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DESIGN MITSUBISHI

## Ex-rival revamps Mitsubishi design

Goal: Rugged, more consistent look



Tsunehiro Kunimoto: The "Dynamic Shield" face is the basis of a new styling language for Mitsubishi.

Photo credit: HANS GREIMEL

### PHOTO GALLERY: 2016 Mitsubishi Outlander



PHOTO GALLERY >>

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#### Tsunehiro Kunimoto

**Title:** Corporate general manager of design

**Company:** Mitsubishi Motors Corp.

**Age:** 64

**Joined Mitsubishi:** April 1, 2014

**With Nissan:** 1975-2014

**Education:** Musashino Art University

**In his garage:** Dark silver Outlander PHEV

#### Hans Greimel Automotive News

April 20, 2015 - 12:01 am ET

TOKYO -- In his 40 years at Nissan Motor Co., designer Tsunehiro Kunimoto had a knack for refining the Japanese brand's evolving image through eye-catching, sporty designs.

Now, at a time when most of his contemporaries would be retiring to the links, Kunimoto, 64, is

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**Favorite car:** Ferrari 308 GTB  
**Hobbies:** Kendo (Japanese fencing)  
**U.S. ties:** Vice president, Nissan Design America, 1995  
**Mottos:** "Form follows function," "Don't forget your roots"  
**Dream vacation:** Off the beaten-track in southern France

**Design portfolio**

Significant works by Mitsubishi design chief Tsunehiro Kunimoto

**• At Nissan**

- Nissan Z Concept
- Nissan Skyline R32
- Infiniti FX crossover
- Infiniti G sedan

**• At Mitsubishi**

- Outlander
- XR-PHEV II

gearing up for possibly his biggest challenge: revitalizing Mitsubishi Motors Corp. through a styling overhaul.

Kunimoto's arrival as Mitsubishi's global design chief in April 2014 was an almost unheard-of career shift in Japan, where workers typically stay loyal to the same company for life.

But when it came time for Kunimoto to consider retirement, Mitsubishi's bosses saw an opportunity to poach a skilled veteran. By then, Kunimoto had played a lead role in rechristening the Nissan and Infiniti brands in the 2000s under the revival plan of Nissan CEO Carlos Ghosn.

Among his works: The muscular Infiniti FX crossover and G sedan, and the stocky, well-planted Nissan Z Concept in 2001 that heralded the rebirth of Nissan's iconic sports car.

When approached by Mitsubishi, Kunimoto jumped

at the challenge of repeating that formula.

"Their expectations of me were the same," Kunimoto told *Automotive News* at Mitsubishi's global headquarters here. "Mitsubishi had a difficult term. Now they are seeking a new way."

With a year under his belt, Kunimoto has outlined two priorities for mending Mitsubishi:

1. Develop a more consistent, recognizable look across the lineup.
2. Create a style that taps Mitsu-bishi's roots in rugged SUVs.

"Branding is the first priority for Mitsubishi design," he said. "We want a long-term vision."

The image is a vertical advertisement for sas. At the top left is the sas logo, which consists of a stylized 's' followed by the letters 'sas'. To the right of the logo is the tagline 'THE POWER TO KNOW.' in a smaller, bold font. Below the logo and tagline, the main text reads 'Streaming analytics fuels connected vehicle technology.' in a large, clean, sans-serif font. The background of the advertisement is a blurred photograph of a multi-lane highway with several cars driving away from the viewer, creating a sense of motion. At the bottom right of the advertisement, there is an orange rectangular button with the white text 'Get the paper'.



2016 Mitsubishi Outlander

## Dynamic Shield

Kunimoto's task won't be easy. Mitsubishi has drifted from the cohesive looks that once revolved around its "jet fighter" grille. And the brand will have to overcome customer apathy to not only the vehicles' middling designs but a sparse lineup populated by a hodgepodge of small cars, trucks and electrified vehicles.

"I have a difficult time understanding exactly what a Mitsubishi is supposed to be, what they stand for, who they are," said John Manoogian, a professor of automotive design at the College for Creative Studies and a former General Motors designer. "If I asked 100 people what a Mitsubishi looked like, I doubt I'd get a consistent answer, if an answer at all."

But a new persona is on its way. And the first glimpse comes in the re-engineered 2016 Outlander crossover, shown at the New York auto show and going on sale in the U.S. this summer.

The Outlander will be the first production vehicle getting the brand's new "Dynamic Shield" front fascia design language. That bold X-shaped motif has evolved for years in concept cars such as the XR-PHEV compact crossover shown at the 2013 Tokyo Motor Show.

The goal: Tap Mitsubishi's heritage in off-road, heavy-duty engineering.

As part of his orientation to Mitsubishi Motors, Kunimoto insisted on touring the carmaker's partner companies in the sprawling Mitsubishi *keiretsu* business empire.



*"Branding is the first priority for Mitsubishi design. We want a long-term vision."*

**Tsunehiro Kunimoto**

His studies took him to the aircraft factories and shipyards of Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, the company from which Mitsubishi Motors was spun off in 1970. That focus on large-scale engineering and manufacturing is part of the DNA and something to tout, he said.

"Mitsubishi's strength is reliability. Many customers say Mitsubishi's products are very tough and robust -- the suspension, body, engine," Kunimoto said. "That's related to product image."

## Form, function

Kunimoto says the new looks will capitalize on that reputation. "One of Mitsubishi's design philosophies is form follows function," he said.

The Outlander's new wrap-around grille, for example, aims to be rugged, dynamic and sporty. Meanwhile, the body-color fender extensions projecting around the front lend a sense of safety.

The Dynamic Shield face is the basis of a new styling language that will be carried over to other nameplates. But that is only part of what Kunimoto has in store.

The upcoming design language also will entail new side creasing and a new treatment to the rear. Those ideas are taking shape and won't appear in the midcycle Outlander revamp. Yet they are hinted at in the XR-PHEV II concept shown this year in Geneva. That vehicle likely

previews the next-generation Outlander Sport compact crossover due as early as this fall.

Key elements include a sense of protection associated with Mitsubishi's signature SUV lineup, and the feeling of performance linked to such nameplates as the Lancer Evolution.

Two flagship models were particularly inspiring, he said: the Pajero SUV and Delica van.

"We created a front face named Dynamic Shield," he said. "Dynamic comes from the powerful black area, and the side area focuses on protection for pedestrians and other cars."

By migrating the look to other nameplates, Kunimoto wants a more consistent brand identity. "I couldn't easily recognize the Mitsubishi-ness in recent products," Kunimoto said. "I think the Outlander is an appropriate product to start with the new front face identity."

Manoogian said Mitsubishi's revamp is headed in the right direction.

"First and foremost, establishing a consistent look across all their vehicles would be a place to start," he said. "A recognizable face can go a long way in gaining recognition in the marketplace."

## **Sporty spirit**

Watch for Kunimoto to inject some sporty flourishes, too. At Nissan, he not only shepherded the revival of the Z sporty coupe in the 2000s, but was chief designer of the Skyline R32. That car formed the basis for the rebirth of the high-performance GT-R variant in the late 1980s.

"That was the most exciting, most enjoyable product -- in my past," Kunimoto said of the GT-R.

Mitsubishi's design process became fractured with each vehicle development team seeking out the most expedient design for its project, rather than working within a common framework. The result: such disparate designs as the Mirage and i minicars, even within the same segment.

Kunimoto reorganized his studios to align designers by function, instead of model.

The overhaul means more cohesive looks as well as time and cost savings, he said.

To breathe new ideas into the mix, Kunimoto this month reopened Mitsubishi's European design studio in Frankfurt.

It was shut in 2010, when the then-cash-strapped carmaker was reeling from the global financial crisis. It complements design studios Mitsubishi has in Tokyo and Okazaki, outside its factory near Nagoya.

"I want there to be more of a global competition," Kunimoto said.

A dramatic transformation is a tall order for Mitsubishi. But Kunimoto says the carmaker has a key advantage over rivals: Its small size and flat hierarchy enable fast and flexible change.

"Mitsubishi's unique point is I can talk with the president or CEO very easily; the CEO calls me by telephone and asks, 'Are you OK to talk?'" Kunimoto says. "That thing almost never happened in my past experience. The communication style, distance and culture are very different."

You can reach Hans Greimel at [hgreimel@crain.com](mailto:hgreimel@crain.com). -- Follow Hans on [Twitter](#)

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