

EXPLORING JAPANESE ART AND AESTHETIC AS INSPIRATION FOR EMOTIONALLY DURABLE DESIGN

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ABSTRACT:

In our fast changing society, people find it harder than ever before to build up lasting relationship. This is not a situation only between human / human but human / objects as well. Every day, people over produce, resulting in massive waste. It is believed that users throw away objects simply because they think they are no longer emotionally attached with the object. It is a failure between the user / object relationship. On the other hand, designers should also be responsible because they design short-life-span products. As most people are detached from production of goods, it is hard for them to understand the invisible side of production such as causing damage to environment, created by waste disposal during the manufacturing process and when products reaches its end of life. People living in a city are often emotionally detached from the nature, from where raw materials come and to where wastes are dumped. This makes them indifferent to the environment. However, we all know that landfills will one day be filled up to its full capacity and the saturation will affect us enormously. Many people including designers are seeking solutions for sustainable living and sustainable design. However, recyclable design is no longer enough as it is a down-cycling approach. It is time for designers to take a step out of industrial, economic based design to one that can create or accelerate a change in the behaviour of customers. In this paper, the idea of "emotionally durable design" (Chapman, J., 2005) will be firstly discussed. The paper will focus on exploring a variety of Japanese Aesthetics such as "Wabi-Sabi", "Ma", "Kawaii" etc.; and traditional Art such as "Kintsugi". Japanese Art and Aesthetics are rooted in Japanese daily life and culture, and often revolve around the context of Zen Buddhism. Aesthetic and Art such as "Wabi-Sabi"

and "Kintsugi" praises the time elements, and wear and tear actually add values to objects. It is a very different attitude, while people these days always love to seek for new products. On the other hand, "Ma" in Chinese culture often means "separation" and "boundary", but it emphasise "relation" (or "relationship") in Japanese culture - seen from Japanese gift-giving culture and gift packaging. By reviewing the origin of these culture, which are sometimes considered as a wasteful culture (i.e. problem of over-packaging), though we know that it originally aims at something good. Even "Kawaii" as a very recent standard in Aesthetic actually has a longer historic background than we think and it has a deeper meaning than "cuteness". These Aesthetics principles will help people to value the relationships between human / human, human / objects, human / environment, objects / environment once again. The aim of this paper is to explore the spirit behind Japanese Art and Aesthetics in order to bring them to application. This will create design that has stronger emotional links with users and bring natural experience to them. This can also be practised to change consumer's behaviour that will achieve a less wasteful society.

1. EMOTIONALLY DURABLE DESIGN

Jonathan Chapman (2005: 65) sees waste as a symptom of a failed relationship. He pointed out that 'modern consumers are short-distance runners [...] who only stay for the getting-to-know-you period, when all is fresh, new and novel.' I believe that this symptom is created by consumerism.

Consumerism dominates our modern society. It changes our way of manufacturing, buying and selling. People believe that it helps to boost the economy, while some begin to realise this culture is extremely wasteful. In order to produce products efficiently and cheaply, many of the products we use are produced by mass manufacturing. There are several reasons why users nowadays find it harder than ever to treasure the things they own. Firstly, users are often detached from the manufacturing process. When users are not involved in the design and the making process, it will be hard for them to be emotionally attached to the object. In the same way, when designers are detached from the making process, it will be easier for them to design an irresponsible product. Secondly, I think most of the people from

older generation would also notice that the products now are often less durable than the previous ones. Sadly, many products are designed to be less durable, in order to keep us consuming. People do not even have time to build up deeper emotional feelings for the products! After the newness has worn away, the love (relationship between human and object) will come to an end. Thirdly, in addition, the selling price of products is far too cheap. Users often prefer to buy a new one when the product is broken, instead of repairing it. However, the fact is that: the cost on the environment, of producing and transporting the products, is usually not counted in the manufacturing cost. The price we need to pay in the future to recover the environment may be unaffordable for us. Fourthly, products have been standardised in mass production, where the quality can be controlled, but at the same time products lose their uniqueness.

It is impossible to remove consumerism completely while many people do not see its harm. Recycle is also not the perfect solution against waste. Instead, I think we should educate the general public (the users) to change their attitude to achieve a less wasteful society. While studying several Japanese Aesthetics principles, I find out that many of them teach people to appreciate things in a different way. They can also inspire designers to design emotionally durable products. It will be fun and helpful to introduce these aesthetics to people.

WABI-SABI 侘寂

To explain "Wabi-sabi", we should begin by understanding two other aesthetic terms – "Shibusa (渋さ)" and "Yugen (幽玄)". Crispin Sartwell (2006: 112) pointed out that "shibusa" is usually translated inappropriately as "elegance." However, "shibui" (the adjective) can also mean "true", "simple," or "chaste." Sartwell (2006: 113) also mentioned, 'It captures a quality that is at once aesthetic, ethical, and epistemological, that can be an aspect of what we make, what we are, and what we assert or express.' Therefore, "shibusa" is a way and a place to live in. "Yugen" means obscure and profound, mysterious and elusive. It usually has a link to darkness and abyss.

"Wabi-sabi" can be separated into two terms – "wabi" and "sabi." Sartwell (2006: 113) said that it is related both to "shibusa" and to "yugen" while has

a different emotional tone. "Wabi" can be directly translated into "poverty". It refers to roughness, humility, asymmetry and imperfection. Sartwell (2006:114) said that things found in a peasant hut such as everyday, inexpensive wares, things still in use long after they are worn and cracked are examples of "wabi." This also reminds me of the Sen-no-Rykyu's bamboo vase which was mentioned by Professor Hiroshi Kashiwagi (2011) in his talk – 'Japan / Design.' This vase is so old that the bamboo dried and cracked. Water will leak out from the crack. In western culture, this type of vase would be regarded as broken, functionless, need to be thrown away. However in Japan, the crack on this vase is referred to as the 'loveliest' feature on the vase. "Sabi" means "loneliness." "Sabi" is a quality of stillness and solitude. One of the examples is the Japanese flower arrangement, "ikebana" (生け花), is similar to flower art in western concept. It often puts more emphasis on a branch or leaf than on a blossom, which is very unusual in western flower art.



Figure 1: Sen-no-Rikyuu Bamboo Vase. From: Tokyo National Museum [website] Available at: http://www.tnm.jp/modules/r_collection/index.php?controller=dtl_img&size=L&colid=G4217&t= (Accessed: 6 October 2012)

Leonard Koren (1994: 26-29) in the book, *Wabi-Sabi: for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers*, compared the difference between modernism and

wabi-sabi. I think the table will be helpful to refer to, in order to understand wabi-sabi in a basic level.

modernism	wabi-sabi
Primarily expressed in the public domain	Primarily expressed in the private domain
Implies a logical, rational worldview	Implies and intuitive worldview
Absolute	Relative
Looks for universal, prototypical solutions	Looks for personal idiosyncratic solutions
Mass-produced / modular	One-of-a-kind / variable
Expresses faith in progress	There is no progress
Future-oriented	Present-oriented
Believes in the control of nature	Believes in the fundamental uncontrollability of nature
Romanticizes technology	Romanticizes nature
People adapting to machines	People adapting to nature
Geometric organization of form (sharp, precise, definite shapes and edges)	Organic organization of form (soft, vague shapes and edges)
The box as metaphor (rectilinear, precise, contained)	The bowl as metaphor (free shape, open at top)
Manmade materials	Natural materials
Ostensibly slick	Ostensibly crude
Needs to be well-maintained	Accommodates to degradation and attrition
Purity makes its expression richer	Corrosion and contamination make its expression richer
Solicits the reduction of sensory information	Solicits the expansion of sensory information
Is intolerant of ambiguity and contradiction	Is comfortable with ambiguity and contradiction
Cool	Warm
Generally light and bright	Generally dark and dim
Function and utility are primary values	Function and utility are not so important
Perfect materiality is an ideal	Perfect immateriality is an ideal
Everlasting	To every thing there is a season

Table 1: Comparing Modernism and Wabi-sabi. From: Koren, L. (1994) *Wabi-Sabi: for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers*. USA: Stone Bridge Press. Pp 26-29

However, I do not want to stop at only introducing wabi-sabi through a material sense. Like what Theroux (2009) worried in his video, *In search of wabi sabi*, this will create another form of consumerism. Wabi-sabi is more than a “category of beauty”. Therefore, rather than buying “wabi-sabi products”, we should discover the “wabi-sabi” around us. For instance: Remy Labesque (2011) (Fig. 2) described the scratched iPhone and Canon camera as ‘Aged to Perfection’. This is the wabi-sabi attitude. Another example is Jeans – the always popular fashion. Nowadays, jeans are designed purposely to have holes and have been bleached. You can even find online tutorials about how to rip your jeans! However, Jeans in the past only looked like this when you wore and washed them too much. This is a way for the users to personalise their jeans. Last but not least, Sartwell’s words (2006: 117-118) will help to conclude my idea: ‘At its deepest, broadest reach, wabi-sabi is a form of beauty that overcomes the dichotomy of beauty and ugliness, even as it overcomes the dichotomy of ordinary and extraordinary. We might think that beauty and ugliness, like good and evil, only make sense in relation to each other.’ In Zen philosophy, both positive and negative are important.



Figure 2: Aged to Perfection. From: Remy Labesque (2011) Object Oriented [blog] Available at: <http://designmind.frogdesign.com/blog/aged-to-perfection.html> (Accessed: 3 November 2012)

PRESERVE MARKS

Japanese values the marks on objects left by ageing. They believe that everything has its story and we should work hard to preserve it instead of removing it. In Japanese mending, when something is broken (usually ceramic wares), you repair it but do not repair it to its original (while the modern mending technique would try to remove every marks). To emphasise that it is broken before, the mender would leave the marks of the crack on the surface of the wares. Indeed, it is a highly skilled technique and a mender is a very special kind of artist in Japan. Besides, there is an artistic technique derived from the traditional mending, which is called "kintsugi (金継ぎ)". "Kin" is "gold" and "tsugi" means "joining". It is an art of fixing broken pottery with lacquer resin and powdered gold. This fixing technique keeps the cracks on a pottery purposely. A 'good' piece should be functional and at the same time all the marks are kept. "Kintsugi" can be a way to personalise objects you own as it no longer looks the same. In addition, Professor Hiroshi Kashiwagi (2011) pointed out that a cheap mass produced tea bowl can increase its value by "kintsugi"! While fixing things can create another form of beauty, we should learn a lesson from the Japanese, and this would help to solve the problem of wastefulness in consumer culture.



Figure 3: Kintsugi. From: Jeannine Cook's Blog [online blog] Available at: <http://jeanninecook.blogspot.co.uk/2012/07/kintsugi-or-art-of-golden-joinery.html> (Accessed: 17 July 2012)

“PERFECT” AND “IMPERFECT”

When I research the keyword “perfect” in Google, I often find information and images about plastic surgery. Human face and body (or objects) in golden ratio has become classic example of beauty in our culture. The modern definition of “perfect” has been used to describe things that are spotless. People are trying to achieve this “perfect” state by artificial methods and the result is the invention of plastic surgery and the beauty industry. However, the word “perfect” is originally derived from Latin word – “perfectus”. It came from “perficio” which means “to finish”, “to bring to an end”. For something that is “perfect” does not mean that it is free from any blemish, it is something that is “finished”. Therefore, I cannot totally agree with Sartwell (2006: 113) and other writers who refer wabi-sabi as aesthetic which appreciate the “imperfect”. Even a piece of rock at the roadside is “perfect” as it is “completed”, by God in religious perspective.

MA 間

“Ma (間)” is usually translated as “gap”, “negative space”, “pause” in English, but the meaning of “ma” is much more complex than these. “Ma” is a very common “kanji” (Chinese character) used both in Japanese and Chinese culture. However, “ma” in Japanese culture has developed into a much deeper spiritual concept. It has become an ideology in Japanese language and practice. It is the way of life of the Japanese. Professor Xu Pin (2005: 38) said, ‘[translated by author] If... “shibusa” is the aesthetic interest and value in Japan, then “ma” would be the standard, the way, and the attitude of living of the Japanese. Its impact on Japanese culture and even on economy is heavier than other cultural concepts [...]’ “Ma” in Chinese culture emphasises the “boundary” and “separation” but in Japanese culture emphasises the “relation”. “Relation” in “ma” is an expression of interrelation of human relation. In Japanese culture, people believe that the gap between people needs to be filled up with some sort of physical object. This is where their gifting culture comes from. Gifting is not only the exchange of objects but a symbol denoting the media of human relationship and interaction. Interaction should weigh more than the object itself. However, many people nowadays put their focus on the value of the object instead of the regards of the giver.

SEPARATION AND NO-SEPARATION

Japanese emphasise on “relation” can also be seen in traditional home architecture. In the modern concept, we always emphasise the “privacy”. We have separate rooms for each family member and each owner of the room has a special lock for his room. In comparison, many Japanese home nowadays are still using sliding paper screen to separate the rooms. Marcel Theroux (2009) in the video, *In search of wabi sabi*, was surprised by the “no privacy” when he was lodging in a Japanese family’s home. Because of the weak separation of the sliding paper screen, every sound could be heard. He needed to speak in a low voice when he was recording himself at night. Professor Hiroshi Kashiwagi (2011) also mentioned in his talk about the sliding paper screen. While everything can be heard next door, when you hear something you should not hear, you pretend that you do not hear; when you see something you should not see, you pretend that you do not see. This is the Japanese way of life, or their practice of “politeness”.

The “separation” which is “without separation”... I would say that it is another daily aesthetics in Japan. In western culture, this kind of concept is very unusual and it even could be thought as a paradox. In both Japanese and Chinese culture, we have the term – “aimai”. “Aimai (曖昧)” means “ambiguous”. It can link two opposite concepts together. To describe: it is neither black nor white, but grey. It is neither good nor bad, but in between. It is neither positive nor negative, but both. Negative is not considered as “bad”, it is just an opposite of positive. Let’s look at the sliding paper screen again: Tanizaki Junichiro mentioned in his book – *In praise of shadows* – ‘...the texture of Chinese paper and Japanese paper gives us a certain feeling of warmth of calm and repose [...] Western paper turns away the lights, while our paper seems to take it in, to envelop it gently, like the soft surface of a first snowfall.’ (Tanizaki, 2001: 17-18) In western culture, we use curtains to block the light out. In contrast, traditional Japanese houses love to use paper screen which gives a soft touch of light. Instead of rejecting the light totally, they choose to “accept it” and “live with it”.

This concept of no-separation reminds us that everything in the world is interrelated. No one is living in a bubble.



Figure 4: Japanese sliding paper screen. [Author's photo]

MONO NO AWARE 物の哀れ AND KAWAII 可愛い

"Mono" means objects or things, while "Aware" means sadness or empathy. Thus, "mono no aware" means "pathos of things" or "empathy towards things." While looking at fallen leaves may arouse a feeling of sadness for a life passing away, seeing changing seasons may make us think of the impermanence of the nature. "Mono no aware" reminds us that everything in the world is impermanent and we need to value it.

Kawaii is a relatively new aesthetic term compare to other aesthetic terms. It generally means "cute" nowadays. It means compactness, adorable, lovable as well. But why I want to introduce it is because of its origin. Kawaii is derived from the term, "kawaisou" (可哀想), which means "pitiful". It again links back to "mono no aware". Japanese always have a sadness feeling on lovable things. However, "sadness" and "empathy" is not always a bad thing in Japanese concept. It sometimes alerts you of or raises your awareness to the surrounding world or the nature.



Figure 5: Fallen flowers. [Author's photo]

IMPERMANENCE – A COMMON FEATURE IN ZEN BIGAKU

The Zen philosophy always emphasises the impermanence and uncontrollability of nature. For example the famous term, “*ichi-go ichi-e* (一期一会)”, which is always used in tea ceremony and Japanese martial art (such as Kendo 剣道, Kyudo 弓道 etc.), also hinted this. “*Ichi-go*” means “a lifetime” and “*ichi-e*” means “a meeting” (either between human and human, or human and object). Thus, “*ichi-go ichi-e*” has the meaning of “for this time only”. It reminds us that we should cherish every meeting with any human or object.

CONCLUSION

What I intend to introduce is the “values and beliefs” of these aesthetics. From these inspirations, I would like to show you two directions of emotionally durable design: “Design to help people to value ageing stuff” and “Design to build up and maintain relationships”.

DESIGN TO HELP PEOPLE TO VALUE AGEING STUFF

“Wabi-sabi” is the appreciation of objects that are worn out or decaying. Each mark, left on a object because of ageing, has its own story. “Mono no aware” reminds us that everything is impermanent; therefore we need to respect its life. We could combine these two aesthetics with Jonathan Chapman’s concept to create designs that would either help the users to appreciate the beauty of ageing or the design that could grow with the users.

One design example which could encourage users to love the ageing marks is the “Stain” teacup (Fig. 6) designed by Bethan Laura Wood. This teacup is designed to stain in certain patterns. The more it is used, the more of the hidden pattern will be revealed. In this case, the user participates to “complete” this piece of design. This example also brings up a message: “ageing can be beautiful.”

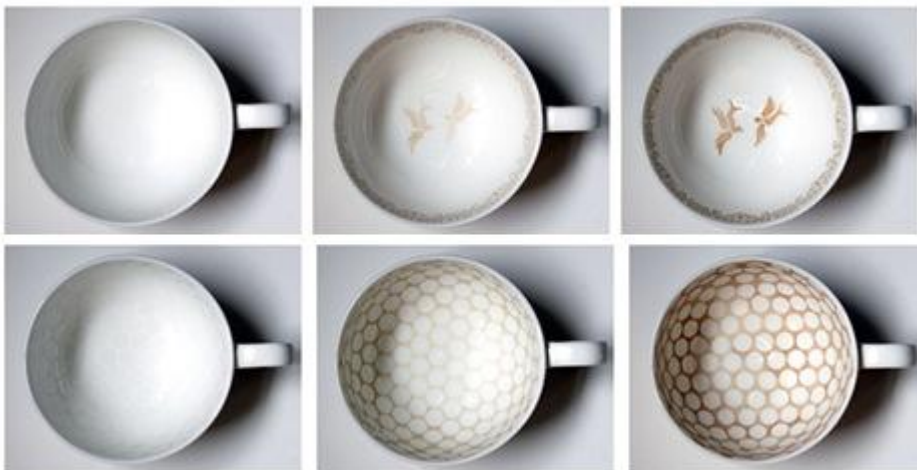


Figure 6: “Stain” teacup by Bethan Laura Wood (2008). From: GIZMODO [website] Available at: <http://gizmodo.com/stain-teacups/> (Accessed: 6 October 2012)

A good design can make users emotionally attached to the object. However, many products fail to do so in our throw-away-society. Jonathan Chapman (2005: 67) suggests that ‘Most products within the current model of design are static, possessing non-evolutionary souls; we as users, on the other hand, are anything but static and exist within a restless state of continual adaptation and growth.’ The heart of the wastage problem is that we (user and object) fail to grow together. Design example such as “The Tripp Trapp Chair” (Fig. 7), shows how design can “grow” with users.



Figure 7: The Tripp Trapp® chair, created in 1972 by the designer Peter Opsvik. From: Amazon [website] Available at: <http://images.amazon.com/images/G/01/baby/detail-page/c26-B001D1A4IS-2-s.jpg> (Accessed: 3 November 2012)

DESIGN TO BUILD UP AND MAINTAIN RELATIONSHIP

The second direction: “Ma” reminds us the importance of relationship. I have created a relationship diagram (Fig. 8) from its concept. Interaction is not only within human / human, but also human / object, human / environment, and object / environment. Designers always consider the human / object relationship, but the latter two are also important. Sustainable design is a hot topic all around the world now. If designers are aware of the object / environment relationship, there will be less irresponsible designs. Secondly, when design can connect people to the nature (rebuild the relationship between human / environment), there will be less thrown away and waste stuff.

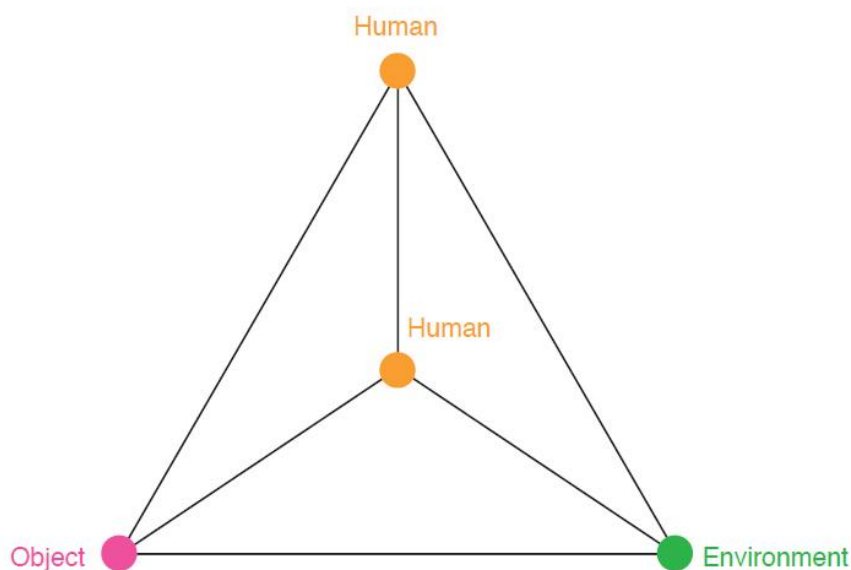


Figure 8: Relationship diagram by the Author

We often find it awkward to see “hi-tech products” in nature (Fig. 9). Sometimes I begin to think: the materials for making the products comes from nature but why in the end the products conflict with nature? A good design should not harm the environment and it may even be more harmonious with the environment. I would like to give Pangea Organics’ bar soap packaging (Fig. 10) as an example because it can finally return to the nature. Seeds are mixed into the recycled cardboard, so you can plant herbs out from these cardboard boxes. Furthermore, designers should also imagine how their products can work with other products or be placed together in the same environment to create synergy.



Figure 9: iPhone on grass. From: The Verge [website]. Available at: <http://www.theverge.com/2012/4/29/2986113/so-i-found-an-iphone-4-gsm-in-the-dirt-what-now> (Accessed: 6 October 2012)



Figure 10: Pangea Organics Soap Packaging. From: NOTCOT [blog]. Available at: <http://www.notcot.com/archives/2008/12/pangea-organics.php> (Accessed: 3 November 2012)

I hope this paper can awaken people to concern about the wastefulness of materialism and stimulate educators to change teaching curriculum in design education to a less materialistic one. I also hope that future designers can adopt these concepts as new ways to design for sustainability.

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