

Cross-Cultural Design: A Visual Approach to Understanding Japanese *Wabi-Sabi*

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Abstract

Understanding how disparate cultures approach, devise, and respond to visual design is useful in igniting communication along cross-cultural landscapes and enriching our own visual culture in the West. Zen Buddhism and the cyclical harmony of the natural world significantly influence Japanese visual aesthetics, encouraging the acceptance of unpredictability in all forms of traditional design. This analysis will offer a discussion of *Wabi-Sabi*, a Japanese worldview exemplifying imperfection, impermanence, and incompleteness that strongly influences Japanese visual culture. Because there is no word or phrase in the English language that perfectly encompasses *Wabi-Sabi*, I have devised a visual method of presentation that will offer readers a visual approach to understanding the subtleties of *Wabi-Sabi*. I will then discuss my design of speculative scenarios that imagine contemporary Western society if its design had been driven primarily by the concept of *Wabi-Sabi*.

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Introduction

Current marketers, designers, and technical writers have stressed the importance of international communication, as connections between “companies, financial institutions, and other commercial entities” are essential for the “existence of modern civilized society” (Lyll 3). In engaging in global communication through international marketing, one of the main barriers is combating cultural differences. Religious development, cultural experiences, and social dynamics vary across national borders; a high-context culture like Japan is different from a fast-paced, time oriented, Western society such as the United States. Because of this, a Japanese audience reacts differently than an American audience when confronted with new events, technology, and philosophies. Without careful analysis of the disconnect between the two cultures, these marketers, designers, and technical writers run the risk of failing to successfully communicate with either audience.

International communication is instilled through both verbal and visual language. Verbal language is often the most used means of communication across cultures, where information is transferred from one culture to the next through written language and words. Given the dissimilarity between languages across borders, this is sometimes not always the most feasible way to communicate. Most places do not speak the same language, and often there are words in one language that have no linguistic counterpart in another. The Japanese language is good for communicating subtleties of “mood, vagueness, and the logic of the heart,” where often the English language is not (Koren 15). In cases where verbal language fails as a cross-cultural connection, visual design steps in. Referees for sports games use red and yellow colored cards to communicate discretion for player punishments. A red hexagon sign is associated with the notion to stop, much like a green light is a signal to move forward. From street signs to food

packaging, design is integral in expressing information. Often times is it easier to physically draw something for further clarification; sketching a map or drawing a picture both serve as visual mediums for communication when language cannot. Specifically, the aesthetics and appearance of visual design is a tool for international communication.

In describing aesthetic appearances, the Japanese have a vocabulary that does not translate directly to English. It is a vocabulary that describes a visual beauty anyone can appreciate, regardless of whether the defining language translates. Aesthetics, the principles of art, “express the ethical world of the good in the form of beauty” (Marra 19). Much of Japanese design culture revolves around aesthetics, from tea ceremonies to flower arranging to building relationships. Traditional Japanese design is so rooted in simplicity and harmony with nature, so what influenced this respectful culture? Many of these aesthetics are influenced by “*wabi-sabi*,” a term that is difficult to articulate by both Japanese and Western designers. Although not always explicitly stated as being *wabi-sabi* in application, the design aesthetic is prominent throughout Japanese culture and design. *Wabi-sabi* is a philosophical mindset, a characteristic of design that provides a rationale for both creative and lifestyle decisions. Because there is no English counterpart for the word, *wabi-sabi* is difficult to explain linguistically; however, the design and the accompanying feeling translate across cultures. Much like how being “Southern” or “Texan” has a certain feeling and connotation that cannot be absolutely defined, *wabi-sabi* is meant to be difficult to compartmentalize. It is difficult to describe being Texan, but visual cues, gestures, accents, and other high-context clues influence implications that someone is in fact Texan.

According to Japanese designer Kenya Hara, “communication is not dispatching information from one entity or person to another,” but “facilitating the mutual exchange of information.” Many words in Japan, like *wabi-sabi*, do not translate to English. In these cases,

design can be tool for international communication when language is a barrier. Because *wabi-sabi* is so difficult to describe linguistically in English, it is easier to describe it visually. Hara notes that “the field of design is human perception” and the “quiet observation of how to sense and how to make the viewer sense” (Hara 147). Marketers often rely on design to transfer information when language is a barrier, so *wabi-sabi* can be understood visually when words fail to translate. This thesis will attempt to visually define a concept that is meant to be indefinable, murky, and subjective. The process begins with creating comparison charts between objects that have strong elements of *wabi-sabi* versus those that have weaker elements. From there, a list of characteristics commonly associated with *wabi-sabi* in application were compiled, and then visually represented through individual spectrums. Each singular spectrum was then evaluated and the relationships between each characteristic were then mapped visually. This thesis will provide a visual approach to understanding and defining both material and immaterial applications of *wabi-sabi*, and offer an alternative explanation of the term rather than accepting the barrier of verbal communication.

International Communication

The continuous reinvention and manipulation of design across varying cultures is constantly evolving; designers are able to interpret techniques differently and produce unique and unexpected visual layouts. As marketers are engaging in more global markets, it is crucial to recognize how to position brands in different arenas. International marketing strategy “has to be adapted from culture to culture,” as the “essence of cross-culture marketing is studying the cultural features, difference of foreign markets, fitting, adapting to them or at least taking them in to consideration” (Risko 439). Prior to addressing an audience, it is important to consider cultural sensitivities and have a general understanding of the audience’s expectations. First, “marketers must study and understand country cultures,” thus a marketing strategy “must deal with the needs and values of a culture carefully” (Risko 443). Some things could come across as inappropriate or disrespectful and a writer or designer could risk losing an audience’s attention if cultural norms are not first considered.

In the same way that no culture is exactly the same, “a marketing concept for a product cannot be the same for all cultures” (Risko 443). For instance, A KitKat chocolate bar in Japan has distinct packaging and market positioning that is different than the typical red package we see in the United States. KitKat has created a green tea flavored chocolate bar in Japan, produced with green packaging, reflecting association with the signature green tea prominent in Japanese culture. The juxtaposition between the two packaging strategies is shown in **Image 1** below. Similarly, services are marketed differently as well; Aflac, an American insurance agency, entered the Japanese market using the same advertising plan and brand positioning as used in the United States. However, the company was not greeted warmly because their commercials did not align with the Japanese emphasis of respect towards one another. In American Aflac

commercials, the duck is often ignored and therefore the advertisement is comical; however, in Japan, the commercials are more serious and the duck is a respected figure. Personal health is a very serious issue in Japan as many Japanese wear masks to protect themselves from disease, so the Japanese did not find Aflac's initial advertisements funny. As a result of these cultural sensitivities and traditions, both Aflac and KitKat altered their advertising to make them more appealing to the Japanese market.

Image 1



To reduce this risk of offending or rubbing any target market in a negative way, the writer or designer should first make general observations about a culture and conduct preliminary research to learn more about an audience. Global perspectives vary, as do the singular markets within this global landscape. Each market is different, and often there are micro-cultures within larger gender, ethnic or racial subcultures. Various differences such as religion, language, lifestyle, and social dynamics affect cultural foundations and further influence how people will respond to product or service marketing. Furthermore, these differences affect how people will respond to visual design.

Understanding Japanese Culture

At the core of all international communication is culture. Culture varies from one part of the world to the next, and has dense history and traditions that influence many aspects of society.

Prior to understanding how the Japanese respond to visual design, it is important to consider their cultural influences. In Japan, traditional cultural values are still prominent in business, design, and marketing; the way people interact with each other is very relationship-driven, unlike the United States. Therefore, business deals with Japan are made after a strong, sincere relationship has been formed. Japan is a very high-context culture, meaning the way they communicate is not always clearly relayed through verbal language. Information is not always “expressed in actual words” but rather relying on “body language or gestures” (Title 14). Body language, physical interaction, and gestures are very important in Japanese communication. In the United States, there are fewer additional context clues and people are often more straightforward – in a low-context culture verbal language explicitly expresses meaning.

Unlike how independence is an end goal for many Americans, dependency in Japan has a positive connotation. Americans seek individual freedom and autonomy, while most people in Japan do not strive for personal success. The Japanese enjoy being dependent on other people, and do not see it as a weakness, but rather strength in unity. As a result, American culture is more diverse and individualistic. The country is more heterogeneous in terms of population diversity, while Japan has a relatively homogeneous population. The United States revolves around interpersonal communication, and is fueled by a drive for personal success. In Japan, privacy for the individual is not important. There are fewer individual gains, and often more group success. Their culture is very group oriented; the whole group must succeed otherwise an individual’s contribution has no meaning¹. The Japanese are more homogeneous and value strong relationships.

¹ For an overview of Japanese culture and business customs, see Hite, Robert E., and Jon M. Hawes. “Understanding the Japanese Culture for Business Success”.

I had the opportunity to travel to Japan and witness some of these cultural values first-hand. I spent one week in Beppu, a small town in the Southern part of Japan, exploring with Japanese students studying at Asia Pacific University, touring local businesses, and immersing myself in the dense culture. I was able to understand how the homogenous culture communicates with both one another and us Americans, and how body language is an important form of communication. I went for a business course with a group of fellow American students, and we were expected to assume traditional Japanese respectfulness towards one another and everyone we met.

We were each assigned Japanese “buddies” based on similar interests; although we were matched in pairs or groups of three, we did almost everything as a group, and everyone was included in every activity. As a large group of roughly 20 Americans and 25 Japanese students, our Japanese buddies placed emphasis on doing things with the group as a whole. Because few of our buddies could speak English very well, we had to rely on verbal cues and hand motions to communicate our message in some instances. They were very patient, relaxed, and willing to take the time to get to know every one of us. Additionally, they were all incredibly hospitable, and devoted an entire week of their summer to our visit. While in Japan, I began to notice how people treated each other differently than in America; each of them was very respectful to elders, to each other, and to us. Our buddies would always let us try things first, and were never gluttonous. We were told that it was rude if we could not finish our meals, so leftover food would get passed around the table for someone to finish it. I found this respectfulness very refreshing, and sparked my interest to learn more about traditional Japanese culture. Coupled with my fascination with their culture was an overwhelming interest in Japanese design. Menus, road signs, and colorful food packaging was so different than what I was used to in America, so I

had to rely on my buddy, Sumire, for all directions. Although I was only there a week, my time spent in Japan sparked my interest in Japanese culture and design, which led to a growing engrossment with cross-cultural design.

Culture and Design

Given an understanding of international communication and its dependence on culture, it is easier to emotionally connect with both global audiences and specific markets. Once an audience is generalized and assessed, design becomes a medium to transfer information. Design and culture are heavily intertwined; so does culture affect design? Or vice versa? Both influence each other and are in constant communication, so it is difficult to pronounce one more influential upon another. Cultural experiences and expectations will often determine how readers will respond to design, and groundbreaking design often influences culture. Given that the Japanese population relies heavily on the group and less on the individual alone, an advertisement or design promoting superior individual success would not resonate well with a Japanese audience. A more effective design would be to promote group-oriented success. In this case, culture influences design. An example of design influencing culture could be periodicals in the United States. Magazines such as *Sports Illustrated*, *VOGUE*, and *People Magazine* fuel a culture surrounded by perfection, insecurity, and sexuality. We are a society that is heavily persuaded by things we see or read both online and in print; whether intentional or not, these influence our beliefs and shape our culture as a society.

Understanding this relationship between design and culture concludes why effective design in one part of the world is not always effective in other countries. In the United States, visuals are often used in addition to text to further explain what was read. Visually heavy

advertisements are becoming more prominent in American advertising, but they are almost always coupled with text to enforce the design. In contrast, visuals in Japan are often designed with the intent to make things more beautiful. Beautiful illustrations or bright anime make up a majority of Japanese visual design. Upon examination of Japanese culture, decoration is an “essential aspect of humane life,” as it transforms “routinely average objects into the non-ordinary” (Nobuo 36). Color, line, shape, texture, size, space, and value are all elements interpreted differently in both places. Japanese design is very colorful, and emphasis is placed on intentional white space. Western design principles such as order, symmetry and hierarchy are often methodically pre-determined and calculated. In Japan, asymmetry is embraced, and more focus is on the process of creation rather than the finished product. “Visuals, integration of graphics and texts, text directionality, physical environment, color, and translation all affect design strategies” (Carpenter). Because of these differences in Western and Japanese design, some aesthetics in Japan do not carry the same value in Western society.

Design in Japan

In discussing Japanese culture and its influence on design, it is easier to understand why traditional Japanese design values attention to detail, devotion to process, and reliance on simplicity. Traditional Japanese design is different from contemporary Japanese design, much how various artistic eras in the United States do not share similarities. As various Japanese design techniques developed in consistently with traditional culture, trends in graphic aesthetics and visual design formed; however, these patterns “cannot be too rigid or too circumscribed” (Richie 11).

Traditional Japanese design, “free of modern influence,” is most closely associated with a natural, accidental, simple appearance. Visually different from traditional Western design, but it still adheres to some of the same design principles. However, traditional Japanese design is more focused on the design process than the finished product; indecision is embraced, and too much structure in the process of design is discouraged. Some of the same techniques seen in Western design such as color and typography are used, but others such as “order, symmetry, and logical progression do not coincide with traditional Japanese design” (Richie). Instead, aesthetic concepts such as *wabi*, *sabi*, *aare*, and *yigen* define the landscape of traditional Japanese design. Nature and simplicity form the root of all Japanese design, as the process of designing in itself is more important than the finished product, and emphasis on the “actual construction of a self than with self-expression” (Richie 15). Given this interpretation of design process, there is still a strong focus on the final product.

According to Japanese designer Kenya Hara, “the craftman’s spirit,” is applicable in all facets of life, from street cleaners to fashion designers.

“The craftman’s spirit, I think, imbues people with a sense of beauty, as in elaboration, delicacy, care, simplicity (words I often use). Obviously, this also applies to bento-making and the pride people take in making them as beautiful as they can.

There is a similar craftman’s spirit (“shokunin kishitsu” or “shokunin katagi”) in Europe. Yet in Europe I can see it coming alive only from a certain level of sophistication. In Japan, even ordinary jobs such as cleaning and cooking are filled with this craftman’s spirit. It is common sense in Japan.

While Japanese are known for their particular aesthetic sense, I would say we also have an incapacity to see ugliness. How come?

We usually focus fully on what's right in front of our eyes. We tend to ignore the horrible, especially if it is not an integral part of our personal perspective. We ignore that our cities are a chaotic mess, filled with ugly architecture and nasty signage. And so you have the situation where a Japanese worker will open a beautiful bento box in a stale conference room or on a horrendous, crowded sidewalk."

Individuals often "shape their job to enhance its meaningfulness," much like designers shape their creations to enhance their emotional or social impact (Erez 1).

To coin the term *Japanese aesthetics* would be to loosely categorize design qualities prominent in traditional Japanese design. "Aesthetics" holds meaning in the West, but lacks a Japanese counterpart that clearly defines the word. In the West, aesthetics often applies to distinguish something "beautiful from merely pleasing" (Richie 19). Prior to foreign influence, Japanese designers had no need for the word. Japan eventually coined the term *bigaku* in 1883 to refer to the word foreigners were using to describe the "science of fine arts" (Richie 20). Once the word was actualized, formal instruction and a more generalized understanding of *aesthetics* commenced.

Traditional Japanese aesthetics are characterized by focusing on an aesthetic concept "unique" to Japan and "different from" non-Japanese aesthetic traditions, the Western aesthetic tradition in particular (Saito 85). Much like linguistic differences, the Japanese grasp of aesthetics is more emotional and less structured. According to aesthetician Itoh Teiji, the Japanese interpretation of aesthetics is "intuitive and perceptual rather than rational and logical" (Richie 11). Much how most of traditional Japanese design is more devoted to process rather than product, the aesthetics are rooted deeper than the designs' physical appearance. Sensitivity to, respect for, and appreciation of the "quintessential character of an object" characterizes Japanese aesthetics (Saito 85). Referring to the materials used in creating a design, a component

of Japanese aesthetics is respecting and honoring these in the process. Referencing textiles, William Norris advises: “Never forget the materials you are working with, and try always to use it for doing what it can do best” (Saito 85). Designers and workmen must honor their materials and exalt their beauty in the best way possible. Because the materials are so important, attitude and respect towards innate characteristics of objects is an underlying component of all traditional Japanese design. From paper to textile, Japanese crafts “are transmitted generation after generation,” firmly rooted “in respect for the materials, methods, tools, and traditions of each craft” (Saito 86).

The respectful attitude towards objects and materials is not only an aesthetic, but also a moral virtue, guided by religious influence. Nearly every traditional Japanese aesthetic principle is derived from Shinto, Taoism, or Zen Buddhism ideals. The repetition of nature, harmony, and self-enlightenment already prevalent in Japanese culture fuel a population centered on acceptance of imperfection and balance. Already a thousand years old when Buddhism entered Japan in the late twelfth to early thirteenth century, the religion taught the following:

- (1) The world is a place of suffering; (2) suffering is caused by human desires and acquisitiveness; (3) something can be done to end suffering; and (4) the end of suffering and achievement of enlightenment or Buddhahood lies in following the Eightfold Noble Path. (Varley 20)

Most Japanese accepted Buddhism without qualm, specifically the fundamental belief that all things are impermanent. Coupled with Shinto, the ethnic religion of the nearly 80% of the Japanese population, Buddhism and Shinto beliefs synthesized; ideas were merged and acceptance of one religion did not deny belief of the other. In modern day Japan, the celebration of birth and marriage are often Shinto, while funerals are Buddhism. While Buddhism is focused on leading one’s path to Enlightenment, Shinto expresses a love of nature – much like Taoism.

Taoism focuses on the individual's place in nature, with emphasis on consumption and material moderation in all aspects of life. Taoists are aware of constant change, and work to maintain a balance between this change and the present. The marriage of these belief systems funneled religious views to build the rudimentary foundation of Japanese culture.

These perceptual values from nature influenced specific aesthetic concepts to emerge, filtering through both design and society. Aesthetics such as *Furyu*, *Shibui*, *Yigen*, *Iki*, and *Aware* are distinguished as different “tastes” Japanese design (Richie). Because the term “taste” is so subjective, the aesthetics were catalogued to better understand the impulse behind each technique. *Furyu* is comparable to elegance and sophistication in English, or the term “stylish.” Introduced first in China, it meant “good manners,” before becoming the essence of existing beautifully in an environment of “elegant simplicity” (Richie 35). A softer elegance is suggested with *shibui*, describing a certain kind of demeanor or design that is more subdued. According to Donald Richie, *shibui* is “simple patters, singers with unostentatious deliveries, actors who blend with the ensemble” (Richie 41). Anything that stands “between elegance and pathos” is aware, a verb form to commiserate or pity (Richie 52). Everyone can experience the aesthetic, and it influences related categories such as *yugen*, referring to “mystery and depth,” as well as *wabi* and *sabi* (Richie 54). In Japanese aesthetics, categories within categories flourish, all systematically supporting and thriving off one another. With each aesthetic, an awareness and respect for materials used is understood, and a serene sense of simplicity is embodied. Given this devotion to a clear mind throughout the design process, there is still a strong focus on the final product being aesthetically beautiful.

The Role of *Wabi-Sabi*

Throughout research of traditional Japanese design, one aesthetic continued to reappear, and was an influencer of many other design aesthetics. In considering Japanese beauty, this pair of conjoined twins is the most visible and renounced: difficult to explain, but easy to spot. These prominent principles in Japanese design are *wabi* and *sabi*: *wabi-sabi*. Separately, they mean different things, but together they denote the beauty of all things “imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete” (Koren). Imperfection referring to the inclination that everything has come from nothing and will return to nothing again. This cyclical system infers that nothing is permanent and everything will eventually wear down and fade into oblivion. What exists today will eventually be non-existent. Imperfection is the acceptance of flaws, mistakes, and the uncontrollability of nature. Nothing exists without imperfections; even the finest craftsman’s work or a product conjured by a machine is not perfect. Upon closer look, everything has flaws. Finally, everything is incomplete. Nothing is every fully “complete” as there is always room to improve, progress, or change. Everything is in a constant state of becoming, dissolving, and changing. Even great design is not timeless. Together, imperfection, impermanence, and incompleteness are the closest things to fully encompassing *wabi-sabi* linguistically.

Although *wabi-sabi* is a design aesthetic, it is also a mindset: a philosophical way of viewing life. Given its heavy connection with imperfection *wabi-sabi* is an understanding that everything is as it should be in the world. Everyone and everything comes from a space of emptiness and nothingness, and will eventually all return to this state. Shinto, reverence of the natural world, encourages this thinking. Traditional Japanese designers often must clear their minds and remind themselves of this cyclical cycle to and from nothingness, prior to creating or designing something beautiful. By creating space in the mind first, it is easier to focus on the task

and design process at hand. *Wabi-sabi* embraces space, as space is not empty, but rather intentionally left un-filled. There is not a word or phrase in the English language to fully encompass the design or feeling associated with *wabi-sabi*. The closest words to describing *wabi-sabi* in English are rustic, authentic, murky, and one-of-a-kind, but these only characterize a portion of the principle. According to Leonard Koren, *wabi-sabi* is the most “conspicuous and characteristic” feature of what we think of as traditional Japanese beauty, and it “occupies roughly the same position in the Japanese pantheon of aesthetic values as do the Greek ideals of beauty and perfection in the West” (Koren).

This “accidental alliteration” of words is a concept, not merely a quality attached to an object, and is rooted in the harmony of nature in an imperfect world (Richie 43). The principle was a radical departure from Chinese influence, by rejecting perfection and embracing the uncontrollability of nature. Unlike the United States, little material culture has been saved in Japan. Because of this, *wabi-sabi* is not easily reducible to a formula or strict categorization without risk of destroying its essence. To fully explain the principle might diminish its murkiness and freedom in application. It is a “nature-based aesthetic paradigm” that was once easily recognizable, but has become more difficult to define as modern influences shape Japanese design (Koren 9). Some of the first people involved with *wabi-sabi* were tea masters, priests, and monks, all practicing followers of Zen Buddhism. *Wabi-sabi* was even referred to as the “Zen of things” (Koren 16). The design principle was not passed down through every generation because it was an idea that only those privy to its exposure were educated. The *iemoto* of the house, the head family member, shared *wabi-sabi* only with those of their choosing. The principle was valuable knowledge, and was only shared “in exchange for money or favors” (Koren 17). Very few received formal instruction or information from a direct source. Because of this, most people

claim to understand the feeling when they are exposed to *wabi-sabi*, but have trouble articulating what exactly it is that caught their senses.

To begin to understand *wabi-sabi*, first the two terms must be defined separately:

Wabi is a philosophical concept, a way of life, a spiritual path. It is the inward and subjective misery of living alone in nature, away from society. *Wabi* is seeking the beauty of earth and disintegration, the beauty in simplicity, and abundance in poverty. It is the principle that encourages asymmetry, harmony, and tranquility. Finding the right amount of perfection in handmade craftsmanship and beautifying the subtle asymmetry of its making is *wabi*. Machine made bowls lack *wabi* as they were not made by hand, lack asymmetry, and are void of any experiences associated with its making that are memorable to the craftsman.

Sabi is an aesthetic term, referring to material objects that have been subject to the passage of time. In contrast to *wabi*, it is the outward, the objective, and embraces the natural progression of time. It is the inclination that beauty can only come with age. Things that are *sabi* are lean, withered, authentic, and melancholic. The deteriorating object becomes a bridge that links to previous owners, experiences, and ages.

Together, the two send a powerful message of simplicity. But can something be just *wabi*? Can something be *sabi* and not *wabi*? Or must they exist together? The two constructs now overlap so much that the line separating them has become increasingly fuzzy and difficult to distinguish. Instead of analyzing their operation separate from one another, it is easier to find examples of *wabi-sabi* and distinguish which components are *wabi* and which are *sabi*. One of the most comprehensive examples of *wabi-sabi* is found in the traditional Japanese tea ceremony. Known as *chanoyu*, *chado*, or *sado*, the tea ceremony is the simple serving of tea; according to Leonard Koren, it is an “eclectic social art form combining, among other things, the

skills of architecture, interior and garden design, flower arranging, painting, food preparation, and performance.” A Japanese tea ceremony is a tradition rooted in respect and appreciation. Each participant must enter through a small opening to the tearoom, a way to demonstrate equality across social, economic, and demographic boundaries. This action is an expression of *wabi*, as it is most closely associated with insufficiency and poverty. *Wabi* applies to the mindset and aim to live a life associated with reverence for the natural world and those in it, so it is demonstrated through the gratuitous relationship between the host and the guest. The hosts prepare the tea specifically for their guests with immense care. In return, the guests honor the hosts gift and take time to admire the bowl the tea was presented in. The environment of the tea ceremony is *wabi*, while the physical objects are *sabi*. The utensils used to prepare the tea, and the bowls themselves are *sabi*. Because *sabi* is more objective, it encompasses the objects that *wabi* influences adoration of.

Wabi-sabi is also deeply embedded in ikebana, a form of Japanese flower arrangement. Much like the tea ceremony, ikebana is rooted in appreciation for the natural world and materials involved in the arrangement process. Influenced by *wabi*, ikebana has three principles, exemplifying three poignant flowers. The flowers are irrelevant, but rather what they stand for is what matters. The three main principles of heaven, earth and man are arranged as flowers to relate to the world. Heaven (*shin*) offers creativity, imagination, and dignity. Earth (*hikae*) provides sturdiness, and provides solidity. Human connects the two, and is a bridge between heaven and earth. The flowers themselves are *sabi*, and resemble each of the principles. Heaven is the tallest and strongest in the design, while Earth is the shortest and closest to the bottom. Human stands between heaven and earth, providing aesthetic balance. Every material has a place and a purpose. According to Donald Richie, “nature should be our model,” and “we are to regard

it, to learn from it.” Beautiful ikebana arrangements are methodically planned and orchestrated according to these *wabi-sabi* induced guidelines.

The easiest way to understand *wabi-sabi* is to begin looking for it in your everyday life. The aesthetic is subjective, making it difficult to strictly define and categorize; you can only “find permanence in expiring examples” (Richie 38). According to Leonard Koren, “it is the cracks in the bark of trees that let us know it is a mature and healthy tree” or “the lines in a person’s face that lets us know how much they have laughed, considered carefully, grimaced in their lifetime” (Koren). It is the crack in the front porch steps, the crooked picture frame, and the one crooked plank along the wooden fence encasing the backyard. Throughout history, objects that were either never completed, or have imperfections are often the most acclaimed. The Venus de Milo statue, one of the most famous works of ancient Greek sculpture, is missing both arms. Because the statue is not complete, it leaves the viewer to imaging where the arms would lie. The Leaning Tower of Pisa in Italy is known for its notorious sideways slant, the Liberty Bell would not be as remarkable without the crack sliding up the side of the bell, and the acropolis in Greece would not be as renowned if not for its deteriorating state. Buildings and statues are famous for their flaws, age, and imperfections. In Japanese design, *wabi-sabi* is seen in pottery and handmade utensils. When a bowl breaks, the cracks are highlighted with lacquer and gold dust. Instead of lamenting the loss of a bowl, embellishing the cracks celebrates the object breaking. *Wabi-sabi* can be compared to waves in the ocean. “There are no permanent waves, there are no perfect waves, there are no complete waves. Every wave rises and falls” (Altair). It is a philosophical mindset and design aesthetic that is constant and continuously returning to its beginning: nothingness. The strongest examples of *wabi-sabi* are those that require further thought. The definition of *wabi-sabi* is murky itself, translating to its subjective appearance. In

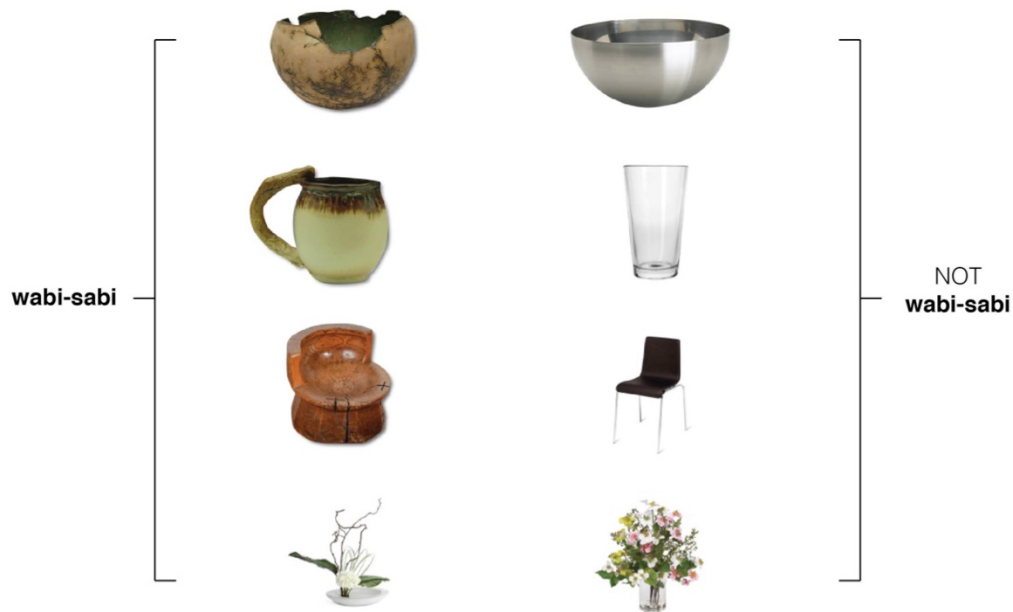
application, it requires imagination of what could have been or what still could be. Although there is no progress in *wabi-sabi*, it evokes wonder for the both the future and the past.

According to Leonard Koren, *wabi-sabi* is most easily understood when compared in contrast to modernism, another “slippery term” that includes most of the “slick, minimalist appliances, machines, automobiles, and gadgets produced since the second World War” (Koren 25). Although they were both radical departures of earlier art and design, they have strong differences that make it easier to distinguish elements of *wabi-sabi*. Because the aesthetic is very focused on impermanence and the idea that everything will eventually return to nothingness, its appearance is very fluid. Typically there are no hard edges, with a very organic, soft shape. There is little structure of the object, and natural asymmetry is evident. The bowl is a metaphor for *wabi-sabi*, because it has a free shape and is circular, another enforcer of the cyclical nature of the aesthetic. *Wabi-sabi* encourages reverence for the environment, and when used in design is often represented using sustainable and natural materials such as bamboo and wood. Modern materials such as metallic and stainless steel are not strong materials for creating a strong representation of the aesthetic. However, the authenticity of the materials is more important than the material itself. If a more modern material was used to construct an object, but a *wabi-sabi* mindset was embodied in the creative process, the creation still expresses some form of *wabi-sabi*. How the materials are used is very important in distinguishing something as having elements of *wabi-sabi*. Because *sabi* is often an expression of the beautification of time, the older something is, the more elements of *wabi-sabi* it has. Degradation and time exposure make the expression of *wabi-sabi* richer. Warm, earthy, colors are usually represented through the materials, and brighter, poppy colors are not strong elements of *wabi-sabi*. The aesthetic is intended to be murky, hard to distinguish, and difficult to generalize. As many people express

wabi-sabi through home architecture, it is often used in the private domain. It is a very personal mindset, and not typically expressed in the public sphere. *Wabi-sabi* celebrates the human rather than the machine, and emphasizes process over product. Because of this, most objects that are machine made and mass-produced have fewer elements of *wabi-sabi* than something that is hand made and one-of-a-kind. Mass production reduces the value of something, as it is no longer unique, and lacks imperfections that would be more prevalent in something that is handmade.

Although verbal descriptions of these elements are helpful, they are more easily understood when paired with visual representational as well. In defining *wabi-sabi*, it is easier to recognize through examples. As shown visually in **Exhibit A**, there is a noticeable difference between objects that have strong elements of *wabi-sabi* compared with those that have stronger elements of modernism.

Exhibit A



From the visual, it is easy to distinguish strong elements of *wabi-sabi* from weaker ones. For instance, the bowl on the left has strong elements of *wabi-sabi* and looks broken, rustic, and possibly handmade. In comparison, the newer, more modern metallic bowl on the right does not have as strong elements of *wabi-sabi* and was probably made with a machine. However, it is difficult to determine what exactly in each object gives it a *wabi-sabi* appeal, but rather each one simply *feels* different from their modern alternatives. By beginning to document what about each of these stronger examples of *wabi-sabi* have that are different from their modern counterparts, a list of strong attributes of *wabi-sabi* can be compiled. From the collection of these elements and other research, a list of characteristics that influences strong elements of *wabi-sabi* were documented, described, and visually represented in **Exhibit B**.

Exhibit B**form**

There is a free-form, organic, soft shape with rounded corners and no hard edges. There is little tension, and there are no tight areas.

**material**

All natural materials are used and there is no metallic, silver, or stainless steel. They are not modern, crisp, or clean, but rather rustic and antique.

**color**

Muted, earthy colors are used to resemble the natural world. Bright, poppy colors are scarce.

**degradation**

Time has romanticized the materials so they have withered and begun to deteriorate.



production

No machines were involved in the production. Handmade, original ideas, and nature itself were the instruments of production.



authenticity

All materials and ideas are revered. The designer or thinker values the process of creation as much or more than the finished product.



domain

The thing itself is very personal and private. It is not something to be presented in the public domain, but rather within the confines of one's personal arena.



context

Intentional and non-intentional imperfections are embraced. These imperfections were not derived due to laziness or inattentiveness to craft, but rather the nature of the materials and the process.



time

Age has only enhanced its beauty. There is no progress or material advancement as time passes.

**sustainability**

Recyclable, natural, and reusable materials are used to reduce environmental waste. All materials are able to resolve to nothingness.

**simplicity**

There is little structure, and very simple design. *Less is more*, in terms of simplicity.

**symmetry**

Asymmetry is embraced. Things may be off centered, awkward, yet still look completely balanced.



In developing these characteristics, it became more apparent that *wabi-sabi* is very fluid and not easily definable. Elements of *wabi-sabi* vary with application in each object, practice, or mindset, making it difficult to create a concise list of characteristics that would either prove or disprove something being *wabi-sabi*. Verbal descriptions of the aesthetic coupled with visuals were more powerful and easy to understand than just written language. From researching elements of *wabi-sabi*, it was easy to assume that a visual approach to understanding something that is hard to define would be the most consolidated way to explain the aesthetic.

Developing a Spectrum for *Wabi-Sabi*

In application, *wabi-sabi* can be many things, both material and immaterial, and is often difficult to distinguish as “*wabi-sabi*” solely based on appearance. In creating a rubric for categorizing the aesthetic, I initially designed a very rigid analysis through numerical responses. I took each of these elements of *wabi-sabi* and placed them on a spectrum from one to three, with written descriptions to denote what each end of the spectrum would look like. Three being the strongest example of *wabi-sabi*, while one portraying elements closer to modernism. Upon creation of this rubric, I realized that each element cannot be weighted using the same numerical scale, and *wabi-sabi* cannot be defined through numerical analysis. According to social scientist Foucault, scales distinguish very clearly “between the very real” and “those that reside solely in the realm of imagination.” The juxtaposition of the real and imaginative is what makes *wabi-sabi* so interesting and difficult to define, so the aesthetic has more depth than the rubric I initially designed gave it.

In creating a visual approach to understanding *wabi-sabi*, it is important to consider how intentionally difficult it is to create an all-encompassing description of the aesthetic. By

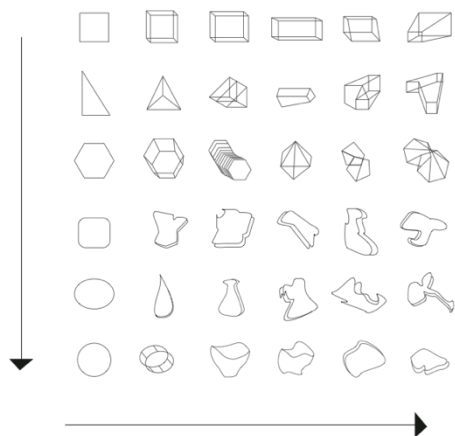
definition, it is easier to categorize anything odd, misshapen, and awkward as “*wabi-sabi*.” If this is the case, what defines *wabi-sabi* from careless craft? Between an intentionally imperfect creation and laziness in completion? On the other hand, where do we draw the line between intentional *wabi-sabi* and nature? The line between these two disparate ends of the design spectrum is fuzzy, making it very difficult to create a rubric for categorizing the aesthetic. It is difficult to define *wabi-sabi* with words, but the feeling attached to the principle exudes a sad, beautiful, calming, sensation. According to Japanese designer Kenya Hara, “to understand something is not to be able to define it or describe it.” The less information we have about something, we are less inclined to understand it more deeply. For instance, take a spoon. In the West, we define a spoon as a utensil for eating. Upon closer examination and research, it is harder to define what constitutes something as being a spoon. What materials are used in creating a spoon? What makes a spoon different than a ladle, or a knife? A spoon could be used to stir, or to measure. The more we know about what a spoon can be, the harder it is to define. The same applies for *wabi-sabi*; the more research conducted about the aesthetic, the harder it is to wholly define. A breach in this informational gap is what makes *wabi-sabi* so beautiful. Use of the aesthetic is the designers discretion and up to the viewers subjective opinion. With this in mind, can a rubric be created for *wabi-sabi*, an aesthetic that is impossible to define? Because of the subjective nature of *wabi-sabi*, developing a rubric to further understand it could only make it harder to define. Guidelines can be explained to offer what *wabi-sabi* could look like, but it is difficult to develop a rubric that would withstand the test of all expressions of *wabi-sabi*. Therefore, a set of characteristics was explained to distinguish *wabi-sabi* from *wabi-slobby*, laziness, and a lack of attention to detail.

Categorizing Wabi-Sabi

Each of the characteristics listed previously of *wabi-sabi* can be defined further, and each embodies the same subjectivity as the aesthetic itself. *Wabi-sabi* is very fluid, and spectrums displaying its elements must hold the same elasticity. Alfred Kinsey, creator of the Kinsey Scale - displaying sexual behavior in the human male - notes the “living world is a continuum in each and every one of its aspects.” After researching how information is categorized, either through taxonomies, rubrics, or visual maps, I realized a continuum would best reflect the elasticity of *wabi-sabi*. A spectrum of each the characteristics of *wabi-sabi* could not be designed the same way; they have different variations and a numerical rubric like the one I initially created would not suffice. Of the characteristics listed above, each was analyzed and broken down further. The spectrums allow for subjective interpretation, and offer further breakdown of characteristics that typically define *wabi-sabi*. Instead of making a stagnant rubric that either proves or disproves *wabi-sabi*, a moving continuum represents characteristics of the aesthetic more clearly. **Exhibit C** below offers a visual understanding of each spectrum.

Exhibit C

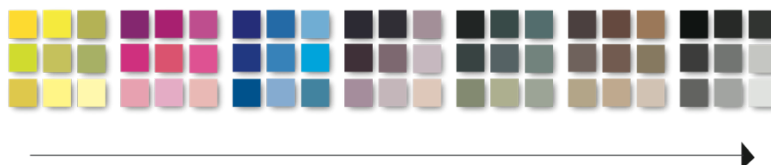
form



material



color



sustainability



domain

personal **vs.** private

time



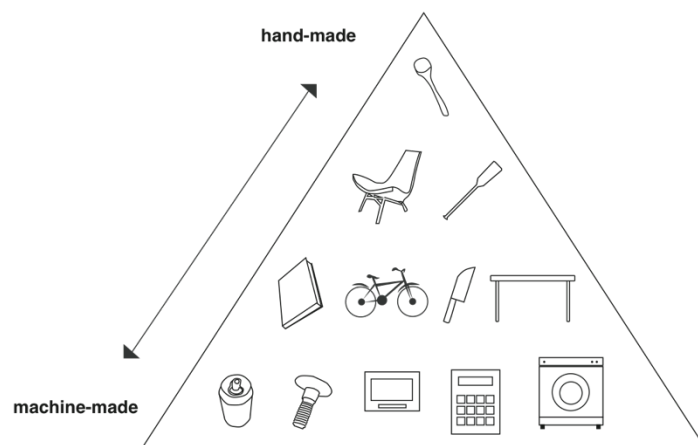
simplicity



context

deliberate **vs.** accidental

production



A Visual Approach

Each spectrum was designed to offer a visual medium in which to assess strong elements of *wabi-sabi*. For each characteristic, it is intended not to define *wabi-sabi* to a mere black-and-white rubric, but rather a continuous spectrum ranging from weak elements to so stronger elements. Offering viewers the informational background to understand what *wabi-sabi* often looks like makes it easier for them to distinguish the aesthetic in application. No spectrum I designed defines something on the farthest right with strongest *wabi-sabi* elements an example of the aesthetic itself. Placement on each spectrum merely denotes how strong the characteristic of *wabi-sabi* is; nothing can be formally declared *wabi-sabi* from these spectrums. It is then subjective to the viewer to determine if the object or method in question is definitely *wabi-sabi*. Complete categorization would reduce all imagination and diminish the essence of *wabi-sabi*.

Upon creation of these individual spectrums, it became imperative to establish the importance of one characteristic over another, and the relationships between each. A strong component of *wabi-sabi* in one area does not necessarily constitute a similar strong feature in another area. For example, an object could be very irregularly shaped, but be made out of metallic material. Is it *wabi-sabi*? The form spectrum will tell you the object has strong characteristics of *wabi-sabi* in terms of form, but the material spectrum says the opposite. This relationship between singular spectrums made it clear they were not durable enough to stand alone by themselves. Each singular variable relates to one another and must then be weighted together. With this in mind, a visual map was created; relationships between elements are displayed their hierarchy is employed. The map has two points of beginning: material and immaterial. Given the object, idea, or mindset in question, the visual map guides the viewer through the sequence of reviewing for *wabi-sabi* elements. Material objects have a different

progression than immaterial things, as elements of *wabi-sabi* fluctuate depending on the medium. In the design world, color and shape are some of the most important elements. Because of these overlapping relationships, each singular spectrum and visual display was then evaluated and assessed based on its relationship with *wabi-sabi* and other characteristics. Some elements are weighted more and must rank higher than another, while others exist in continuum with another element. These spectrums could not be visually displayed through a rubric, or an individual spectrum, but rather a visual map.

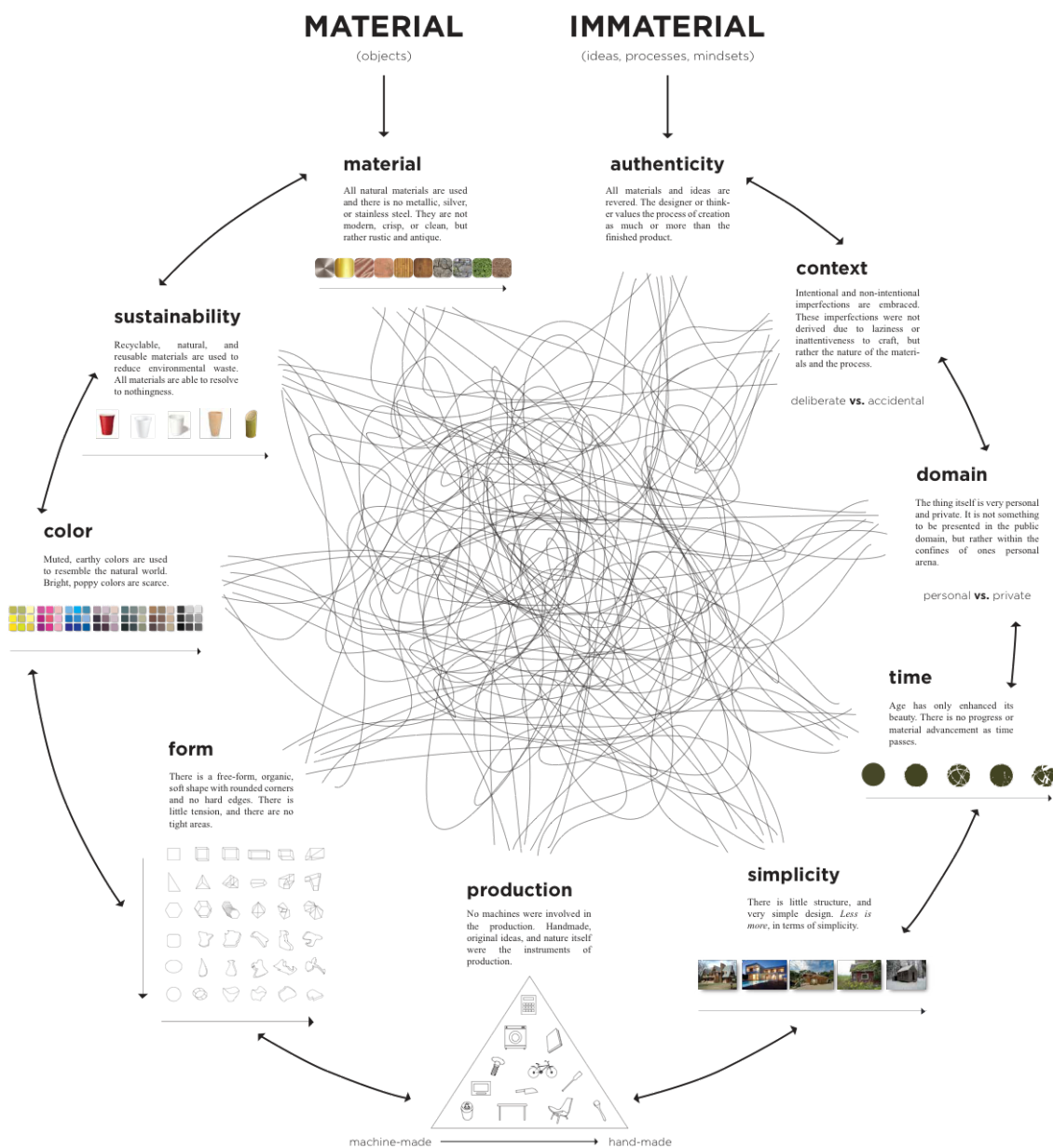
As seen in **Exhibit D**, a visual map of *wabi-sabi* is derived. Because *wabi-sabi* can be both a material object and an immaterial mindset or philosophy, there are different hierarchical steps to analyzing. Depending on what is being assessed, there is a different sequence of characteristics to observe. For instance, a material object such as a bowl would have a different progression of analysis of *wabi-sabi* than the observation of traditional ikebana's emphasis on the relationship between man, earth, and heaven; one is a material thing, while the other is not tangible. Therefore, when conducting a visual analysis on a bowl, you begin by first discussing what materials were used to construct it, followed by observation of how sustainable these materials are, their coloring, and so forth. Despite this cyclical cycle of assessment, each characteristic is related to each other. The unruly lines in the middle of the map portray this; relationships between all of these *wabi-sabi* elements are present, but sometimes difficult to see. The confusing nature of the lines in the middle signifies the difficulty of understanding *wabi-sabi*, and encourages the viewer to accept the aesthetic for its murkiness.

Exhibit D

a visual approach to understanding Japanese

wabi-sabi

*stronger elements of wabi-sabi are found as you move



A *Wabi-Sabi* World

As a visual aesthetic and philosophical mindset, *wabi-sabi* is an integral value of Japanese culture. As a society, we begin to accept and normalize theories, ideas, and aesthetics that eventually become our intrinsic values. In the West, society is materialistic and modern, fueling a capitalist economy. As a value, *Wabi-sabi* rejects all of these concepts and does not normalize societies so focused around commercial materialism. Kenya Hara “sees the Japanese aesthetic and way of life as a role model for the Western world, with its modesty, symbolism, tradition and darkness, discarding overconsumption to experience another joy” (Hara 10). This contrast infers the implication of *wabi-sabi* aesthetics on society in the West. What happens when we see *wabi-sabi* in the West? What would happen if *wabi-sabi* were a huge part of our culture?

If *wabi-sabi* were a cultural value in the West, some things would be very different in terms of why and how things are made. How we design in the West is influenced by the values that motivate the design process. Currently, the Western world is driven on the values such as success, efficiency, and progress. Mass production, outsourcing, and progressive technological inventions are the effect of these foundational values. With *wabi-sabi* as a value, materialism would not be a staple in society much like it is now. Because *wabi-sabi* does not embrace progression, as everything will once gain resort to nothingness, there would not be as much emphasis on technological advancement. Material items are so engrained in Western society already, so the influence of *wabi-sabi* would decrease materialism rather than completely terminate it. It is difficult to eradicate materialism completely, so it would be unrealistic to assume that adopting a *wabi-sabi* mindset would do so. Material products would still exist, but would be similar to those created by Muji, a contemporary Japanese brand that embodies

traditional Japanese design, as shown in **Image 2**. Muji “counters the rest of the world,” which “runs on the fuel of capitalism and appetite” (Hara 229).

Image 2



A *wabi-sabi* influence would create an economy that thrives on items designed with simplicity in mind. Products and services would be subjective, and up to the user to determine their functionality. The material would no longer define the objects use, but rather the consumer would. *Wabi-sabi* in the West would create a juxtaposition of natural design and the material world. Fewer products would be mass-produced, and there would be a stronger emphasis on handmade goods. As a result, there would be fewer material things, and nothing would be seen as more valuable than another. Within the *wabi-sabi* aesthetic, nothing is “valuable” because that would imply something is “not valuable” (Koren). Sustainable materials would be used to create things, and reverence for nature and the environment would be embedded in all areas of society. Everything would be used and nothing would go to waste. Materials would be maximized to their full utility, and there would be high reverence for their functionality. Products would be designed to again result to the nothingness they originated from. Materials that are disposable and natural decomposers would be used to create handmade items for individual consumers.

In terms of society, people would be more nomadic, as there would be little global transportation and communication. Cars and machinery that pollute the environment would not

be as salient, as they would not be as necessary. There would be a stronger focus on the present rather than future; time would be more cyclical rather than linear as people would no longer be so focused on micromanaging time. Wooden furniture and simple architecture would structure buildings, and solar-conscious houses would be designed. Consciousness of ones self and our impact on the environment would be infused throughout society, and all imperfections would be embraced.

In respect to our culture, *wabi-sabi* would undermine most of our aspirations to be successful, make all the right decisions, and essentially, be “perfect.” *Wabi-sabi* embraces imperfection, and the aesthetic strongly encourages acceptance of natural disorder. As a society, American culture is driven on money and success. *Wabi-sabi* advocates for a more relaxed approach to being successful and happy – accepting beauty in imperfection and simplicity. The aesthetic value encourages a relaxed society with deep cultural reverence for natural change and unpredictability. Everything is constantly changing, moving up and down and nothing is every fully complete. Much like our own lives, we will begin and end with nothingness; *wabi-sabi* encourages a similar mindset throughout all aspects of non-living parts of society as well.

Conclusion

Throughout the process of deliberating and writing this thesis, I did not have a set plan or consistent direction. I created charts, rubrics, spectrums, and maps multiple times, each one failing on the first try. With each failure, I learned more about *wabi-sabi* than I did when I first started the process; at the same time, I realized I knew less about it than before. After each failure, I knew what *wabi-sabi* was not, but I still had trouble defining what it was. I continued to come across the same question; how can I categorize something that is not meant to be

categorized? It was not until I realized that my continuums and visual map of spectrums are not the basis for explicitly defining *wabi-sabi*, but rather recognizing some elements were there. I tried too hard to define something that was intentionally left indefinable. Through research of different ways people categorize things, I understood that my completed visualization of *wabi-sabi* did not have to be so inflexible as a numerical rubric. My finished visual map is a guideline for understanding the aesthetic value, but not an end-all-be-all rubric. After having created a visual approach to understanding *wabi-sabi*, I am comfortably aware that I still do not know everything about the aesthetic. I know immensely more than I did prior to embarking on this project, but there is still more to learn.

Throughout the project, I intended to gain more insight about Japanese culture through my research of *wabi-sabi*. I wanted to know why traditional Japanese design is the way it is, and why it is different from Western design. I now understand that design is motivated by culture, which is ultimately motivated by values. Moreover, to understand a different culture is to understand its values. I now understand why Japanese design is different from Western design because I am able to articulate what cultural values are evident in Japan that are not in the West. As a student who hopes to engage in international marketing as a career, this helps me develop awareness for cultural sensitivities and traditional values when engaging in cross-cultural communication.

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