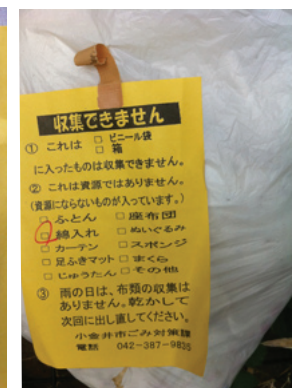
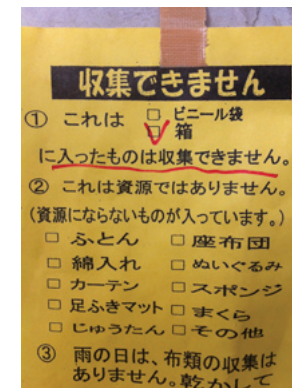


**Gomi:** Waste and Society in Japan  
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www.livedebris.org  
Taylor Cass Stevenson



It's hard to go even a few days in Tokyo without understanding the city's complex household disposal rules. One must purchase bags to dispose of anything. Blue bags for plastic, brown for food waste. Even the detailed calendar of what to put out when will not always help in avoiding violations.



With Tokyo's growth in garbage, Jungle Crows migrated from nature to the city to prey on waste. This led to two types of cages: one for waste and one, a trap, for crows. Tokyo has tried many methods for eradicating crows, mostly involving traps and poisonous gas. Japan has clearly thought long and hard on the subject of waste, so it's surprising to see food and goods packaged in so many layers of plastic.



One can see Zero Waste signs around Tokyo, though it's clear that the definition of "zero waste" is aesthetic and hardly literal. Japan, which burns more waste than any other developed country, has a poor track record for protecting the health of its citizens from the hazards of modern waste treatment. After a series of public controversies over the emission of toxic dioxins from waste incinerators in the 1990s, the Japanese government enforced a rigid waste separation regime in order to avoid the incineration of hazardous chlorine-based plastics, which then became labeled "unburnable waste." Other plastic remained "burnable," as is food waste. If Japan wanted to seriously reduce waste, however, there's little doubt that its populace would comply with new rules. In the "zero waste" town of Kamikatsu, people segregate their waste into 32 different categories and recycle 85% of it.

Left sign reads: A serious waste announcement: Koganei aims to become a zero waste (*gomi zero*) town.



It can be hard to stomach sending organic waste to an incinerator, but there are alternatives. Composting pellets can help organic waste break down faster, though one needs to use a lot of them and they aren't cheap! One can also mail-order red worms to start a worm bin. In some places, people use small ovens to cook the moisture out of organic waste, which they can then apply to their gardens. The electricity usage is questionable, though.

Goro Oshida has been a municipal waste worker in Tokyo since the 1970s and is also the president of the Sanitation Workers Union for Human Rights. He claims that valorizing cleanliness, and providing waste workers with proper uniforms and facilities to maintain personal cleanliness, has significantly de-stigmatized the profession. There is still need for a human rights union for sanitation workers because discrimination continues to be a problem in Japan. In Japan's feudal Edo era caste system, bottom-rung *Burakumin* (hamlet people) filled dirty and unsavory jobs such as waste management, butchering and leather work. Many of these professions are still filled by descendents of *Burakumin*. It's from the legacy of caste that derogatory terms for sanitation workers, such as "eta," (meaning abundance of filth), originate. In Japan in the 1970s, when waste was more stigmatized than it is today, waste collectors were not permitted to carry anything higher than a high school diploma. Today, after extensive cleaning campaigns aimed at demonizing waste through the promotion of cleanliness, waste collection is a sought after job and a high school diploma is mandatory. Attaching value to material waste, or even attaching value to human waste collectors, can restrict educationally or economically disadvantaged people from participating in formal waste management scenarios unless explicit actions are taken to maintain their involvement. Tokyo's waste collection systems, which ban direct scavenging from municipal and private collection sites, do allow groups, like apartment complexes, to save materials and sell them directly to recycling companies. They have also allowed certain homeless groups to amass materials to sell to private recyclers, such as in Tokyo's Miyashita Park, which even provides the homeless community with storage space for cans and bottles.



Miyashita Park's homeless camp and recyclables storage center

Brazilian artist Mundano poses in Can Man installation created by this writer, in reaction to Miyashita Park's homeless recycler population.





In Tokyo, where space is always limited, It's easy to see how a keen eye for cleanliness, order and aesthetics has led to overwhelming rates of waste generation. It is the kind of immaculate society that encourages a person to modify her appearance to appear clean, young and "lovely." It is the kind of duty-driven society that compels people to use disposable face masks on the train when they are sick, though the masks only seem to divert a person's sick breath sideways.



The contrast between old and new is everywhere. And, while very old traditions are valued, barely old things don't hold as much value. Thrift shops with names like "Hard-off" don't exactly glorify the act of shopping there. Though, the name could, perhaps, be worse. Traditionally, people were resistant to used clothes because remnants of the past owner's spirit might linger in the clothing. Such beliefs are diminishing and now expensive, second hand clothing boutiques populate Tokyo's hip, bohemian neighborhoods.



Japan is full of good ideas that reduce waste, like toilets with sink water you can wash your hands in before it fills the tank, and traditional *furoshiki* wrapping cloths that can be used for carrying and wrapping most anything. In the semi-agricultural suburbs of Tokyo, just 20 minutes from downtown, one can find unmanned farm stands and vending machines that operate on trust. One is meant to leave money in a metal can in exchange for fresh produce. This not only saves on transportation, but it also means the vegetables aren't wrapped in plastic, as is often the case in supermarkets. Traditional Japanese sandals are another example of clever reuse. *Zori*, cloth sandals that are hand-woven from old kimono fabric, are modeled after traditional *owaraji* sandals, made from rice straw and sometimes enlarged for display at temples. Ms. Sumire Tanaka teaches *zori* weaving at the Edo Open Air Museum and Nogawa Park.





Japanese artists grapple with the aesthetics of garbage in direct and beautiful ways. Kimiyo Mishima, famous for her larger-than-life sculpture of a garbage can in Naoshima, Japan, has devoted her artistic practice to replicating non-durable waste materials as sculpture.

Kanako Ohya's ethereal paintings of leaky garbage bags similarly spark one to reconsider our aesthetic distaste for that which is deemed useless.

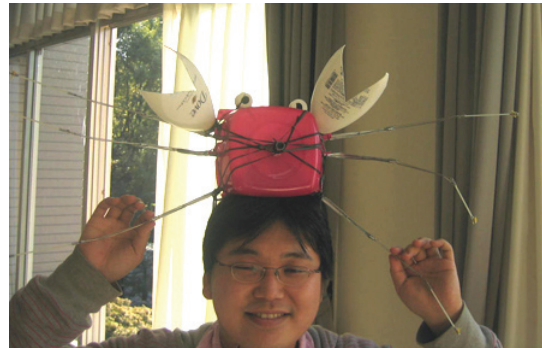


The Casa Project ([casaproject.com](http://casaproject.com)) develops systems for recovering abandoned and broken umbrellas, then teaches people to reuse them into functional and fun items.

Tokyo artist Takuo Yamada ([r-type-1.net](http://r-type-1.net)) gleans materials from recycling and waste sites to engineer magnificent installations, stage designs and other futuristic objects.



There is no doubt that Japanese society is highly creative. One might expect that the country's many rules and social pressure to conform would stifle creativity, and perhaps it does. But Japan's dedication to discipline and perfectionism results in well crafted works and systems. Japanese social science students who attended a Live Debris workshop in Tokyo demonstrated surprising skill and creativity with plastic waste.





Of all of the interesting sights of Japan, the details of a scrap yard proved one of the more memorable.





### Sang Falsus

Mushrooms and meat, spinach and seafood, green tea and dairy...such foods are most susceptible to radioactive contamination. Living in Japan today, we know this. But suspicion of the very food we eat is not a unique condition. Headlines just in the past month revealed that 70% of Indian milk is contaminated with fillers like fertilizers and detergents, that shiitake mushrooms grown near Tokyo were found to be highly radioactive and that most ground beef sold in the US contains "pink slime." The illusive search for food that is definitively nourishing has grown akin to that for the Holy Grail, the Sang Real.

What distinguishes food from waste, holy from ordinary, real from false, saying grace from a simple act of faith? These are mysteries requiring more effort to unscramble than most are willing to put forth. So raise your glass, ladies and gentlemen, to the new era of nutritional chance, tricks and illusions, wonders and edible mysteries.

Tokyo, 2013

Taylor Cass