

An Analysis of the Current Popularity of Wabi-sabi Style Architecture

Feng Mingzhu^{1,a,*}

¹Gold Mantis School of Architecture, Soochow University, Suzhou, China

^afengmingzhu2021@163.com

*Corresponding author

Abstract: *The study examines the growing influence of wabi-sabi style architecture in recent years, as it emerges as a spatial aesthetic philosophy. Firstly, it examines the process of how the wabi-sabi style is created, analyses its beginnings, and traces the development of modern architectural forms. Building upon this foundation, it primarily investigates the widespread appeal of wabi-sabi style building in Europe, North America, and Japan. Ultimately, it succinctly outlines the artistic importance of the evolution of this architectural style in the present day.*

Keywords: *Wabi-sabi style; Architecture; Spatial aesthetic*

1. Introduction

Wabi-sabi aesthetics, a concept rooted in the East, has gained global recognition and is increasingly embraced by the Western design industry. Its unique oriental features have captivated a larger audience and sparked significant interest in recent years. Contemporary architects in the Western world have also utilized the concept of wabi-sabi to produce a collection of contrasting, introspective architectural and spatial projects in Europe and the United States^[1].

2. Wabi-sabi style development method

2.1. The origin of the Wabi-sabi style

Wabi and Sabi are two terms in the Japanese language's etymology. Wabi refers to the state of being alone, cut off from others, and feeling a sense of disappointment. The term "wabi" is formed by combining two words: "wabi" and "sabi". The term "wabi" can be defined as the act of residing in a dwelling or finding pleasure in the seclusion of an extremely compact tea chamber. The term "wabi-silence" is employed to describe the aged, weathered, and worn-out hues that have gradually developed over time, carrying a distinct aesthetic significance^[2]. Consequently, the appreciation of the remnants left by the vanishing of objects within a restrained environment constitutes the fundamental aesthetic essence of "wabi-sabi".

The Muromachi period in Japan, which spanned from 1336 AD to 1573 AD, played a crucial role in the development of wabi-sabi aesthetics. This period witnessed the flourishing of various artistic practices such as the tea ceremony and haiku. The tea ceremony, in particular, embraced the concept of wabi-silence, and it was during this time that the aesthetic trend of wabi-silence reached its pinnacle under the guidance of Chirikyū, a renowned tea ceremony master.

During that time, the influence of Zen religion on society and culture led to a strong connection between Zen, the tea ceremony, and wabi-sabi appreciation. The main focus of wabi-sabi appreciation was found in the activities of the tea ceremony, where Chirikyū made significant modifications to the teahouse, tea ceremony etiquette, and tea utensils. This transformed the tea ceremony into a ritual that embodied the Zen spirit and promoted the aesthetics of naturalness, simplicity, and plainness. Over time, this aesthetic evolved into the distinct "wabi-sabi" aesthetics found in Japanese traditional culture. This aesthetic values the beauty of simplicity and natural imperfections. It has permeated all aspects of Japanese life and is considered a unique and perfected expression of Japanese traditional culture.

In summary, the wabi-sabi tea ceremony of this period embraced poverty and simplicity, aligning with the emphasis on inner reflection promoted by Zen culture. This led to the pursuit of wabi-sabi

aesthetics in architecture, which manifested in the exterior's simplicity and originality, the dark and narrow interior space, and the use of natural materials like straw, yellow mud, and stones. Ultimately, this architectural style satisfied the users' desire to shift their focus away from external matters and towards their own spiritual freedom and liberation, creating a living space akin to that of a Zen practitioner.

2.2. Modern wabi-sabi architecture

Some contemporary architectural designs incorporate the aesthetic concept of wabi-sabi, employing modern techniques to convey the essence of wabi-sabi and cater to users. The original wabi-sabi style was predominantly found in tea houses and certain Japanese garden structures. An example of the original wabi-sabi architectural design can be observed in Myokiwa-an (Figure 1), created by the renowned tea ceremony master, Mr. Chiriku. The space within Myokiwa-an is compact and enclosed. The construction materials employed consist exclusively of natural substances, such as clay, wood, sand, bamboo, straw, and others. Furthermore, the interior furnishings also incorporate natural materials^[3].



Figure 1: Myokiwa-an.

The original features of Wabi-sabi style architecture are evident in modern iterations of this style. Contemporary architecture influenced by Wabi-sabi has expanded beyond tea rooms and garden buildings, and can now be found in houses, hotels, and public buildings such as Tadao Ando's Sumiyoshi's Nagaya and Bosco's Studio&House. This expansion is due to architects seeking to incorporate their own personal design while still adhering to the principles of Wabi-sabi. In summary, modern Wabi-sabi style architecture can either directly express the traditional form of Wabi-sabi design or reflect Wabi-sabi aesthetics in the humanistic pursuits of the architects. In either case, it demonstrates the enduring vitality of Wabi-sabi aesthetics.

3. The global impact of wabi-sabi architectural style

The influence of wabi-silent aesthetics is significant worldwide, particularly in Western countries and Japan. The manifestation of wabi-silent aesthetics differs across different regions. Here are some notable theories, designers, and design works associated with the wabi-silent phenomenon in each region:

3.1. Countries in Europe and North America

1) Europe:

The book "Japan: Japan in the Eyes of Europeans" by German architect Bruno Taut in 1934 introduced Japan's traditional architectural space to the West, focusing on the Katsura Rikyu Shrine. Similarly, American historian Ernest Fenollosa's book "Outline of a History of Eastern Fine Arts" continued to introduce oriental art to the United States and Europe, emphasizing the exchange between the East and West and incorporating wabi-sabi in teahouse architecture. This concept of wabi-sabi in tea houses was further promoted in Axel Vervoordt's 2011 book "Wabi-sabi Inspiration" and Leonard Koren's 1994 book "The Beauty of Wabi-sabi: Fundamentals of Minimalist Aesthetics for Product Managers, Designers, and Lifestylists," which provided a reinterpretation of wabi-sabi from the perspective of

architectural space.

The Akari lamp sculpture, designed by Japanese-American artist Isamu Noguchi in 1951, is known for its wabi-sabi style and was widely used as a decorative feature in homes during that time. It continues to be a popular choice for interior design in residential buildings. In 2014, the loft suite at The Greenwich Hotel (Figure 2) in Manhattan was completed by renowned collector, antique dealer, and architectural interior designer Axel Vervoordt, along with Japanese architect Tatsuro Miki, resulting in a highly acclaimed and celebrated project^[1]. AD Magazine featured Axel Vervoordt's design work in both 2015 and 2017. Shinichiro Ogata's latest venture, Ogata Paris, is making a significant impact in the city of Paris.



Figure 2: The Greenwich Hotel.

Annabell Kutucu is an interior designer and architect based in Berlin, Germany. Since establishing his studio in 2010, he has specialized in designing hotels and private residences. Some of his notable projects include the Yapa Milan Restaurant, Milan 59 Apartments, and Casa Cook Resort. The main design concept of the restaurant is the use of soft lighting to create a subdued atmosphere. This lighting is not meant to hide any areas, but rather to showcase the beauty of the dimly lit scene. The design also emphasizes the original texture of the materials used, highlighting the beauty of their roughness. This warm and understated dining environment has a profound impact on people, as it allows them to escape from the worries and desires of the world and immerse themselves in the play of light and shadow.

Perspective is an interior design studio based in Stockholm, Sweden, that was established in 2016 by Robin Klang and Ejub Bicic. They specialize in designing residential and commercial spaces with a wabi-sabi aesthetic. Some of their notable projects include Kaptensgatan House, Torsgatan Apartments, Rute House in Stockholm, and Rute Barn Studio on the Swiss island of Gotland.

Studio Andrew Trotter, a Spanish architectural business founded in 2010, draws significant inspiration from Yohji Yamamoto. The firm specializes in architecture, interior design, product design, and related design services.

Block722 Architects is an architecture practice headquartered in Athens, established in 2009 by Sotiris Tsergas and Katja Margaritoglou. Their architectural designs employ precise geometric lines, organic materials, and intricate elements to form a serene environment.

2) North America:

Susan Clark established Radnor, a design firm located in New York, in 2016. The firm specializes in creating designs inspired by wabi-sabi, encompassing a wide range of products such as bed frames, tables, sofas, soft accessories, pots, and wooden spoons for daily use. Radnor's exhibition titled "Material Interiors" was showcased during New York Design Month in 2024. The exhibition showcased a collection of thoughtfully designed works that utilized natural materials, which are highly valued in the wabi-sabi aesthetic, to create comfortable living spaces.

Yana Prydalna, an American interior designer, drew inspiration from the wabi-sabi aesthetic of the Orient while designing the interior of the Meridian Residence in California. Instead of using vibrant colors, Prydalna focused on maintaining the natural texture of wood, the ruggedness of stone, and the simplicity of cotton and linen. This combination of natural elements creates a warm and inviting space that stands in stark contrast to modernist architecture.

Estudio MMX, a Mexican architectural practice established in 2010, focuses in incorporating wabi-

sabi aesthetics with local environments. Their portfolio encompasses several architectural projects, such as the BGD Apartment House and the single-family houses CBC House and CMR House in Mexico City, Mexico. Additionally, they have designed individual mansions, such as the CVC House and CAB House in Amsterdam. Furthermore, they have also created the Progreso Geological Museum, situated on the shore of the Yucatan Peninsula, Mexico.

3.2. Countries in the Asian

1) Japan

The concept of wabi-sabi has become deeply ingrained in Japanese culture as a fundamental aesthetic sensibility. Originally rooted in religious aesthetics, it has evolved into a traditional sense of preserving Japan's unique cultural characteristics during the process of modernization after World War II. Several books on wabi-sabi have been published in Japan, including Krii Oshii's "Pure Genre and Mourning" (1941), "The Theory of Style - A Study of 'Silence'" (1940), "Japan's Wabi-sabi" (2017), and Masayuki Kurokawa's "Eight Aesthetic Consciousnesses in Japan" (2006).

Designers and their works: Shin Isozaki embarked on a global tour in 1978 to promote the Japanese concept of "time and space," emphasizing the importance of "wabi" and "silence"^[4]. In 1980, designer Kenya Hara established MUJI with a design philosophy centered around the idea of "emptiness." Founded in 1980, Muji incorporates wabi-sabi aesthetics into the design of its products, as envisioned by designer Kenya Hara. This design approach is rooted in the concept of "empty" design. This particular design offers Japanese individuals a visually simple yet emotionally profound aesthetic encounter, which gradually garnered recognition, leading to the acceptance of the brand's unique aesthetics in both Japan and the Western world^[1]. Throughout history, Muji's artistic sensibility has been strongly rooted in Japanese culture. Its emergence is revolutionary. Simultaneously, it has had a significant global influence as a sophisticated and unrefined concept for lifestyle^[5].

Ichio Shinohara's Hakunoya (1964-1966) is an artistic creation that has a wabi-silent ambiance. It is distinguished by the blending and merging of different parts using the techniques of "weak form" and "divided space". This artwork showcases the vibrancy of the cultural "avant-garde"^[6]. This environment has a wabi-sabi ambiance, showcasing the vibrancy of cultural innovation. The influence of wabi-sabi can also be observed in the architectural creations of Japanese architects, such as Tadao Ando's Nagaya in Sumiyoshi (1976) and Kazushige Meijima's Toshima Museum of Art. Tadao Ando's architectural designs have been appraised by international critics as embodying the essence of Shinto or Zen settings^[1]. Furthermore, several of his works have gained widespread recognition and popularity globally, resulting in the gradual dissemination of the wabi-sabi aesthetic and its influence on the world. At the Biennale, Hiroshi Sugimoto created a glass tea room that lacked pillars in order to revive the aesthetic of wabi-silence in contemporary tea ceremonies. In 2018, Tadao Ando created an artist's apartment for the Wabi Case (Figure 3). Foundation that not only emphasizes the search of humanity but also directly incorporates wabi-silence motifs on the building's facade.

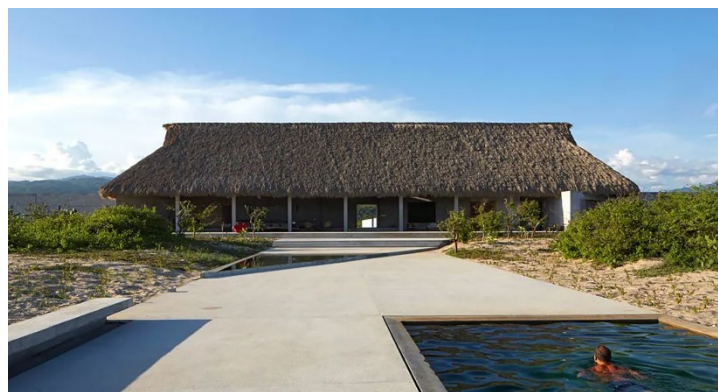


Figure 3: Artist's apartment for the Wabi Case.

2) China

The Yuexi Xianglin Zen Tea Room in Haikou underwent renovation and was specifically designed by architect Chip Kwan. It was chosen as the recipient of the 22nd Andrew Martin International Interior Design Awards. The architectural design integrates ancient Chinese architectural components with Japanese Zen aesthetics to establish a contemporary Zen environment influenced by modern wabi-sabi

principles.

3) India

Ashiesh Shah Architect, a wabi-sabi design company based in Mumbai, India, was established in the year 2000. Lake House (Figure 4) was designed by Ashiesh Shah, a renowned designer in India. His design work is influenced by the Japanese philosophy of wabi-sabi, which emphasizes simplicity and imperfection. Additionally, he incorporates the bold, passionate, and romantic elements of Indian design into the wabi-sabi style.



Figure 4: Lake House.

4. Summary

With the emergence of wabi-sabi aesthetics, it is frequently referred to as something simple and calm in a wide sense, and people often use the word "imperfect perfection" to characterize the wabi-sabi style. However, wabi-sabi aesthetics has evolved not only as an aesthetic principle of removing the false and maintaining the real and simplifying the complex, but also as a way of life and mindset of the people. Wabi-sabi style architecture has made an impression on the world because it is intimately tied to the spiritual interests of modern people. The basic form allows the user to rest mentally, the shielding of the outside world isolates the user from the distractions of the outside world, and the decorations with faults in the inside represent an acceptance of the imperfections of life.

In modern society, the pursuit of the "wabi-sabi style" embodies the pursuit of resistance to the trend of consumerism and functionalism, and the study of the origin of the "wabi-sabi" aesthetic and its architectural style constitutes an important addition to contemporary design culture and spatial expression.

References

- [1] Zhang Nuoran. *Wabi-sabi: counterattacking the powerless space of western modern architecture*[J]. *Art and Design*, 2015(2):78-85.
- [2] Wang Xiangyuan. *The Aesthetics of Wabi, Wabi Tea and Silence in Japan*[J]. *Dongyue Lun* 2016, 37(07):148-156.
- [3] Yu Zuoping. *Study on the Collision and Integration of Cultures in the Modernization Process of Japanese Architecture* [D]. Zhejiang University, 2019.
- [4] (Japanese) Taro Igarashi. *Architecture of Japan Modernity and Tradition* [M]. Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2021.01.
- [5] Kenya Hara. *Design in design: the complete book* [M]. Guangxi Normal University Press, 2010.
- [6] Huang Heng, Zheng Jing. *Harmony and Wabi-sabi - The "Avant-Garde" Tradition of Mother's House and White House* [J]. *Architect*, 2022, (01): 43-52.