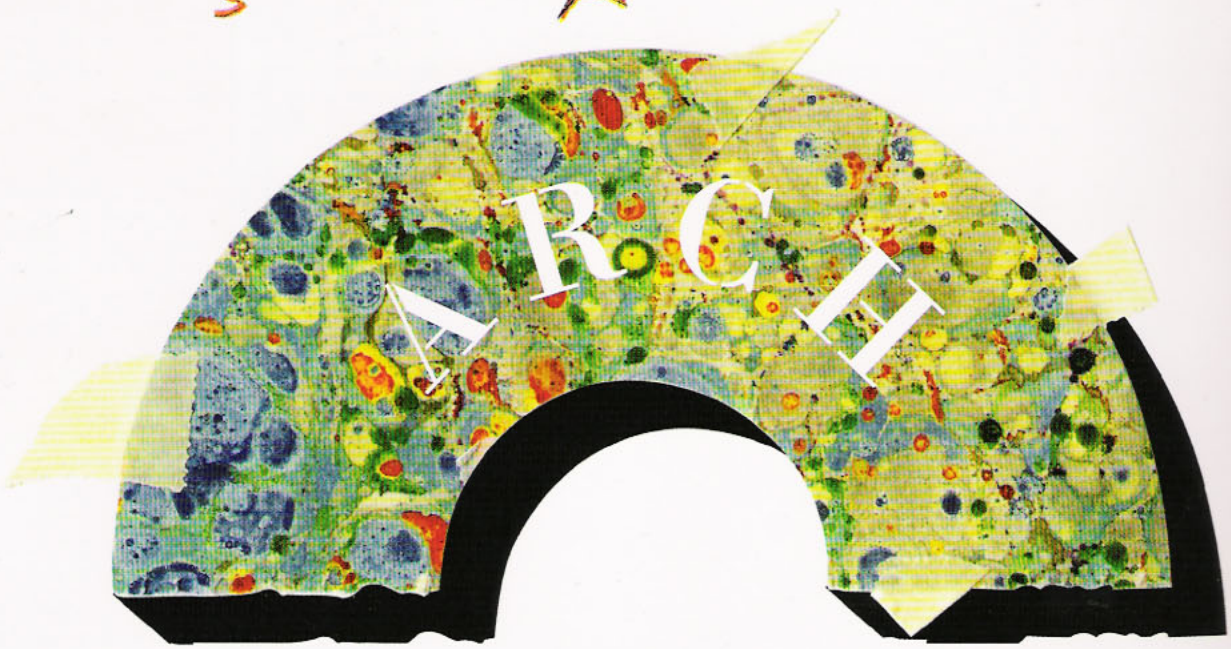
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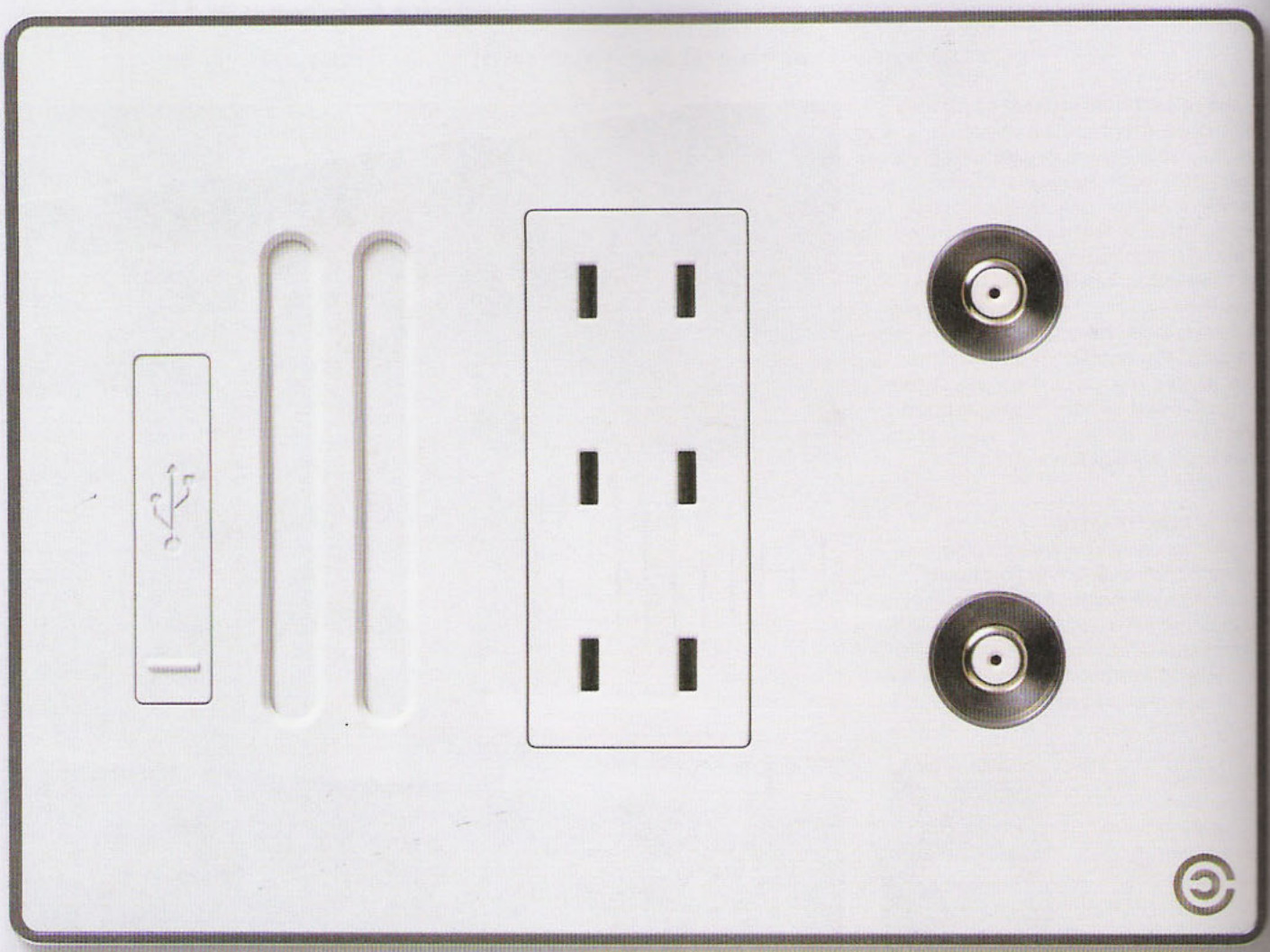
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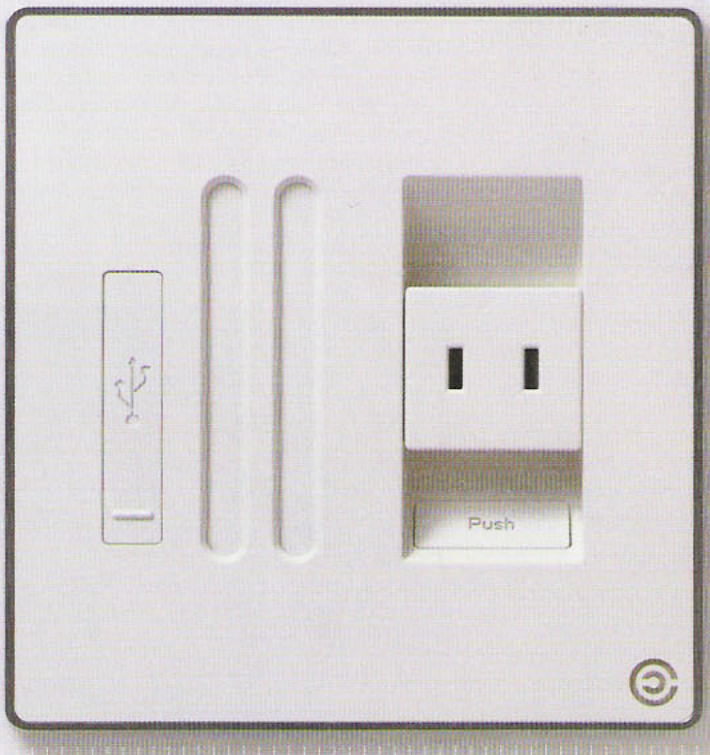
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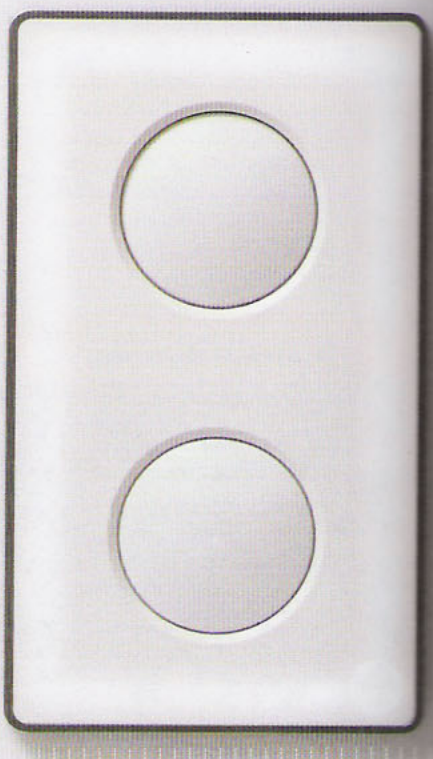


WORTH A PLUG

This page, above, Sakai's triple socket for ComCom includes a hard disk and USB port and can store music and movies or send them to other products

Left, the double socket incorporates a built-in extension lead

Right, the switch plate can be set up to turn on several lights at once



Turning it on

Japan's big companies are clamouring to get top electronics designer Toshihiko Sakai to transform their ideas into amazing appliances, but this switched on surf fan is just as interested in creating exciting interiors

Writer Fiona Wilson

If Toshihiko Sakai had followed his boyhood dream he'd be designing motorbikes by now. Luckily, he was diverted by a degree in industrial design and discovered that his true talent lay in electronics. Today he's one of a handful of independent electronics designers in Japan who are called on by big companies looking for fresh ideas.

Sakai flirts with the corporate world, but prefers to work for himself. After graduation he spent three years in a Tokyo design studio before leaving for Australia to surf. Upon returning to Japan, he set up Sakai Design. And when he's not designing computer equipment and mobile phones, he switches his attention to other design projects, turning out furniture and commercial interiors.

His unusual mix of electronics and interior design has served him well in his latest commission for Japanese company Comfortable Communications (ComCom). Originally asked to design a multi-appliance remote control unit for its new hi-tech apartments, Sakai ended up designing a series of 22 integrated home appliances – all controlled by the one remote. He chose a neutral look for the appliances, opting for white – the standard colour for new Tokyo apartments – and silver, for a high-end sheen. 'The products are very complicated technically,' he says, 'but I wanted them to look clean and simple.'

There's a selection of micro-products – the 007 gadgets, as Sakai calls them: a tiny projector, a mini digital camera that also works as a surveillance camera, and a microphone that is good both for hands-free phone calls and for listening in on your apartment when you're away from home. Then there are the audio-visual goods – two flat-screen televisions and CD and DVD players with wall- or floor-mounted speakers – and light switches and plug sockets to complete the system. Lights can be turned on in five rooms at once and movies zapped straight from an online movie store to the TV. The system will be up and running in October, when ComCom unveils its show apartment in Tokyo's Daikanyama district.

Sakai's flitting between the electronics and interiors worlds means he's as likely to appear at Milan's Salone Internazionale del Mobile as at Tokyo Designers Block. His diverse portfolio ranges from an exhibition space for Yamaha (for whom he's now designing an electronic keyboard) to a car navigation system for Sharp.

One of his most recent commissions was to design the interior of Fumo, a dog-friendly pizzeria based in Tokyo. Catering to the handbag-sized dogs favoured in Japan's capital, Fumo offers well-dressed dachshunds space to run around in and pizzas of their own. Sakai came up with a simple but robust interior that uses tough acrylic tables and hard-wearing flooring more usually seen on indoor athletics tracks. Other extra-curricular projects have included pieces of furniture like 'Nap', a rattan and cloth seat shaped like the head of a sleeping Buddha, and 'Yoko', a chair originally designed for his mother's coffee shop. 'Everything's so micro, so tiny with electronics,' he says. 'Sometimes it's good just to take a break.' ✱

Sakai Design Associate, tel: 81.3 5363 1039, www.sakaidesign.com



INSPECT A GADGET
This 125mm projector can display movies on the wall or ceiling