

The Influence of Wabi-Sabi Aesthetics on Space Design

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Abstract: By continuously exploring the deep-level culture of Wabi-Sabi aesthetics, this paper, where Sen no Rikyu's soan (thatched-hut) tearooms is taken as a typical example for Japanese Wabi-Sabi aesthetics, discusses the applications and inspirations of Wabi-Sabi aesthetics on modern space design from the perspective of the mixture between space and environment. For the present-day space design under the aesthetics of Wabi-Sabi, the harmonious symbiosis of spatial relationship has gradually become the mainstream. As the aesthetic subject experiences the process of aesthetic evaluation, the philosophical reflection on "the transient being eternal" and the renewed search for the significance of life elevate the introspective value of Wabi-Sabi aesthetics to a spatial perspective.

Keywords: Wabi-Sabi Aesthetics; Space Design; Space of Tearoom

1. Introduction

Space refers to not only an abstract concept but also a created or designed entity. Space design contains multiple dimensions ranging from the city planning or street architecture in the stereoscopic world to the decoration in the planar world. When it comes to "space," people always think of a closely related word, namely "time." Time and space are inherently inseparable. Looking at the changes of space design from the perspective of time is actually equivalent to interpreting the historical phenomenon of space design. To study the space design, understanding its history is indispensable. Throughout the long history of humanity, people have created different spaces with their own unique characteristics depending on the features of different regions. The unity between practicality and aesthetics were gradually formed during this process. The transition from creating things for use to endowing the things with specific meaning indicates the correlations between matter and spirit.[1] As an aesthetic ideology, Wabi-Sabi aesthetics belongs to the realm of the spiritual. From this perspective, this paper analyzes the influence of this ideology on space design.

2. The Implication of Wabi-Sabi Aesthetics and its History of Development in Space Design

As a loanword, the term "design" appeared in China in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. However, designing activities in China have a much longer history along with the development of agricultural and handicraft activities. As recorded in "*Kao Gong Ji (The Artificer's Record)*", a pre-Qin craft design literature, "*Assessing the form and properties of materials, refining the five elements (metal, wood, hide, jade, clay), and crafting practical tools for the people all define the work of the myriad craftsmen.*"[2] This indirectly confirms the necessary procedure of designing before creating. In Joseph Needham's *Science and Civilization in China*, ample historical evidence demonstrate that China's scientific and technological advancements had long held a leading position in the world until the 17th century, when a gradual decline began. Beyond science and technology, China's political, cultural, and philosophical thought also maintained a leading position up to the late Ming Dynasty. China and Japan, as neighbors, share profound cultural ties, with China exerting a profound influence on the development of Japanese culture. The aesthetics of Wabi-Sabi, deeply rooted in ancient Chinese Zen Buddhist culture, merged with Japanese cultural traditions under the influence of Zen philosophy, ultimately evolving into a unique form of aesthetic expression that complements Japan's indigenous artistic sensibilities.

2.1 Overview of Wabi-Sabi Aesthetics

Wabi-sabi aesthetics evolved from the eastward transmission of Chinese Zen Buddhist culture to

Japan. Japanese practitioners discerned within Zen philosophy a higher-order beauty rooted in returning to authenticity and embracing unadorned truth. This manifests as an aestheticization of surface roughness to reveal intuitive genuineness, guiding individuals to perceive the essential beauty of things through introspective contemplation — thereby cultivating a spiritual realm where "profound silence surpasses audible presence".

Chinese Zen philosophy embodies an ethereal, transcendent aesthetic, pursuing the state of "emptiness". Yet this "emptiness" signifies not mere nothingness, but rather the sensation of "creation emerging from void". Wabi-Sabi represents both a state of being and a state of beauty — neither rigid nor stagnant, but perpetually suspended in the dialectic of transformation and constancy. It is the oxymoronic unity of impermanence and perpetuity, or the paradoxical synthesis of eternity and ephemerality.

2.2 Material Culture and the Evolution of Wabi-Sabi Aesthetics

During Japan's Muromachi period, the literati and samurai classes embraced Wabi-Sabi's anti-materialistic ethos and rustic antiquity as a deliberate countermeasure against prevailing social extravagance. By synthesizing these principles with indigenous cultural traditions, they established the aesthetic prototype of Japanese Wabi-Sabi. Subsequently, the Zen tea master Sen no Rikyu integrated Wabi-Sabi aesthetics into *chanoyu* (tea ceremony) culture. This pivotal development marked Wabi-Sabi's maturation into a refined philosophical system, elevating it to a central ideological position within Japanese cultural discourse.

2.3 Expression of Wabi-Sabi Aesthetics in Spatial Design

Wabi-sabi is an aesthetic that preserves the beauty of imperfection. Its integration into interior environments emphasizes serene naturalness and a return to authenticity, creating tranquil living spaces that evoke physical and mental delight through their detachment from worldly concerns. Taking the Japanese tearoom as an example, teacups serve as distinctive interior furnishings embodying flawed beauty. The kintsugi craft, foundational to teacup restoration techniques, evolved from Wabi-Sabi principles. When kintsugi-mended tea utensils are displayed within Wabi-Sabi interiors, their understated elegance naturally harmonizes with the surroundings, calming the mind and fostering a perspective of simplicity toward objects and life — ultimately achieving the pursuit of inner purity and uncomplicated existence.

The expression of Wabi-Sabi in interior design manifests not only through kintsugi artifacts but also intrinsically through dim environments shaped by light and shadow. *Yugen* (shadowed beauty), as a unique element in Japanese interiors, constitutes an essential dimension of Wabi-Sabi philosophy. Jun'ichiro Tanizaki asserts in *In Praise of Shadows*: "The beauty of a Japanese room depends wholly on the gradation of shadows." [3] Wabi-Sabi's philosophical concepts of introspective restraint and silent profundity synergize with *yugen* conveyed through subdued lighting, permeating spaces with contemplative seclusion. For instance, folding screens commonly placed in Japanese interiors reveal restrained beauty when natural sunlight filters through them — an ineffable grace perceptible only to occupants.

3. Manifestations of Wabi-Sabi Aesthetics in Japanese Interior Space Design

Wabi-Sabi aesthetics profoundly influences Japanese interior design. Its primary artistic expression emerges through *chanoyu* culture, which venerates the principles of *Wa-Kei-Sei-Jaku* (harmony, respect, purity, tranquility). This philosophy manifests as the pursuit of "boundless expansiveness" and "infinite elegance" within confined, minimalist spaces. Culturally, Wabi-Sabi in tea ceremony embodies dual dimensions of temporality and spatiality. Spatially, it encompasses both interior/exterior environments of tearooms and extends to curated displays of antique scrolls and utensils. Tearoom architecture, as the enduring vessel of tea practice, persists to this day. Kakuzo Okakura likened the tearoom to "an oasis in the desolate wilderness of mundane existence." As the spiritual core of tea ceremony, its construction principles, design ethos, and furnishing arrangements collectively convey Wabi-Sabi's essence. Tearooms influenced by Wabi-Sabi deliberately embrace asymmetry, featuring intimate scales, natural materials, and refined simplicity. Their richly layered minimalism constitutes a distinct architectural school in Japan. Sen no Rikyu's *soan* (thatched-hut) tearooms exerted lasting impact on Japanese design. His *Tai-an* (built in 1582) in Kyoto, the oldest extant two-tatami tearoom and sole surviving Rikyu-

original structure, exemplifies this legacy. This paper analyzes Rikyu's tearooms to elucidate Wabi-Sabi's role in shaping Japanese interior spaces.

3.1 Creative Philosophy of Sen no Rikyu's Tea Rooms

Sen no Rikyu (1522-1591), a tea master of Japan's Azuchi-Momoyama period, was born in Sakai. Following the collapse of the Muromachi shogunate (1573), samurai conflicts spurred the flourishing of urban culture. The introduction of Chinese Song Dynasty *tencha* (tea-whisking) methods catalyzed *chanoyu*'s development, as warriors sought spiritual solace in tea spaces. By the mid-16th century, tea culture permeated all social strata. To master tea's essence, Rikyu practiced Zen under Daitokuji Temple abbots: Dairin Soto, Shorei Soki, and Kokei Sochin. He integrated Zen monastic discipline and ascetic attitudes into tea practice, establishing the unadorned *soan-cha* (thatched-hut tea) style. As recorded in *Nanporoku*: "Tea in a small thatched hut must first attain enlightenment through Buddhist practice... The Buddha's teachings are tea's foundation." [4]; "Soan-cha embodies the Buddha's immaculate pure land." [5] Rikyu elevated tea ritual to Zen discipline, transforming *chanoyu* into embodied spiritual cultivation.

Rikyu's tea philosophy synthesized the Muromachi-period *shoin* tea with his introspective *soan-cha*, forging a spiritually oriented tea practice. It prioritized "heart-to-heart connection" and defined tea's essence through his famed maxim: "In summer, evoke coolness; in winter, warmth. Arrange charcoal to boil water efficiently; prepare tea to delight the palate. Herein lies tea's secret."

Guided by Zen's foundational principles, namely "Emptiness" as ontological core, "Original Non-Being" as creative doctrine, Equanimity toward all phenomena, and *Wa-Kei-Sei-Jaku* (Harmony, Respect, Purity, Tranquility) as operational tenets, he perpetually generated novel tea expressions. Rikyu implemented *wa-kei-sei-jaku* as the design paradigm for his spatial creations.

3.2 Spatial Design Expressions in Sen no Rikyu's Tea Rooms

The aesthetic consciousness underlying Rikyu's *soan* tearooms derives from Wabi-Sabi principles. These spaces unify pragmatic functionality and artistic expression, manifesting a core Wabi-Sabi vocabulary of simplicity, austerity, and understatement — evident in both their compact spatial configurations and unembellished construction materials. This design paradigm maintains enduring influence as a cornerstone of Japanese architectural evolution.

3.2.1 Refined Spatial Configuration

The *soan* tearoom exhibits meticulous compactness in plan, comprising *temae-za* (host's preparation area), *kyaku-seki* (guest seating), *jiroko* (sunken hearth), *tokonoma* (display alcove), *nijiriguchi* (crawl-through entrance), *sadoguchi* (utensils entry), *tenjo-moso* (ceiling light window), and *mizuya* (utility annex). The *jiroko* (housing the *sumi-ro*, namely corner brazier) is embedded within the *temae-za*. Spatial organization centers on the *temae-za*, with the *tokonoma*, *sadoguchi*, and *nijiriguchi* positioned at three radial endpoints.

Rikyu's design philosophy prioritized spatial efficiency, asserting "2.5 tatami mats suffice." Traditional Japanese design employs codified systems: tatami mats define spatial scale; folding screens (*byobu*) and paper-clad doors (*shoji*) partition space; post-and-beam frameworks determine structural character. Thus, *soan* tearooms embody Wabi-Sabi's pursuit of disciplined refinement. Their intimate scale fosters profound attentiveness.

3.2.2 Simple and Unadorned Spatial Interfaces

Since the Muromachi period (1336-1573), tearoom floors have exclusively used tatami mats — the quintessential Japanese flooring. These spaces accommodate only 2-3 guests per gathering. The main reception area spans approximately 2.5 tatami mats (4.05 m²): 1.5 mats for the host and 1 mat shared by two guests. Seating distance: 1-3.5 meters. This intentionally compact design facilitates knee-to-knee dialogue, enabling authentic communion. Rikyu's *Tai-an* employs a mere 1.5-mat layout to evoke the realm of *Mu* (Emptiness) within its austere space. *Mu* constitutes the foundational principle of spatial design: liberation from worldly constraints allows poetic spatial resonance to emerge organically.

Materially, tearooms incorporate elements such as earthen plaster walls common in vernacular dwellings, paper-clad *shoji* partitions, unpeeled timber pillars, bamboo-and-reed ceilings, and straw-reinforced clay walls. This material palette creates rustic hermitage ambiance. Decoration is limited to a single floral arrangement (*chabana*) and scroll display (*tokonoma*). Within the void-like tranquility, only

flowers and light filtering through *washi* paper immerse the space in *yugen*. As Rikyu envisioned: "*For living, half a mat to sit; one full mat to sleep — that suffices.*" This wordlessly comprehensible Zen sensibility manifests the designer's spatial philosophy and Rikyu's worldview.

3.2.3 Natural Physical Environment

Approaching the tearoom, irregular stepping stones traverse the path flanked by low woven-fiber fences preserving moss vegetation and cultivating serenity. At the entrance, the *nijiriguchi* (60cm-high crawl-through portal) requires all visitors, regardless of their status, to bow humbly. This spatial device embodies egalitarian principles, reminding participants of universal equality. Both *Tai-an*'s architecture and tea rituals saturate Wabi-Sabi ideals.

Rikyu intentionally employed subdued lighting to induce concentration, creating *yugen* atmospheres that foster grounded tranquility and transcendental contemplation. The *nijiriguchi* directly faces the *tokonoma*; when opened, exterior light indirectly illuminates the alcove, with lattice windows supplementing ambient luminance. Two *shitaji-mado* (ground-level windows) behind guests brightly light the *temae-za*. Their varying heights and sizes produce differentiated light angles/volumes, ensuring clear visibility of the host's tea preparation. Spatially, the asymmetrical tatami layout between *temae-za* and guest seats manifests Wabi-Sabi's "impermanence and imperfection". Irregular window placements and the central pillar with flanking walls fracture spatial uniformity, expressing unpredictability. This resonates with Zen's doctrine: "from singularity arises infinite variation".

3.2.4 Unpretentious Furnishing Art

Tearooms contain minimal furniture, featuring only suspended shelves (*tsuridana*) for utensil storage. The tea objects Rikyu cherished in *Tai-an* prioritize functionality while embodying natural simplicity: fisherman's basket-turned-flower vessel, *yojiro*'s amidado-gama kettle, *chojiro*'s black Raku tea bowl, and *socho*'s black tea caddy. These organically blend with the tearoom's ethos. Utensils face the host to facilitate focused tea preparation, enabling guests to achieve *ittai doshin* (unified consciousness). The apogee of tea practice is *chazen ichimi* (tea and Zen as one). As an artistic gesture, "hanging scrolls on ash-plastered walls" reflects refined taste. The *tokonoma* scroll inscribed *myoki* (Blissful Purity) — denoting the Buddha Akṣobhya's pure land where all beings practice virtue — resonates with Rikyu's *soan* spirit.

Canadian psychologist Richard R. Powell describes Wabi-Sabi artifacts in *Wabi Sabi Simple*: "*Values: naturalness, subtlety, openness, resilience, seasonality, authenticity, and handcrafted imperfection.*"[6] These seven principles encapsulate Wabi-Sabi's essence. In spatial furnishing, Wabi-Sabi's philosophical depth often transcends mere functionality. Furnishings intensify sensory communication between objects and users, enriching spirituality and animating space with emotive qualities. An intrinsic relationship exists among furnishings, color, and materials: furnishings constitute integral components of spatial color schemes and material expressions. Though localized elements, they crystallize a space's spiritual core. Wabi-Sabi furnishings exhibit distinctive chromatic and textural preferences.

4. Analysis of Spatial Design Language under Wabi-Sabi Influence

4.1 Impact on Surface-Level Spatial Design

The surface-level spatial design informed by Wabi-Sabi aesthetics can be interpreted through four dimensions: spatial delicacy, aesthetic restraint through order, natural material simplicity, and poetics of light and shadow.

Firstly, Wabi-Sabi spaces embody phenomenological subtlety — discreet yet interconnected, rejecting isolation through deliberate environmental integration. This represents artistic discipline achieved by balancing design elements. Spatially, such environments manifest multivalent ambiguity in layout, fluid partitions that transform local areas into cohesive wholes, and formal expansion of physical dimensions through interpenetration. Structurally, Wabi-Sabi spaces exhibit refined irregularity. Conscious reduction of ornamentation heightens rustic elegance. This formal discipline emerges from multi-perspective calibration, culminating in definitive spatial expressions.

Secondly, Wabi-Sabi spaces reveal distinct "beauty of ordered restraint." Japanese tearoom architecture evolved from *shoin*-style to *sukiya-zukuri*, demonstrating Wabi-Sabi's organizational influence. Materially, tactile roughness is prerequisite for Wabi-Sabi sensibility. Embracing such texture cultivates authenticity, transforming minimalist interiors into "immaculate egoless realms". This deepens

contemplation of spatial-cultural interrelations and advances understanding of Wabi-Sabi's self-transcendent pursuit. As *Nanporoku* states: "*Tea ceremony aims to realize a pure Buddha-land within thatched tearooms, creating an ideal society.*"[7]

Finally, the interplay of light and shadow embodies *mujo* (impermanence) in Wabi-Sabi aesthetics. Variations in light's hue and intensity shape shifting spatial atmospheres. As solar angles shift, spaces morph: ambiguous dimness at dawn, crystalline clarity at noon, soft luminescence in afternoon, and obscure opacity at dusk. This diurnal metamorphosis imbues spaces with profound emotional resonance. Individual perception, filtered through personal experience, elevates spatial spirituality to a profoundly individualized state. The uncontrollable beauty of light-shadow dynamics evokes humanity's insignificance before nature, awakening awareness of *mujo*. Simultaneously, it inspires pathos and reverence for transient beauty. Thus, light-shadow manipulation confers upon space: temporal ephemerality and cyclicity, spatial richness and visual poetics, and deep affective contemplation.

4.2 Impact on Profound Spatial Design

Wabi-Sabi's influence on profound spatial design manifests through: dialectical reconciliation of imagery and harmonious unification of artistic conception. Firstly, imagery reflects designers' conceptual orientations and aesthetic inclinations. Wabi-Sabi imagery encompasses natural or artificial objects with divergent semiotic properties, which under aesthetic mediation become non-antagonistic dialectical unities. Philosophically, greater inherent contradictions yield deeper reconciliation — revealing profound truths. Contrasts within such imagery (e.g., nature/artifice, industry/craft, vitality/stillness, luminosity/*yugen*) undergo reconciliatory processes through Wabi-Sabi's lens. This dialectical synthesis liberates spaces from reductive monotony, generating experiential tension that sparks vitality and spatial contemplation. Elemental convergence thus forges spaces rich in formal and semantic dimensions.

Secondly, the *yijing* (artistic conception) in spatial design encompasses both temporal and spatial dimensions. On one level, it achieves *spatiotemporal transmutation* through the properties of spatial imagery: spatial landscapes/textures manifest temporal ephemerality and perpetuity and spatial forms/light-shadow interplay metaphorize *xu-shi xiangsheng* (generative dialectic of void and substance). This synthesis creates *conceptual beauty* within finite spaces. On another level, as a profound design language, *yijing* evokes: affective perception, spatial imagination, and aesthetic cognition.

5. Application of Wabi-Sabi Aesthetics in Modern Spatial Design

Positioned within the trajectory of historical development, Wabi-Sabi aesthetics must continuously evolve to enhance its universality in response to contemporary demands. This will be elucidated through the following aspects. Firstly, aesthetic consciousness coexists with spatial design. Space serves as a vessel for objects; under the guidance of Wabi-Sabi principles, spatial design emphasizes establishing a symbiotic relationship with interior furnishings at the semantic level. It skillfully blends roughness with refinement, simplicity with neatness, and patina with profundity, generating harmonious visual experiences. Secondly, as a response to spiritual needs, spatial design often adopts an approach of juxtaposing and integrating heterogeneous elements. This achieves balanced handling of multiplicity and contradictions within spaces, creating comfortable spatial atmospheres. Finally, spatial design is grounded in the aesthetic concept of *kosei* (void-serenity) from Wabi-Sabi philosophy. It constructs naturalistic spatial identities that, though visually austere, provoke profound spiritual reflection. Consequently, spatial design manifests primordial and symbiotic values.

The integration of imagery and artistic conception (*yijing*) directs Wabi-Sabi -influenced forms toward organic morphology, presenting unadorned textures. Materials predominantly retain rough or natural qualities with minimal artificial intervention, while color palettes favor muted earth tones or natural hues. Wabi-Sabi artifacts abstain from intense sensory stimulation yet evoke subtle sensory pleasure. Beyond authentically shaping the phenomenology of objects, Wabi-Sabi's celebration of the "beauty of imperfection," "beauty of roughness," and "sense of temporal patina" facilitates transformative ontological explorations of material existence.

6. Revelations of Wabi-Sabi Aesthetics for Modern Spatial Design

Through continuous exploration of Wabi-Sabi's profound cultural dimensions, we distill the following implementation strategies from the dialogue between space and environment, spatial imagery

articulation, and spiritual atmosphere cultivation: (i) blurring interior-exterior boundaries to pursue symbiotic relationships; (ii) leveraging spatial permeability and symbolic attributes to consciously integrate fluidity and becoming during spatial division; and (iii) dissolving indoor-outdoor demarcations, skillfully merging interior and exterior realms to achieve spatial ambiguity and resonance.

In spatial design, designers may intentionally deconstruct enclosed forms or incorporate intentionally flawed furnishings, evoking contemplative aesthetic tendencies. Throughout such spaces, partitions function as display furniture, static zones transform into dynamic fields — blurring both spatial and material boundaries to enrich experiential depth.

Wabi-Sabi's *aufheben* of external form redirects focus toward essence, compelling designers to radically simplify appearances and prioritize spiritual expression. Through harmonizing interior-exterior integration, natural landscapes merge seamlessly with built environments. Interior spaces represent human artifice; exterior scenery embodies nature. This synergy expresses a symbiotic interdependence — simultaneously autonomous yet unified, distinct yet complementary. Wabi-Sabi-guided spatial design aligns with Zen aesthetics' pursuit of dialectical unity. Contradiction manifests as spatial tension and contrast; unity emerges as ordered coherence. Born from negation, Wabi-Sabi's essence crystallizes precisely within paradox. Its core elements — *mujo* (impermanence) and temporal resonance, imperfection and austere purity reserve and elegance — constitute, from another perspective, unified opposites. This represents the perceiver's process of digesting and reshaping the world's binary elements (void/substance, beauty/ugliness) through an aesthetic lens.

7. Conclusions

From a historical perspective, spatial legacies accumulated through temporal metamorphosis form an unbreakable chain. Continuities between past and present spaces arise primarily from evolving ideological and cultural influences. Though spatial design constitutes an emerging discipline, its existence has paralleled human habitation throughout history. Today, mass production characterizes our fast-paced era, while technological advancement catalyzes modern spatial evolution. As material standards improve, spiritual needs intensify accordingly. Modern spatial design must therefore embody greater unity, spirituality, and profundity. Integrating utilitarian and metaphysical functions represents Wabi-Sabi aesthetics' ultimate objective in spatial design. This approach not only elevates spatial functionality and form through aesthetic principles but also enriches spiritual resonance, fulfilling contemporary desires for mental repose and psychological restoration. Wabi-Sabi's Zen-inspired aesthetic delivers unique sensorial experiences. As spatial design increasingly prioritizes spiritual dimensions, its significance will expand exponentially.

In contemporary Wabi-Sabi spatial practice, symbiotic integration has become predominant. Emphasizing material metamorphosis across temporal dimensions — temporally grounded, spatially manifested — enables holistic perception of chronotopic reality. As aesthetic subjects complete their experiential journey, contemplating the paradox that "ephemerality is eternity," they recalibrate life's meaning. This constitutes Wabi-Sabi's metacognitive value when elevated to a spatial philosophy.

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