

The Essence of Space: Minimalism in Contemporary Architecture and Interior Design

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Abstract - Minimalism in contemporary design reflects a broader cultural shift toward simplicity, intentionality, and environmental consciousness. Rooted in Zen philosophy—which emphasizes impermanence, mindfulness, and spatial awareness—and influenced by Western modernist ideologies such as the Bauhaus movement, minimalism values clarity, honesty of materials, and spatial efficiency in both interior and architectural design. This study examines the philosophical foundations, practical implementations, and the emotional and environmental impacts of minimalism. It explores how minimalist design practices align with the current need for sustainable living, psychological well-being, and functional refinement in built environments. Employing a qualitative-dominant, mixed-methods approach, the research incorporates a comprehensive literature review, in-depth interviews with design practitioners, a structured survey of 25 professionals, and case study analyses of minimalist works by architects. The findings reveal that minimalist spaces enhance mental clarity, emotional calm, and functional simplicity while encouraging sustainable practices through intentional material use and reduction. Designers consistently reported that minimalist environments support intentional living and help counter overstimulated modern lifestyles. Case studies further illustrate how minimalism functions as both a design strategy and a lifestyle philosophy. In conclusion, minimalism emerges as a holistic, adaptable, and resilient approach that responds to the psychological, ecological, and social demands of contemporary life. More than a fleeting trend, it promotes human-centered environments that are calming, purposeful, and future-oriented, reaffirming its continued relevance in the global design landscape.

Key Words: Minimalism, Interior Design, Contemporary Architecture, Sustainability, Design Psychology, Spatial Clarity

1. INTRODUCTION

Minimalism has become an influential movement in contemporary design, extending beyond visual aesthetics to address the psychological, environmental, and functional needs of the modern world. As global urbanization accelerates and digital distractions multiply, individuals increasingly seek environments that offer calm, clarity, and authenticity. In response, minimalist design has emerged as

a counterbalance—a deliberate reduction of visual noise and material excess to create spaces that emphasize purpose, peace, and well-being.

Rooted in Zen Buddhism and refined through Western modernist movements such as Bauhaus, minimalism emphasizes “less but better.” It advocates for the intentional elimination of non-essential elements, enabling design to focus on what truly matters: function, proportion, light, and material honesty. This research investigates how minimalism has evolved into a culturally adaptive and emotionally resonant design approach, particularly in interior and architectural contexts. The study explores how minimalist strategies are applied in contemporary practice to achieve sustainable, psychologically supportive, and spatially efficient environments.

1.1 HYPOTHESIS

Minimalist interior design positively contributes to psychological well-being, promotes sustainability, and enhances spatial usability in contemporary residential and architectural settings.

1.2 Objectives

- To examine the philosophical and historical foundations of minimalism
- To identify key design principles and their practical application
- To evaluate the impact of minimalism on well-being and sustainability
- To compare minimalist design with related movements such as Modernism, and Zen architecture

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Zen Origins and Eastern Influence

Minimalism’s spiritual and philosophical origins lie in Zen Buddhism. Concepts like ‘*ma*’ (negative space), ‘*wabi-sabi*’ (acceptance of imperfection), and ‘*shibui*’ (understated

beauty) all influence Japanese architectural aesthetics. Andrew Juniper describes wabi-sabi as a “reverence for simplicity and transience” that encourages designers to find beauty in the modest and impermanent (Juniper, Wabi Sabi: The Japanese art of impermanence, 2003)

These values are seen in traditional Japanese interiors—clean lines, raw materials like wood and paper, and spaces that evoke quietude. Zen minimalism prioritizes emptiness not as void, but as potential—a space for contemplation and balance. (Chayka, 2016,84).

2.2 Western Modernism and the Bauhaus Ethos

Minimalism in the West emerged from modernist movements like Bauhaus in the early 20th century. The Bauhaus philosophy unified art, design, and industrial production and rejected ornamentation in favor of function. Architects such as Mies van der Rohe introduced the now-iconic concept of “less is more,” which still underpins minimalist thinking today (Goad, 2005).

Le Corbusier, another key figure in modernist minimalism, emphasized proportion, simplicity, and light. These ideas helped create a design movement that was not just functional, but psychologically and materially efficient.

Contemporary architects like John Pawson and Tadao Ando have refined minimalism into a meditative spatial experience. Pawson’s architecture is marked by precise geometry and silence—his work seeks to “do more with less,” creating impact through restraint (Pawson, 2004). Tadao Ando’s concrete structures embrace stillness and natural light, drawing from both Zen and modernist traditions. As he notes, “architecture is the interplay between light and shadow” (Ando, 2010).

2.3 Indian Ethos on Minimalism

The Sanskrit phrase “अति सर्वत्र वर्जयेत्”, meaning “*excess should be avoided in all aspects*,” encapsulates the Vedic Indian ethos of moderation, simplicity, and balance—core ideas that align closely with the principles of minimalism. In Indian philosophy, this is further echoed in **Jainism**, which promotes the doctrine of “**Aparigraha**”, or non-attachment to material possessions. Jain teachings encourage individuals to lead a modest life, avoid over-consumption, and cultivate detachment from wealth and ownership. This philosophy supports mindful living and aligns with contemporary ideas of sustainability by advocating resource preservation and waste reduction.

In the context of **pre-independence India**, **Mahatma Gandhi** became a global symbol of simplicity and self-reliance. His lifestyle, and especially the design of the **Sabarmati Ashram**, reflected a deep commitment to minimalism. Gandhi consciously rejected material excess and promoted the values of *simple living and high thinking*. His

minimalist approach influenced not just political and spiritual movements, but also how design, consumption,

and sustainability were perceived in India. In modern times, **minimalism in India** extends beyond physical possessions to embrace conscious consumption, financial mindfulness, and prioritizing experiences and purpose over accumulation—reflecting both traditional wisdom and contemporary relevance.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods approach, including:

- **Literature Review:** An extensive review of scholarly literature on Zen design, modernism, Bauhaus, and minimalist theory.
- **Case Studies:** Analysis of notable projects K2 house and The Grand Alabaster Punjab
- **Survey:** Two structured 16-question and 13 survey distributed to 25 architects and interior designers who specialize in minimalism.
- **Comparative Analysis:** A thematic comparison of minimalism with movements such as brutalism, modernism, Zen architecture and Scandinavian design.

4. SURVEY FINDINGS

4.1 Zen Origins and Eastern Influence

Respondents indicated that clarity, emotional calm, and sustainability were primary design goals. The use of neutral color palettes and natural materials—such as untreated wood, concrete, and glass—was cited as central to their minimalist approach.

4.2 Application Strategies

Common strategies included open floor plans, concealed storage, and the strategic use of natural light. Many designers incorporated biophilic design elements, such as indoor plants, and emphasized ambient lighting to soften the visual austerity of minimalism.

4.3 Emotional and Spatial Outcomes

Most practitioners reported that minimalist environments promote user focus and reduce cognitive fatigue. Tactile materials and organic elements were key in preventing the coldness often associated with overly stark interiors.

4.4 Common Challenges

Designers acknowledged that maintaining warmth and comfort without sacrificing minimalist integrity was a consistent challenge. There were also concerns about minimalism being misinterpreted as a trend rather than a design philosophy.

5. COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

5.1 Minimalism vs. Brutalism

Although both styles avoid ornamentation, brutalism often appears heavy and imposing due to its use of raw concrete and aggressive forms. In contrast, minimalism emphasizes lightness, openness, and serenity.

Aspect	Minimalism	Brutalism
Philosophy	Focus on reducing elements to achieve clarity and tranquility.	Emphasizes raw, exposed materials and bold, imposing forms.
Aesthetic	Subtle, delicate, and serene spatial compositions.	Heavy, massive, and rough-textured forms.
Material	Smooth concrete, light woods, and soft color palettes.	Rough, unfinished concrete (béton brut) and steel.
Example	John Pawson's minimalist home.	Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation

Table 1 Comparison of principles of two different design ideologies-1

5.2 Minimalism vs. Modernism

Modernism embraces technology and innovation, often resulting in bold, expressive forms. In contrast, minimalism seeks restraint. As Goad suggests, modernism and minimalism intersect, but the latter softens modernism's rationalism with emotional and spiritual depth (Goad, 2005).

Aspect	Minimalism	Modernism
Philosophy	"Less is more" – focuses on extreme simplicity and reduction.	"Form follows function" – emphasizes function-driven design with clean aesthetics.
Aesthetic	Pure forms, monochromatic tones, and elimination of excess.	Simplicity with functional expression, often using industrial materials.
Material	Natural materials like raw concrete,	Steel, glass, and reinforced concrete

	wood, and stone.	for industrial efficiency.
Example	Tadao Ando's Church of the Light	Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House

Table 2 Comparison of principles of two different design ideologies-2

5.3 Minimalism vs. Japanese Zen Architecture

Both value simplicity and the natural world, but Zen design adds a spiritual layer rooted in impermanence and harmony

with nature—elements that may be aesthetically mirrored but not philosophically present in all Western minimalist designs.

Aspect	Minimalism	Japanese Zen Architects
Philosophy	Reduction of elements for simplicity and purity.	Inspired by Zen philosophy, emphasizing balance, harmony, and nature.
Aesthetic	Clean lines, neutral colors, and geometric forms	Natural materials, asymmetry, and integration with nature.
Material	Concrete, glass, steel and stone.	Wood, paper screens (shoji), bamboo, and tatami.
Example	Tadao Ando's Water Temple	Katsura Imperial Villa

Table 3 Comparison of principles of two different design ideologies-3

5.4 Minimalism vs. Scandinavian design

Minimalism and Scandinavian design both value simplicity, functionality, and clean aesthetics, but they differ in tone and warmth. While minimalism often leans toward stark, monochrome palettes and extreme reduction, Scandinavian design adds coziness through soft textures, light wood, and muted earthy tones. The result is a minimal yet inviting environment rooted in comfort and practicality.

Aspect	Minimalism	Scandinavian Design
Philosophy	Extreme reduction to achieve clarity and focus.	Minimalism blended with warmth and functionality.
Aesthetic	Stark simplicity with a neutral palette.	Soft minimalism with warm, natural tones.

Material	Concrete, glass and metal.	Wood, wool, and light-colored materials.
Example	Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion	Alvar Aalto's Villa Mairea

Table 4 Comparison of principles of two different design ideologies-4

6. DISCUSSION

The research affirms that minimalism plays a vital role in shaping environments that are emotionally soothing and ecologically responsible. Its emphasis on spatial clarity and natural materials aligns with modern needs for mental wellness and sustainability. The integration of Zen and Bauhaus ideologies allows minimalism to balance form and function while providing cultural depth.

Minimalist strategies are often chosen not for stylistic novelty but as conscious responses to overconsumption, visual chaos, and resource depletion. However, its successful implementation depends on an understanding of its philosophical roots and thoughtful design choices that prioritize comfort and personalization.

The essence of minimalism lies not in the absence of things, but in the intentional presence of only what matters. This distinction is critical. Good minimalist design does not aim for sterile perfection, but for considered clarity. The visual silence it creates allows for the amplification of human experience—how light travels, how sound moves, how textures feel underfoot. These subtle qualities are what make minimalist spaces resonate on an emotional level.

Moreover, minimalism is inherently dynamic. It adapts to culture, geography, and changing needs. In climates with abundant sunlight, it utilizes openness and reflection. In colder settings, it adopts warmth through insulation and texture. This ability to adapt makes it highly applicable across global contexts—from compact urban apartments to open rural retreats.

The integration of sensory design—touch, sound, temperature, and scent—also plays a growing role in modern minimalism. Designers are moving beyond the visual to create spaces that soothe the entire nervous system. Tactile surfaces, subtle acoustics, and natural ventilation become tools for emotional wellness, aligning physical environment with mental clarity.

6.1 Minimalism and Technology Integration

While minimalism traditionally emphasizes simplicity and analog living, it has recently adapted to include smart technology in subtle and integrated ways. The modern minimalist home often incorporates hidden smart systems—lighting, climate control, and security—that enhance

functionality without disrupting visual serenity. Devices like voice-controlled assistants and automated lighting systems can be seamlessly embedded into minimalist interiors, allowing occupants to maintain technological convenience without cluttering space with visible hardware.

Smart design can also support sustainability goals. Energy-efficient appliances, solar panel systems, and intelligent home automation can be used to monitor and reduce energy consumption. These advancements align with minimalism's ethos of thoughtful resource use and environmental responsibility. When used judiciously, technology complements minimalist living by promoting ease, control, and awareness—all within a visually restrained environment.

6.2 Expanding the Role of Materiality

Another key area of growth in minimalist design is the use of sustainable and regionally sourced materials. The earlier focus on materials like concrete, wood, and glass has evolved to include bamboo, recycled stone, reclaimed timber, and earth-based composites. This evolution represents a deeper commitment to environmental ethics within minimalist frameworks.

Minimalist spaces now prioritize not just material honesty, but also material storytelling—using elements that reflect local culture, artisanal craftsmanship, or a narrative of repurposing. This helps to add character and human warmth to otherwise restrained spaces, balancing starkness with cultural depth.

7. CONCLUSION

Minimalism is more than a stylistic expression—it is a reflection of deeper values such as mindfulness, sustainability, and intentional living. By reducing spatial clutter and emphasizing quality over quantity, minimalist design creates environments that are both aesthetically pleasing and emotionally restorative.

As architecture and design continue to evolve in response to environmental pressures, social shifts, and digital acceleration, minimalism remains uniquely positioned to offer enduring solutions. It simplifies without stripping, it clarifies without erasing, and it invites users to be present. Its success lies in its adaptability—not only in aesthetics, but in the way it integrates new technologies, local materials, and human rituals. Minimalism, at its best, is an architecture of empathy—one that listens to the needs of the planet and the people inhabiting it.

The results of this study show that when minimalism is applied with sensitivity and purpose, it can yield spaces that are not only beautiful but also profoundly humane. Its adaptability across cultures and disciplines ensures its continued relevance in addressing the challenges of 21st-

century living—urban stress, environmental degradation, and the psychological burden of overstimulation.

Minimalism, in its purest form, is not about deprivation but about making room—for clarity, calm, and conscious living.

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