

A woman with short brown hair and glasses, wearing a black jacket and a bright pink scarf, stands in a narrow alleyway. The walls are made of brick and stone, with numerous exposed pipes and a vintage-style lantern hanging from the ceiling. The scene is dimly lit, creating a warm, atmospheric setting.

# MAKING A Boyhood Dream A REALITY

**TAKANORI AIBA** Chairman and CEO of GRAPHICS & DESIGNING INC. Producer and art director. Attracted attention for

his design work in producing the Shin-Yokohama Ramen Museum and the Skylark Gusto chain of restaurants. In

addition, he has worked on such projects as the Musée du Petit Prince de Saint Exupéry à Hakone and DEAN & DELUCA.



“Maybe I just haven’t grown up,” laughs Aiba, comfortable in his office. Surrounded by fantastic, imaginary resorts, reminiscent of Mont San-Michel or Laputa Island in *Gulliver’s Travels*, the space is akin to a young boy’s dream castle.

One Aiba idea that became a major hit was the Shin-Yokohama Ramen Museum. Basically a collection of *ramen* shops representing various flavors of the noodle from around the country, it is housed in a facility that recreates a sense of Japan in 1958. This unique idea has proved nostalgic and immensely popular, attracting 1.5 million visitors annually, with no sign of interest waning.

“I thought that it would be interesting to somehow link the deep-seated popularity of *ramen* with visiting a museum, something that lacks appeal in Japan.” But the concept transcends mere originality, in that he was meticulous in his efforts, such as creating names of people in a fictional town and a diagram explaining how these fictional people are connected. Aiba paid great attention to detail, working to make buildings look old and using optical illusions to make spaces seem larger. This is a technique that Aiba, a fan of Disneyland since his childhood, said he picked up from the theme park.

Another success is the Ninja Akasaka restaurant designed by Aiba in 2001. In the Akasaka district of Tokyo, it is proving to be very popular, particularly

with foreign customers. It is fashioned to look like a hidden ninja village, and is full of tricks and devices to entertain customers, such as a bridge that suddenly appears with a secret incantation from the ninja guide. In fact, the venture has proved so successful that a second shop has opened in Tribeca in New York.

“For me it is all about surprising and satisfying customers — nothing less will do. That is all I have come to care about,” said Aiba.

@ ON THE INTERNET

<http://www.gandd.co.jp>



TOP: NINJA AKASAKA • Tokyo, 2001

A ninja-themed restaurant popular among foreign business people and celebrities.

ABOVE: SHIN-YOKOHAMA RAMEN MUSEUM • Yokohama, 1994  
Japan’s first food theme-park, where varieties of *ramen* from all over Japan can be enjoyed in a mock town modeled on urban Japan in 1958.