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Zen and the Art of Website Maintenance

Picture a Zen garden. Peaceful, serene, and meticulously maintained by monks with the kind of patience that can only be gained through the pursuit of enlightenment. A visit to a temple in the ancient town of Kamakura a few years ago left me with a tiny glimpse into the world of Zen and a taste of what is required to achieve such simple beauty. This aesthetic sense is summed up by the Japanese term *wabi-sabi*, which refers to the application of mindfulness to everyday life. Leonard Koren, who wrote one of the definitive Western guides to wabi-sabi [1], defined its essential characteristics as a beauty that is imperfect and impermanent but also humble and modest. It requires a rejection of the ostentatious in favor of function. To experience wabi-sabi takes patience and attention to detail. In his BBC documentary *In Search of Wabi-Sabi*, Marcel Theroux [2] surmised that wabi-sabi was more than

an intellectual pursuit of aesthetic ideals; it was something closer to a spirituality ingrained in the Japanese psyche. Since 16th-century Japan, the wabi-sabi aesthetic has revealed itself in several physical forms: from the elegant ritual of tea ceremonies and the minimalist floristry of *ikebana* to traditional musical instruments such as the *shamisen*. In the post-war period of the second half of the 20th century, this aesthetic has continued through the modern and post-modern eras. Architects such as Tadao Ando and Toyo Ito (Figure 1) have created elegant structures that manage to be as simple and functional as they are beautiful. This sublime sense of simplicity has manifested itself across various media. On film, Yasujiro Ozu captured an elegant beauty that inspired generations of directors. Similarly, graphic designers in Japan such as Shigeo Fukuda and Yoshiro Yamashita also reflected this aesthetic. Despite their disparate origins, modernist style

and wabi-sabi share traits of modest forms and an emphasis on form after function. Today many of the signs you see in Japan give a modernist impression with an emphasis primarily on function and readability. Helvetica is as pervasive in Tokyo as it is in the International Typographic Style of 1960s Switzerland. This seemingly intuitive Japanese sense of functional simplicity is even apparent in Honda's famous Asimo robot, which has a sleek and smooth exterior worthy of the next Apple product.

So why is it then that a country steeped in beautiful, functional simplicity has websites that are crowded and often almost impossible to read, that seem to ignore modern design conventions, much less incorporate even a trace of wabi-sabi? Since Web 2.0 in the mid-2000s, interface design globally has moved toward a more simple but functional approach, resulting in the recent preference for flat design over ornamentation (e.g., consider how buttons have gone from a 3D beveled appearance to a more 2D style). Yet despite its long-term love of laptops and smartphones and some of the best Internet speeds in the world, somehow the sparse simplicity of wabi-sabi does not seem to have translated to the Web. Somehow the realities of 21st-century interface design have not caught on. (Japan is, incidentally—much to the surprise of many immigrants—a country where fax machines remain common.)

As a design researcher living in Tokyo, I am trying to understand why this is the case. How can an innovative and creative culture—where time-honored wabi-sabi aesthetics seem to have permeated even robot design—have so many websites that look like they have not been updated in more



Figure 2. The homepage of Ito Yokado, a chain of shopping centers in Japan.



Figure 1. The library of Tama Art University's campus in Hachioji, Tokyo, was designed by renowned Japanese architect Toyo Ito.

than a decade? According to some design academics and practitioners in Japan with whom I have spoken, it may be because in Japan, if something looks cheap and cluttered, it is more likely to be popular with consumers. Or it could be that Japanese software developers have never been good at making interfaces.

Although I have yet to find research that confirms either of these perspectives, some research suggests the bombardment of information that users receive from Japanese websites may be due to the implicit and ambiguous nature of communication in Japanese society [3]. Nevertheless, this does not explain why practically every other design discipline in Japan has abundant examples of some of the world's most elegant work. Nor does it explain why so many Japanese websites ignore a lot of design theory and do not appear to have been updated this century. Figure 2 shows a typical website. Some of the text is so small that I cannot understand how Japan's aging citizens (more than one-fifth of the population is over 65) could possibly read it. Much of the text is delivered via images, so a screen-reading device might not help much either.

Despite its facade of high-tech culture and bullet trains, Japan is often resistant to change (see my previous note about fax machines). This could be one explanation for the current state of Web design in Japan. Nevertheless, I am heartened by the Web presence of some companies such as Muji and Uniqlo. These companies are internationally known for their functional simplicity, and I breathed a sigh of relief when I discovered that their sense of aesthetics extended to their online presence. I can see a glimpse of wabi-sabi in the way in which both companies approach their products, and thankfully, in their websites. Perhaps they realize that success in overseas markets means providing more intuitive and accessible designs. But, curiously, these companies also have local websites in Japan with more simple and functional designs.

Personally, I am looking to create examples that reflect both Japan's Zen-inspired design traditions and the realities of the modern Internet. I am pleased that most of the Japanese people I have spoken to who have seen

the website for my newest research project have commented favorably on the design. I must admit I was hesitant to show these colleagues designs for a website intended for a Japanese audience. In the meantime, while I wait for wabi-sabi—and the realities of modern interface design—to catch on in Japanese cyberspace, it might be time to head back to the temple.

ENDNOTES

1. Koren, L. *Wabi-sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers*. Imperfect Pub, 2008.
2. Theroux, M. *In Search of Wabi-Sabi*. British Broadcasting Corporation, London, 2009.
3. Cyr, D. and Trevor-Smith, H. Localization of Web design: An empirical comparison of German, Japanese, and United States Web site characteristics. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 55, 13 (2004), 1199–1208. DOI: 10.1002/asi.20075

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