

# The Concept of Emptiness in Wabi-Sabi Aesthetics and Its Influence on Scandinavian Minimalist Space Design

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## Abstract

The convergence of Wabi-Sabi aesthetics and Scandinavian minimalism has redefined contemporary space design, emphasizing emptiness, simplicity, and natural beauty. Despite their cultural differences, both philosophies share a reverence for space as an intentional presence, fostering mindfulness, tranquility, and functionality. Wabi-Sabi embraces imperfection and transience, while Scandinavian minimalism prioritizes clean lines and functional clarity, yet both highlight the importance of natural materials, subdued color palettes, and handcrafted details. This paper explores the role of emptiness in Wabi-Sabi aesthetics and its influence on Scandinavian minimalist space design, examining their historical origins, core principles, and impact on contemporary interiors. By analyzing their psychological, emotional, and sustainable dimensions, this study demonstrates how their fusion promotes well-being, intentional living, and a deeper connection to nature — offering a meaningful alternative to excessive materialism in modern design.

**Keywords:** Wabi-Sabi, Scandinavian minimalism, natural materials

## 1. Introduction

Design philosophy is a reflection of cultural values, history, and human interaction with space. Across different cultures, various aesthetic principles have emerged to shape how we perceive and engage with our surroundings. Among these, Wabi-Sabi from Japan and Scandinavian minimalism from Northern Europe stand out as two distinct yet philosophically aligned design ideologies. Though they originate from vastly different cultural and historical contexts, they share a deep appreciation for simplicity, natural elements, and the intentional use of emptiness in space. At first glance, Wabi-Sabi and Scandinavian minimalism may appear to follow different visual languages — one rooted in organic imperfection and the other in clean-lined functionality. However, both aesthetics embrace a concept of emptiness that is not a void, but rather a presence of space that fosters mindfulness, tranquility, and a deeper connection to one's environment. This concept of emptiness goes beyond mere aesthetics; it influences emotions, behavior, and the way people interact with their surroundings. In Wabi-Sabi, emptiness is deeply tied to the Japanese notion of “Ma” (間) — a philosophical and spatial principle that refers to the pause, the silence, or the space between things. “Ma” is not just an absence of material; it is an active, intentional presence that allows objects, architecture, and people to breathe, co-exist, and find meaning in simplicity. It reflects a worldview that values impermanence and transience, celebrating the beauty of materials that age gracefully — such as weathered wood, cracked ceramics, and rough textiles. Scandinavian minimalism, on the other hand, approaches emptiness through the lens of functionality and clarity. Emerging from the harsh Nordic climate, where natural light is scarce for much of the year, Scandinavian design evolved to maximize light, openness, and warmth in interiors. This resulted in a preference for uncluttered spaces, neutral color palettes, and simple yet highly functional furniture that prioritizes both aesthetics and practicality. The Scandinavian philosophy of “lagom” (just the right amount) encourages a balanced way of living — where nothing is excessive, yet nothing is missing either. While Wabi-Sabi finds beauty in the imperfect, the aged, and

the asymmetrical, Scandinavian minimalism values clean, streamlined designs that enhance efficiency and calmness. Despite these nuances, both aesthetics share the fundamental idea that emptiness is not an absence but an essential presence — a space that enhances appreciation, contemplation, and serenity. This paper will explore the role of emptiness in Wabi-Sabi aesthetics and its influence on Scandinavian minimalist space design. By examining the philosophical foundations, aesthetic principles, and practical applications of these two design ideologies, we can uncover how intentional emptiness shapes modern interiors, influencing not just the way spaces look, but how they feel, function, and foster well-being.

## 2. Understanding Emptiness in Wabi-Sabi

Wabi-Sabi is a profound Japanese aesthetic and philosophical worldview that embraces the impermanent, the incomplete, and the imperfect. Unlike Western ideals that often seek perfection, symmetry, and permanence, Wabi-Sabi finds beauty in the natural cycle of growth, decay, and renewal. At its core, Wabi-Sabi is a way of seeing the world, rooted in Zen Buddhist principles of impermanence (*mujō* 無常), suffering (*dukkha*), and the absence of self (*anattā*). These ideas influence not only Japanese art and architecture but also everyday life, shaping how people interact with their environment and cultivate a sense of mindfulness.

### 2.1 The Role of “Ma” (間): The Space Between

A central concept in Wabi-Sabi aesthetics is “Ma” (間), which can be loosely translated as “emptiness,” “gap,” or “the space between things.” However, “Ma” is more than just negative space—it is an active, living void that enhances the things around it. It allows objects to breathe, invites the observer to slow down, and creates a rhythmic balance between presence and absence.

In Japanese architecture and interior design, Ma manifests in various ways: Minimalist tea rooms, where empty space fosters mindfulness and appreciation of simple elements like a single flower arrangement (*ikebana*) or a handcrafted ceramic tea bowl. Traditional shoji screens, which diffuse natural light gently, creating an interplay between shadow and illumination. Unfinished aesthetics, where natural materials such as raw wood, aged stone, or textured paper reveal their innate qualities without being overly polished or perfected.

In contrast to Western architecture, which often seeks to maximize utility by filling space with furniture, decorations, or technological elements, Wabi-Sabi embraces emptiness as an essential part of design. The gaps, pauses, and negative spaces are not accidental—they are carefully crafted to evoke tranquility, depth, and a heightened awareness of one’s surroundings.



### 2.2 Embracing the Imperfect and the Transient

Another key aspect of Wabi-Sabi emptiness is the appreciation of natural imperfection and impermanence. This is reflected in: Aging materials: Weathered wood, rusted metal, and worn textiles are not discarded but cherished for their evolving beauty. The cracks in a ceramic bowl or the patina of old stone floors tell a story of time and usage. Asymmetry and irregularity: Unlike Western symmetry, which aims for balance through evenness, Wabi-Sabi finds harmony in irregularity. A slightly misshapen vase, an asymmetrical garden layout, or an unevenly glazed pottery cup reflect the organic unpredictability of nature. Muted and earthy tones: Colors in Wabi-Sabi interiors are subdued—shades of brown, gray, and faded greens that blend with nature, creating an atmosphere of quiet humility.



### 2.3 The Psychological and Emotional Impact of Wabi-Sabi Emptiness

The deliberate use of emptiness in Wabi-Sabi interiors goes beyond aesthetics — it has a psychological and emotional effect on the occupant. In a world cluttered with distractions, noise, and overstimulation, Wabi-Sabi spaces offer a retreat — a place where one can slow down, reflect, and reconnect with nature.

The practice of “kanso”, meaning simplicity, teaches that by reducing unnecessary elements, we gain clarity of mind. This aligns with Zen meditation practices, where emptiness is not about lacking something but rather about creating room for awareness, peace, and acceptance.

**Japanese Tea Ceremony (Sadō):** The tea room is intentionally small and uncluttered, with only the essential elements needed for the ritual. The emptiness in the room directs attention to the moment — each movement, each sip of tea, and the presence of nature outside.

**Zen Gardens (Karesansui):** The famous dry rock gardens use sand, stones, and vast areas of empty space to evoke the essence of water, mountains, and nature. The emptiness in the garden is not a void — it is a place of contemplation, inviting the viewer to fill the space with their own thoughts and interpretations.

**Japanese Calligraphy (Shodō):** The way ink is placed on paper emphasizes negative space, allowing the empty areas to be just as expressive as the brushstrokes themselves. The simplicity of a single character, surrounded by empty white paper, highlights the power of what is left unsaid.

In Wabi-Sabi aesthetics, emptiness is never truly empty—it is a living presence that allows objects, light, and time to interact harmoniously. The intentional use of negative space fosters mindfulness, encourages reflection, and invites a deep appreciation for life’s fleeting moments. Rather than fearing emptiness, Wabi-Sabi teaches us to embrace it—to see beauty in the imperfect, to cherish the gaps, and to find meaning in the spaces between things. This principle of emptiness, as we will see, also plays a crucial role in Scandinavian minimalist space design, where functionality and simplicity create similar havens of calm and clarity.

## 3. Scandinavian Minimalism: The Beauty of Simplicity

Scandinavian minimalism is more than just a design style — it is a lifestyle philosophy rooted in the Nordic way of life. Originating in Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Norway, and Iceland, this aesthetic evolved in response to the region’s unique climate, cultural values, and social principles. Unlike the stark, often clinical feel of modern minimalism, Scandinavian design embraces warmth, comfort, and functionality, making it an inviting and livable form of simplicity.

### 3.1 The Origins of Scandinavian Minimalism

Scandinavian minimalism finds its roots in the early 20th century when designers sought to create a functional yet aesthetically pleasing living environment for people of all social classes. The movement was influenced by: The Nordic climate – Long, harsh winters with limited daylight necessitated bright, open, and airy interiors that maximize natural light. The Modernist movement — Inspired by Bauhaus principles, Scandinavian designers embraced form following function, reducing unnecessary ornamentation while keeping things beautiful and practical. Post-war social democracy — Scandinavian societies emphasized equality, accessibility, and sustainability, leading to the creation of affordable, well-designed furniture and homes. Traditional Nordic craftsmanship — A deep appreciation for handcrafted, high-quality goods made from natural materials remains central to Scandinavian design.

**Key Pioneers of Scandinavian Minimalism:** Alvar Aalto (Finland) — Known for his organic architecture and furniture designs that blend functionality with nature. Arne Jacobsen (Denmark) — Created iconic minimalist furniture, including the Egg Chair and the Series 7 Chair. Bruno Mathsson (Sweden) — Promoted ergonomic, lightweight furniture with natural wood elements.

By the 1950s, Scandinavian design had gained international recognition, particularly through exhibits like *Design in Scandinavia*, which toured the United States and showcased Nordic minimalism to the world.

### 3.2 Core Principles of Scandinavian Minimalism

#### 3.2.1 Functionality Over Ornamentation

Scandinavian design follows the principle of functionality first — every object in a space serves a practical purpose. Unlike traditional Western interiors that often feature decorative elements for purely aesthetic appeal, Scandinavian interiors prioritize: Multi-functional furniture (e.g., extendable dining tables, storage-integrated seating). Space-efficient layouts that avoid clutter. Simplicity in form, ensuring usability and longevity.

#### 3.2.2 Light and Space: The Nordic Solution to Dark Winters

With limited sunlight during the long winter months, light becomes an essential element in Scandinavian design. This is achieved by: Maximizing natural light — Large, unobstructed windows, white or pale-colored walls, and reflective surfaces help brighten spaces. Soft and warm artificial lighting — The use of pendant lamps, floor lamps, and candles creates a cozy ambiance. Minimalist yet open layouts — Rooms are designed to feel spacious, airy, and inviting.

#### 3.2.3 The Philosophy of “Hygge” (Cozy Well-being) and “Lagom” (Just the Right Amount)

Two uniquely Nordic philosophies influence Scandinavian minimalism: Hygge (Denmark and Norway) — A sense of warmth, coziness, and comfort, often achieved through soft lighting, plush textiles, and inviting seating areas. Lagom (Sweden) — The concept of balance and moderation, encouraging people to live with “just enough” rather than excess. This results in interiors that feel warm, lived-in, and harmonious rather than cold or sterile.

### 3.3 Materials: Bringing Nature Indoors

Scandinavian design is deeply connected to nature, which is reflected in the materials used. Unlike Wabi-Sabi, which embraces raw, weathered textures, Scandinavian minimalism favors refined, high-quality finishes while still maintaining a sense of warmth and authenticity.

Table 1. Commonly Used Materials in Scandinavian Interiors:

Material	Purpose & Aesthetic
Light-toned wood (oak, pine, birch)	Used for floors, furniture, and wall panels to create a warm, organic feel.
Wool and linen textiles	Adds softness and coziness to spaces through throws, rugs, and upholstery.
Leather	Common in sofas and chairs, often in neutral or earthy tones.
Glass and metal	Incorporated in lighting fixtures and furniture for a modern touch.
Stone and ceramic	Used in kitchens and bathrooms for durability and a natural aesthetic.

Unlike more industrial or modernist minimalism, Scandinavian interiors avoid excessive use of steel, synthetic materials, or high-gloss finishes, favoring a more organic, tactile approach.

### 3.4 The Psychological and Emotional Impact of Scandinavian Minimalism

Scandinavian minimalism is designed not just for beauty but for well-being. Research suggests that well-designed, uncluttered spaces: Reduce stress and anxiety — A clean, organized space promotes mental clarity and focus. Enhance productivity — Scandinavian home offices often incorporate minimal distractions, improving concentration. Encourage relaxation and coziness — The inclusion of warm textures and lighting creates an emotionally soothing environment. Unlike stark minimalism, which can sometimes feel impersonal, Scandinavian interiors balance simplicity with comfort, making them highly livable.



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Scandinavian minimalism is more than just a design aesthetic — it is a way of life rooted in the Nordic philosophy of balance, simplicity, and functionality. It represents a mindful approach to living that values quality over quantity, essentialism over excess, and comfort over cold sterility. Unlike traditional minimalism, which can sometimes feel stark and uninviting, Scandinavian minimalism embraces warmth through natural materials, soft textures, and carefully curated spaces that are both practical and beautiful.

The heart of this philosophy lies in its ability to create homes that feel light, open, and airy while maintaining a

sense of coziness and well-being. With long, dark winters, Scandinavian design prioritizes the use of natural light by incorporating large windows, neutral color palettes, and bright, open interiors. Every element in a Scandinavian space has a purpose, and excess is stripped away in favor of a more intentional lifestyle. Furniture is designed to be functional yet stylish, often with clean lines, ergonomic forms, and multi-purpose uses. The principle of “lagom” — which means “just the right amount” — is reflected in the way Scandinavian interiors avoid unnecessary clutter while still allowing space for personal expression and comfort.

Materials play a crucial role in achieving this aesthetic. Light-toned woods such as oak, birch, and pine are widely used for flooring, furniture, and architectural details, adding warmth and a connection to nature. Soft textiles such as wool, linen, and cotton enhance the feeling of comfort, while stone, ceramic, and glass create a refined yet organic look. Handmade and high-quality craftsmanship is preferred over mass-produced goods, reinforcing the idea of longevity and sustainability in design choices.

More than just a visual style, Scandinavian minimalism has a profound psychological and emotional impact. Clean and uncluttered spaces help reduce stress and promote a sense of calm, making it easier to focus and relax. The incorporation of natural elements, soft lighting, and warm textures fosters an inviting atmosphere where people can feel at ease. The overall effect is one of quiet luxury — where simplicity does not mean deprivation, but rather a refined way of living with only what is truly necessary and meaningful.

Scandinavian minimalism’s embrace of emptiness, light, and natural materials creates a dialogue with Wabi-Sabi principles, where imperfections and asymmetry are celebrated as part of the beauty of everyday life. Both philosophies value space as an active element in design, allowing the mind to breathe and find tranquility within the environment. In contemporary design, these two aesthetics increasingly overlap, shaping interiors that are not only visually serene but also deeply connected to a mindful way of living. Scandinavian minimalism stands as a testament to the idea that a well-designed home is not just about appearance — it is about fostering well-being, harmony, and a deeper connection to the things that truly matter.

#### **4. The Convergence of Wabi-Sabi and Scandinavian Minimalism**

Despite emerging from different cultural backgrounds, Wabi-Sabi and Scandinavian minimalism share a deep appreciation for simplicity, natural materials, and the intentional use of space. Both aesthetics reject excess and embrace a philosophy where emptiness is not a void but a meaningful presence. In Wabi-Sabi, emptiness is tied to the Japanese concept of “Ma” (間) — the space between objects that allows room for contemplation and balance. In Scandinavian minimalism, emptiness is utilized for functionality and openness, creating light-filled, breathable interiors that feel both inviting and calming. Together, these two design philosophies demonstrate that minimalism is not about the absence of things but about creating space for what truly matters.

At their core, Wabi-Sabi and Scandinavian minimalism both celebrate the beauty of the natural and the unrefined. While Wabi-Sabi embraces imperfection, asymmetry, and the passage of time — seen in the cracks of a ceramic bowl or the weathered grain of old wood — Scandinavian minimalism emphasizes clean lines, refined craftsmanship, and an appreciation for raw materials in their most authentic state. Scandinavian interiors may be more polished in comparison, but they share Wabi-Sabi’s reverence for nature, using organic textures such as untreated wood, linen, stone, and wool to create warmth within minimalist spaces. The color palettes of both styles reflect this connection to nature: Wabi-Sabi favors earthy browns, soft grays, and muted greens, while Scandinavian minimalism leans toward whites, beiges, and pale woods to maximize light.

Where these aesthetics diverge is in their approach to balance. Wabi-Sabi’s asymmetry and irregularity reflect the imperfect beauty of nature, where randomness and decay are seen as part of an object’s history and charm. A chipped teacup, an unevenly glazed vase, or a slightly slanted wooden beam all embody the spirit of Wabi-Sabi, encouraging acceptance of imperfection as a natural state. Scandinavian minimalism, on the other hand, values a more harmonious symmetry, favoring order, alignment, and streamlined forms that create a sense of clarity and precision. However, these differences do not contradict each other—rather, they complement one another in a fusion of organic imperfection and structured simplicity.

The convergence of Wabi-Sabi and Scandinavian minimalism is particularly evident in contemporary interior design, where elements of both styles are blended to create serene yet functional living spaces. A Nordic-inspired home might incorporate handcrafted Japanese pottery, imperfectly textured walls, or raw linen cushions, adding Wabi-Sabi’s sense of soulfulness to an otherwise structured environment. Likewise, a traditional Japanese home might integrate Scandinavian-style furniture with clean lines and light-toned wood, enhancing both comfort and functionality while preserving a sense of quiet restraint. This fusion is increasingly popular in modern design, as people seek spaces that feel both uncluttered and deeply personal, both peaceful and lived-in.

Ultimately, the intersection of Wabi-Sabi and Scandinavian minimalism reflects a philosophy of mindful living. Both aesthetics teach that space should not be filled for the sake of filling, that objects should be chosen with care, and that beauty lies in the details of the ordinary. They invite us to slow down, to notice the play of light on



a wooden surface, to appreciate the textures of handmade ceramics, and to embrace the quiet elegance of empty space. By combining the transience and organic imperfection of Wabi-Sabi with the functionality and refined simplicity of Scandinavian minimalism, modern interiors can achieve a balance that is at once practical, poetic, and deeply calming.

### **5. Influence on Contemporary Space Design**

The fusion of Wabi-Sabi and Scandinavian minimalism has significantly influenced contemporary space design, shaping a global movement toward interiors that are both functional and deeply emotive. As people increasingly seek homes that promote tranquility, balance, and authenticity, designers have begun to merge the organic warmth of Wabi-Sabi with the clean, structured simplicity of Scandinavian aesthetics. This hybrid approach results in spaces that are not only visually serene but also encourage a more mindful and intentional way of living.

One of the most striking manifestations of this influence is the rise of Minimalist Japanese-Nordic homes — a design movement that blends the best of both worlds. These homes prioritize open, uncluttered layouts, where every object has a purpose and nothing feels excessive or out of place. Instead of traditional decorative elements, visual interest is created through the use of natural materials, subtle textures, and carefully curated imperfections. Wooden furniture with soft curves and natural grain patterns, handcrafted ceramics with slight asymmetries, and textured linen upholstery create an atmosphere that feels both lived-in and effortlessly elegant. Walls are often left bare or adorned with only a single piece of artwork or a simple dried flower arrangement, reinforcing the idea that space itself is a form of design.

Lighting and space play a crucial role in contemporary interiors influenced by Wabi-Sabi and Scandinavian minimalism. Natural light is maximized wherever possible, with large windows left unadorned or covered in sheer curtains that diffuse sunlight softly. Shadows and light shifts are embraced rather than controlled, adding depth and movement to otherwise still interiors. Artificial lighting is also carefully considered — warm, dimmable lamps, soft paper lanterns, and indirect lighting help create an ambiance that feels cozy rather than stark. Open floor plans further enhance the sense of airiness, allowing rooms to flow seamlessly into one another while maintaining a sense of purpose and function in each space.

Sustainability is another major driving force behind the contemporary adoption of this aesthetic. In a world increasingly aware of the environmental impact of mass production and disposable consumerism, the principles of Wabi-Sabi and Scandinavian minimalism offer an alternative: thoughtful consumption, quality craftsmanship, and long-lasting materials. Instead of following fleeting trends, designers encourage investment in timeless, well-made pieces that will age beautifully over time. Reclaimed wood, recycled textiles, and eco-friendly paints are frequently used, aligning with the broader push toward sustainable living. This commitment to durability extends to handmade objects and artisanal craftsmanship, with more people appreciating the charm of handcrafted ceramics, woven baskets, and locally sourced furnishings over mass-produced items.

The influence of these aesthetics is also evident in the way contemporary spaces foster emotional well-being. Modern life is often fast-paced and overwhelming, leading to a desire for homes that function as sanctuaries. The combination of warm minimalism, tactile materials, and calming colors helps create an environment that encourages relaxation, reflection, and mindfulness. Whether in urban apartments or countryside retreats, contemporary interiors infused with Wabi-Sabi and Scandinavian principles offer a sense of stillness in an otherwise chaotic world.

This philosophy extends beyond just homes; it has influenced workspaces, hotels, cafes, and public spaces worldwide. Office designs inspired by this fusion prioritize natural elements, decluttered workstations, and calming tones, promoting focus and reducing stress. Similarly, hotels and wellness retreats incorporating these aesthetics provide guests with spaces that feel intimate and rejuvenating, emphasizing simplicity and the beauty of the natural world.

The convergence of Wabi-Sabi and Scandinavian minimalism in contemporary space design reflects a broader cultural shift—a move away from excess and artificial perfection toward authenticity, balance, and a deeper connection to our surroundings. By blending the imperfection and organic elegance of Wabi-Sabi with the structured simplicity and functionality of Scandinavian design, modern interiors achieve a harmony that is both practical and poetic, proving that less is not just more, but better.

### **6. Conclusion**

The concept of emptiness in Wabi-Sabi and its counterpart in Scandinavian minimalism illustrates how space, when intentionally designed, becomes an active and meaningful element in the environment. Emptiness is not simply the absence of objects but rather an intentional presence—one that fosters calmness, introspection, and harmony. In both philosophies, space is carefully curated, with every object carrying a sense of purpose and every open area offering an opportunity for reflection. These aesthetics encourage a profound appreciation for

what remains, emphasizing quality over quantity and meaning over excess. As modern life becomes increasingly fast-paced and overstimulated, the appeal of Wabi-Sabi and Scandinavian minimalism continues to grow. People are seeking refuge from visual noise, clutter, and the overwhelming demands of consumer culture. The intentional embrace of simplicity, imperfection, and openness offers not just a design approach but a philosophy for mindful living. It encourages individuals to slow down, to notice the subtleties of their environment, and to find beauty in the unrefined, the aged, and the quietly imperfect.

Wabi-Sabi teaches us to accept the passage of time, the weathering of materials, and the organic irregularities of nature as part of life's beauty. Scandinavian minimalism, on the other hand, prioritizes functional clarity, clean spaces, and an appreciation for natural light and texture, creating environments that feel both structured and inviting. The growing integration of these two aesthetics in contemporary interiors signifies a global shift toward sustainability, balance, and the appreciation of imperfection. More than just visual styles, both Wabi-Sabi and Scandinavian minimalism encourage a deeper emotional and psychological connection to space. A home or workspace designed with these principles is not just a shelter or a place of work—it becomes a sanctuary, a space that invites presence and mindfulness. The interplay between minimalism and warmth, between function and beauty, ensures that the spaces remain livable, comfortable, and enduringly relevant.

In an era of disposable culture and fast design trends, the timeless appeal of these aesthetics suggests a return to thoughtful consumption, handcrafted details, and the lasting value of natural materials. This shift is not just about aesthetics but about rethinking the way we interact with space and materiality, moving toward a world where design is not only about looking good but about feeling right. Through the lens of Wabi-Sabi's imperfect beauty and Scandinavian minimalism's functional serenity, modern spaces evolve into sanctuaries of peace — where emptiness is not a lack but an invitation to breathe. In the end, the fusion of these two philosophies reminds us that in both design and life, true beauty lies not in excess, but in simplicity, authenticity, and the space to simply be.

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