

The Gaijin Futurist (21C edited version)

Jim Dator dreamt of becoming part of Japan but the resulting culture shock made him look to the future

Richard Slaughter

Futurists often approach their field with great enthusiasm. But Jim Dator's 'road to Damascus' started with rejection in Japan.

"I learned to have a certain independence from culture which I guess many people never acquire," Jim Dator says, describing his early passion for Japan. "I don't feel in the slightest bound by [conventions] because for six years the culture to which I so fervently desired to adhere wouldn't accept me no matter how I behaved."

Dator travelled to Japan partly to discover why this small and war-beaten country had industrialised so much more rapidly than any other non-Western country of the time. He also came to understand the crucial relationship between values, technology, and society. "I learned that, no matter how hard I tried, or how 'Japanese' I thought I was, Japanese society is impossible to penetrate from the outside.

"If I did something thoroughly outrageous from a middle class American point of view, the Japanese tolerated it, but considered me to be a *hen na gaijin* (strange foreigner, or outsider). If I did something thoroughly conventional from a middle-class American point of view, they also tolerated it but *still* considered me to be a *hen na gaijin*. No matter what I did, no matter how outrageous or conventional from my American point of view, the Japanese both tolerated it and rejected it! So when I came back to the US, I decided not to care what middle class America – or anyone else – thought about me. If it seemed right to me, I'd do it. If it seemed wrong (no matter how strongly my culture said it was right), I would resist it. And I found I could do so easily and without (as far as I can tell) any guilt".

Dator, amongst the best-known figures in the international futures community, established the first college course in futures studies at Virginia Technical College in the U.S. in 1967.

Since '69 he has directed the Centre for Futures Studies at the University of Hawaii and acted as president of the World Futures Studies Federation (WFSF).

His work is influenced by some of the classical dilemmas about social organisations and, on the other hand, macro-theories of social change described by Spengler, Toynbee, and Marx. Behavioural science, the trendy topic of the '50s, also governed Dator's early interests, leading him "to wonder about the possibility of predicting and even guiding the future movement of aspects of all societies," says Dator.

A further event followed Dator's visit to Japan and helped to precipitate his futures career; "An American friend of mine, John Randolph, who was Associated Press Far Eastern correspondent for many years, showed me the draft of an article he had written entitled *The Senior Partner*. Randolph took Spengler's theory which describes the 'stages' civilisations go through, showing that Japan and the West had gone through exactly the same stages, in exactly the same sequence, for almost exactly the same length of time. But, and this is what turned my world upside down, Randolph concluded that Japan went through those stages approximately 200 years *ahead* of the West. If he was correct, the West could see its future in the *present* of Japan.

"His argument sent me on my way as a futurist. I have remained fervently committed to studying ideas about the future of my society and of all other societies and cultures in the world."

In 1966 Dator returned to the U.S. having regretfully concluded that he could never become Japanese. He met up with a group of architects and artists teaching, as he was, at Virginia Polytechnic Institute. Members of the Archigram Group from England inspired him to consider questions of design, especially social system design.

"One of my friends, David Greene, read some stuff I was writing and said, 'Jim, you sound like Marshall McLuhan.' I said, 'Who?' because I'd never heard of McLuhan, or Buckminster Fuller, or any of the other people David said I sounded like.

It was Greene who pointed Dator towards the World Future Society (WFS), recently formed in Washington.

"I also happened to run across one of Alvin Toffler's first pieces on the future in a magazine called *Horizons*. The article was titled, 'The Future as a Way of Life'. I immediately began teaching my classes at Virginia Tech with even more of a future orientation. Then, in 1967, I got the necessary university approvals to teach what may well be the first officially-approved, regularly-scheduled undergraduate university course on the future ever taught in the US.

Significantly, the WFSF is an early example of an organisation beginning globally, rather than nationally or locally. The WFSF had its origins in 1967, in Oslo, at a meeting of people from many different parts of the world. The next meeting (the first Dator attended) was in Kyoto, Japan in 1970. Then Bucharest in 1972, and the actual Founding Conference, where the WFSF was officially established as an international organisation according to French law (as it remains), was in Paris in 1973.

This internationalist outlook has been deliberately fostered in subsequent years. "By holding our World Conferences in different parts of the world," says Dator, "we mobilise and legitimate local future-oriented people, and the entire futures focus, thus strengthening local futures research, as well as broadening it, and the future work of all who are able to attend.

If pressed, Dator says that the real reason for his success in Hawaii is his students.

“The students in the Alternative Futures Option have tended to ‘infect’ other students with the futures bug. Some of them are now captains of industry and leaders of government. But, in the process, ‘futures studies’ here has become a normal part of life.”

Given his long association with the field Dator has noticed some intriguing patterns in his students over the years.

“In the ‘60s the future seemed extremely bright to most of my students. They were positive and upbeat. Then we went through the shocks of the ‘70s – Vietnam, the oil crises, economic restructuring and all the rest – and the future seemed horrible. Interest in futures studies clearly dropped off. Then came the ‘80s. Even though from my point of view the ‘80s were, objectively speaking, much worse than the ‘70s, and certainly far worse for the future, my students became very upbeat again.

“The absolutely worse time was at the end of the ‘70s when Ronald Reagan, beginning to run for the presidency, introduced the idea of ‘winnable nuclear war’. A lot of my older students, who had either been Vietnam veterans or war protestors, dropped out. They couldn’t take it. But at present, interest in the future is extremely high among my students, and in most parts of the world. The futures consulting business, *per se*, is very good now – until the Depression, when business, or at least American business, will do the worst possible thing: stop looking at the future at all.”

Dator’s views on culture and technology are somewhat challenging. “One thing that makes me interested in the future is that I know nothing, and care nothing, about my past. I have no ‘culture’. I don’t know my ethnicity. I have no idea where the name ‘Dator’ came from. I always ask people, and while I get some interesting suggestions, actually no one knows. And I don’t really care.

“However, I know that most people of the world care very much – far too much – about their ethnic background, so I have alternated back and forth between being sympathetic with ethnic revival movements and being unsympathetic and worried about their dangerous side. With the rise of nationalism in Europe again, I’m beginning to feel even more unsympathetic to ethnic identity questions. This makes me question even those which are on the rise here in Hawaii, as in Australia and especially New Zealand”.

Some futures people suggest that that the future is made primarily by people and that technologies are just a secondary consideration. Dator doesn’t agree. He sees technology as a major cause of social change.

“I certainly don’t believe for a minute that people are passive and have no role in envisaging and creating their preferred future. But there are many forces creating the future and the will of people is only one of them. ‘Will’ alone is never enough, and, more importantly, ‘will’ is influenced by peoples’ experiences –

what they are able to do, and not to do – and technology plays a major role in enabling them to have new experiences and/or in making it difficult or impossible to have older ones. That is why I look at technology as a major agent of social change: it conditions human ideas.

“Technology humanises and re-humanises us. Humans are never without technology. We have had different kinds at different periods and cultures, but I consider it silly to talk about ‘technology on a human scale’ or even ‘appropriate technology’ without recognising that past experiences shaped by past technologies have created our ideas of what ‘a human scale’ is, or what ‘appropriate technology’ is. New technologies change the human scale, and may, in retrospect (or more adequate foresight) be seen as ‘appropriate’ after all.”

The theme was explored by two of Dator’s ex-students who co-authored an article not long ago about ‘the rights of robots’. Sohail Inayatullah and Phil McNally argued that given the development of ‘rights’ historically, on the one hand, and the probable development of artificial intelligence and automation on the other, that it is not unlikely that at some point in the not-too-distant future, robots will demand rights – and get them.

“That is a real possibility,” says Dator. “I really believe that we are moving into a wholly artificial world, and that we might very well be the last, or near the last, generation of *homo sapiens* in the form it has been for perhaps a 100,000, certainly 50,000, years. Indeed, ‘humanism’ could soon join all the other ‘isms of sexism, racism, ageism, etc. as an illegal and immoral sentiment. We are creating our own intelligent successors, our own children if you will, and we had better begin expanding our understanding of love and life beyond ourselves or any other ‘naturally’ evolved flora and fauna on the globe, and beyond the globe itself”.

Richard Slaughter is a lecturer in future studies at Melbourne University and an Associate of the Australian Commission for the Future. His last story for 21•C was on Robert Jungk.

Breakouts:

“One thing that makes me interested in the future is that I know nothing, and care nothing, about my past. I have no ‘culture’.

Note

This interview was published in *21C* Summer 1992 pages 14, 15 & 96.