make sure to have a conversation. My older son went to school whose motto is to 'learn

to love to learn for the rest of your life' and my daughter is going to school whose motto is to 'learn to take responsibilities for your actions'. So I am curious to see how they become different and how they become similar in the future. I don't think of myself as a strict mother about education but I do care to help my children learn what they do not understand if grades go down.

—Academic achievement is of course important, but what do you expect your children to value the most or focus on in their lives? What does your husband think about that?

Yamaguchi: I want my children to find what they love to do and move towards their dreams or goals and be independent. My husband agrees with me.

To other women, and graduates and current students of *Sky*...

—Like you, I think it's really tough for minority women including Japanese to survive in the competitive job market in the US. I'm confident to say that your life story is one of the successful cases. Contrary to your success story, unfortunately there are many women who cannot demonstrate their talents in society or women like single mothers with financial difficulties. To encourage such women, please share your thoughts.



Ms. Yamaguchi with her colleagues at the airport.

Yamaguchi: I have never thought myself as a successful woman who has advanced through in the competitive world. I have been just working and living my way as I please at the pace as I wish. I get sad and depressed and wonder once in a while. But I tell myself to persevere. Even a seemingly successful and powerful woman can have some pain which cannot be realized or shared with others. Princess Diana is probably a notable example.

—Time flies! There are thousands of graduates and students behind you at *Sky*. Many of them are still working very hard in the airline industry. Some of them changed their jobs afterwards. Others already retired from the industry and became housewives. They are now raising their children. They have various lives. Do you have any message to them including to the current *Sky* students?

Yamaguchi: A stay-home-mom is also a real job. Child rearing is very difficult and the most important job in the whole world is to nurture our next generation. I have recently come across a Will Smith youtube video in which he talks about his success during the interview. “You decide”, then all the actions follow. Your path begins to open and widen. Upon setting your mind to it, you work ridiculously hard for it. I totally understand it. However, life is tough. In stead of suffering by yourself or feeling no way out, your students should consult you. Staying in touch with your teacher, you can be reminded of your original goal or inspiration. Ms. Nara is as if our life coach to us all.

— I’m very glad to hear your message to the *Sky* graduates and students. Anyone including myself cannot live alone. I think the biggest fortune in life is to meet people I can feel free to ask and help each other. In my life, during K-12 and university, I met wonderful teachers and professors. I also appreciate my mother and father. For decades, I have my best friends I can openly talk with. They encouraged me so much when I had a hard time in my life.

Designing my life

— This is the last question. Since finishing high school, unlike many other typical Japanese women, you have pursued your way of life. As an interior designer, it seems to me that you have designed your life as well as spaces. To do so, I think you will need courage as much as your talent. What do you think of this?

Yamaguchi: I have never thought that way. It sounds very cool to say I design spaces as well as my life. As you point out, I have walked a different life path from most Japanese women. After finishing high school, I moved to the US to study at college, got married, got a job, had a son at age 30 and had a daughter at age 40. Thanks to support from you, my parents and my husband, I have been able to live a life like this. We cannot live alone. We help each other, relate to each other and we live together. As Will Smith has said, once you decide, you just keep moving forward. That's life.



Napa Showcase Poach designed by Ms. Yamaguchi

—Miyuki, I was very impressed with your story. You have a wonderful perception towards your job and life! More significantly, you, a Japanese woman, have opened up a new path of life in a foreign country. Despite lifestyle, customs and language differences, you have passionately and optimistically lived in the US. You have also coped with many challenges in your job and life. This is surreal! I am truly proud of you, Miyuki, one of the first graduates among the three *Sky* students. I'm really glad to talk with you. Thank you so much today for sharing your precious time and your thoughts with me despite your busy schedule.

Yamaguchi: The pleasure was mine. Thank you.



To contact Ms. Yamaguchi's Office, visit her website at

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