

MINIMALISM – LESS IS MORE

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Independent Inquiry

ACHA6013-1

BA Automotive and Transport Design

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10th December 2021

Minimalism

The minimalism design movement emerged in the 50s and grew rapidly in popularity during the 60s and 70s. It focused on removing anything unnecessary from design and keeping things basic and simple wherever possible. The philosophy brings a focus onto the object and removes any other deeper thinking - 'What you see is what you see' (Minimalism – Art Term | Tate, 2021).



Source (Smith, 1967)

When we talk about minimalist design, we often think in terms of architecture and interior design. However, the movement has had a much greater influence on the design industry, and I plan to research these areas ,along with other design disciplines, to evaluate the different ways that the minimalist movement has been applied. I also aim to relate the theory to my own practice of automotive and transport design to see if the same principles have been applied and discuss what we might expect to see in future automotive designs. In addition to this, I will be assessing the bigger picture of minimalism in relation to its origins and in the context of the lifestyle changes that we are seeing more commonly today.

One argument for minimalism as key philosophical design thinking is that ,by removing all that is unnecessary from a design, you often discover the beauty in its most basic form. The rules and regulation surrounding the design of everything ,from houses to everyday products, can often make it difficult for designers to achieve the purest form of minimalism. However, with clever thinking and problem solving, there are sometimes ways of meeting design regulations and disguising these features to create an illusion of minimalism.

Architecture

Minimalist architecture stemmed from the De Stijl movement and the Bauhaus movement. Both movements emerged at a similar time ,around the 1920s, with the De Stijl from the Netherlands and the Bauhaus from Germany. De Stijl's primary focus was to create 'the ideal fusion of form and function' (Bauhaus & De Stijl Art — ARTe, n.d.). The style shared core principles with the suprematism movement from Russia which explored the beauty of geometrical shapes with a limited colour palette usually consisting of just primary colours.



Yellow-Red-Blue (Kandinsky, 1925)

Bauhaus encouraged the idea that artists and craftsmen should be seen as one complete package as both have equal importance in the creation of something spectacular. Products and manufacturing in the 20s and 30s, in design terms, was very dull and bland. This resulted in lifeless products which had very little emotional connection to consumers. It wasn't until this Bauhaus revolution that they discovered the power of creating beautifully designed items that capture the attention of users and immediately become desirable. The movement inspired improvement in the design of everyday products and generated a sense of excitement in the design world. The teachers of the Bauhaus movement 'reimagined the role art could play in society' (A Brief History of Minimalism: How the Minimalist Movement Happened, n.d.) and became a foundation that would inspire future design movements.



Barcelona Pavilion (Mies van der Rohe, 1929)

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe is considered to be one of the first leader of minimalist architecture, which applied many of the same principles seen from the De Stijl and Bauhaus movement such as geometric shapes with strong bold straight lines in buildings. The purpose of minimalist design in architecture is to refocus the viewers' attention on any of the void

space and away from the structure itself. With this, the structure should be as simplistic as possible by using flat, smooth surfaces and a thoughtful consideration into the way that light interacts with the structure. The style has been explored by various architects and minimalism has ‘transcended its rich history into modern-day contemporary architecture’ (Japan: Minimalism, 2015).

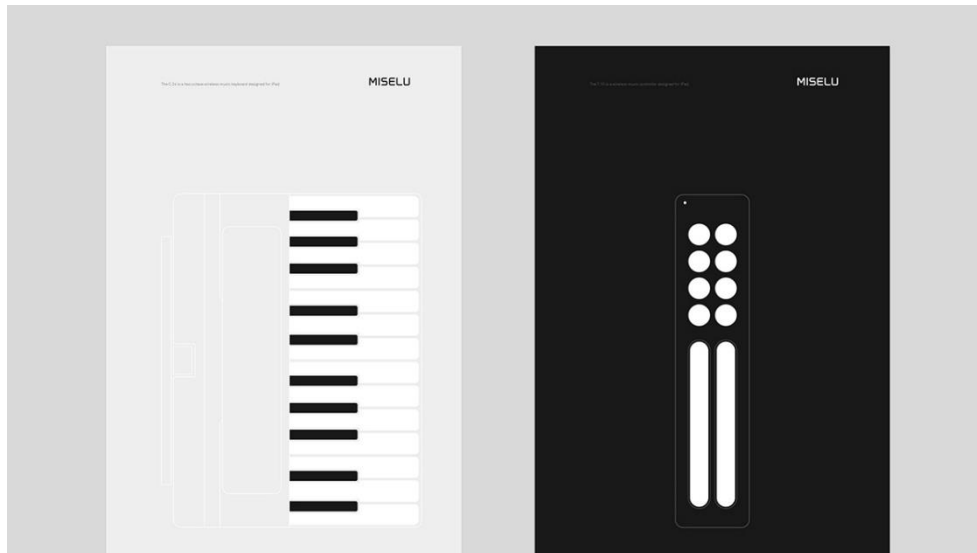
The benefits of minimalism in architecture includes the creation of space which has positive effects on our mood and helps the mind to relax due to there being very little distractions. A less stressful environment is created when there is space around you as the feeling of being crowded and overwhelmed is reduced. This can aid the clearing of the mind and allows us to be peaceful with thoughts and feelings that come our way. Therefore, this style of architecture is not only visually attractive but can also act as a sanctuary for relaxation.

Graphic Design

In this discipline, designers have the role of guiding the observer’s attention to the key areas of information and gaining a better understanding of what they are viewing. The minimalist style is an no brainer for achieving these things as it removes any unnecessary complexity from the design. Just as the Bauhaus movement introduced and inspired the minimalism principles, designers must get the balance right between making something beautiful and functional. This is the same for graphic design, it should be attractive enough to engage the viewers and simple enough to ensure they are not confused by them at the same time.

Particularly in graphic design it is essential to establish a visual hierarchy. The objective is to lead observers on a ‘planned trail of elements’ (April Studio, 2019) to understand content in the correct order. While it is ultimately their choice how they view something and what pieces of information they want to take from this, visual elements such as typography, colour

and font size can help to lead the viewer on a journey. This can have a great impact if you are trying to convey an important message.



Miselu (Character, n.d.)

There is some irony in using a minimalist style when it comes to graphic design. As lots of graphic design is made for commercial use and to try and sell products which from a minimal living point of view is negative and only encourages consumerism in the world. This was not the original intention of the minimalist movement as it was purely an influence in style. However, younger generations have adapted the principles to a way of living and therefore it now seems to contradict itself at the most basic level.

Product Design

The beauty of minimalist products is that they are incredibly simple to the user, but the designer has achieved this result through a complex series of developments in a constant search for the most basic and simple version possible without compromising on function. The best product designs are ones that don't 'distract you from the user experience and which features do not look like they are competing with each other' (Ansari, 2016). As technology

evolves and new engineered features become available, this task gets evermore challenging as the designer must balance the minimalism in the design with technological advancements that will make the product a success. Minimalism is a sensible style for product design as ‘Geometric forms are one of the important styles, providing not only mathematical logicity and physical stability but also visual compatibility and cognitive acceptability’ (Chou, 2011). Visually they are simple for the user to understand, and this makes the product more accessible.

The general approach to this style of product design is seen as ‘subtract until it breaks’ (Ansari, 2016) meaning to keep simplifying the design until the point when you begin to remove from its functional purpose. At which point you should have achieved the best possible minimal design for that particular product.



Braun Wandanlage - Hi-Fi Audio Wall Unit (Rams, 1965)

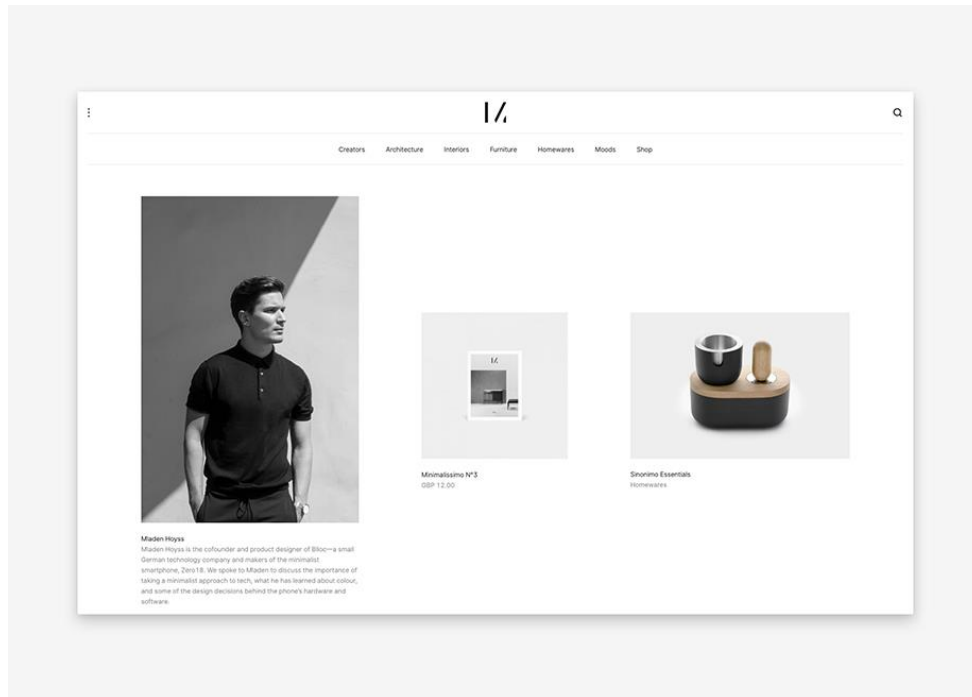
Dieter Rams is regarded as one of the most influential product designers. His products have a distinct minimalist style and are incredibly user friendly. In addition to this, Rams was

one of the first designers to strive for sustainable design with the aim of protecting our environment. Creating the best possible products is not straightforward as a 'good design is subjective and can't necessarily be measured' (What is "Good" Design? A quick look at Dieter Rams' Ten Principles., n.d.). He reflected on the quality of his designs and formed 10 questions of his beliefs about what makes good design. This has influenced product designers ever since. Key points of this include innovation, usability and honesty as they are essential in creating a good design in theory.

Website Design

In website design it can sometimes be difficult to achieve minimalism in its purest definition, however we see lots of websites these days using it as a style for the layout of their sites. The fundamental purpose of a website is to display content and therefore it can sometimes be tricky to balance the amount of content the website needs to display with the simplistic style. Therefore, the suggestion that it is not actually practical for websites to be designed in such a way, and for the user's efficiency, it may be better to display multiple pieces of information at once.

It mostly comes down to the type of website that is being created as to what design style you should use. For example, a magazine website is not well suited to a minimal design style as its purpose is to show diverse, rich content that catches the viewers' attention with multiple different images and bold text. It is essential that we 'recognize what types of websites would and would not benefit from a minimalist style' (Web Designer Depot, 2009).



Minimalissimo website (Minimalissimo, 2021)

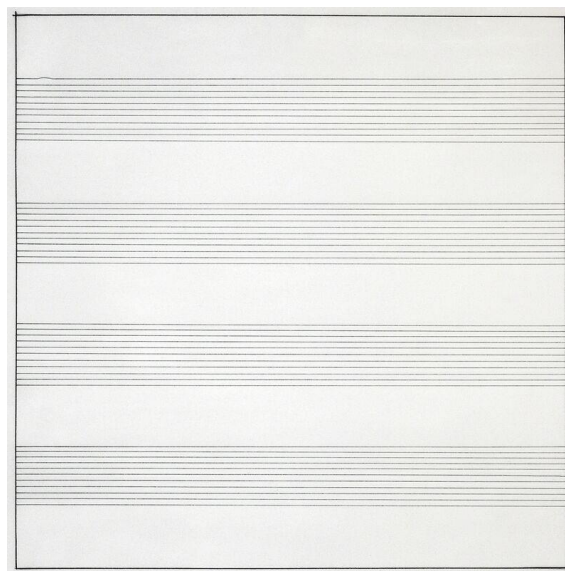
In website design, minimalist style can sometimes be used as people believe it is a way of time saving and they can ,effectively, be lazy and create something that looks good and will attract people. However, what people don't understand is that a 'truly minimalist style takes time to develop, like any complex style.' (Web Designer Depot, 2009). Just because it looks simplistic, it does not mean that there is not hard thinking, planning and preparation that goes into its design. It is still important to experiment with different design directions and develop throughout this process.

One factor that is worth mentioning in website design is that it is functional and serves a purpose, and if we make it too simple, it could possibly make users confused when trying to figure out what to click on and how to navigate the site. If the minimalism is applied correctly to a design in general, then it would be impossible to get confused as you are only faced with what you need.

Abstract Art

Minimalism artworks are unusual in the fact that they do not try to express any kind of message or convey a social issue in the world. They are simply there for the viewer to interpret whatever they feel or not attempt to try and understand the artwork but just to appreciate it for what it is. With this kind of approach, minimalist art can simply be understood as ‘a purified form of beauty and truth.’ (See, 2019).

There is a connection between minimalism and Asian beliefs which are inspirational for artists. For example, the painter Agnes Martin using zen Buddhism as an influence for her creative work and applied the philosophy of focusing on the wonder of nature and to try and ‘tune out the noise of daily life’ (Stamler, 2015). Her works are minimalist in their appearance, however she considered herself to be an abstract expressionist. As opposed to minimalism, where there is no intended meaning, Agnes was expressing a point of view in her works that art is something special that is separate to the complexity and chaos of the world we live in today.



Untitled #10 (Martin, 1990)

Photography

Minimalist photography follows the same basic rules of simplicity and including no excess clutter in the image to result in an incredible work of art. This art form is one of the most effective ways of expressing the idea of less is more as it is easy to discover the power of an image with just a single subject in the frame, in comparison to one where there are several different elements to focus on. The beauty of a photograph is that you can create a sense of emotion and impact and you capture a moment in time that can be reflected upon. You can tell a story through images, and we often find that the more minimal the picture is, the deeper the story. By including less in the frame, we search for answers and build our own picture and take away whatever meaning we feel.



Lone Tree (Kenna, 2004)

True minimalism takes thought and planning, and photography is no exception. The photographer has to carefully balance the amount of information included in the image to give the best overall impact; too much and it will be difficult to discover what the story is trying to tell and too little will leave the viewer confused about what to think. By creating just

enough to start getting the viewer thinking without giving away any obvious message or story will result in the most powerful photograph.

Incredible examples of this style put into practice include the works of British photographer Michael Kenna. His black and white photography has a great emotional power and thought conveying style. His focus on particular subjects is assisted by long exposure times which can reveal things that are not visible to the human eye.

Automotive Design

Minimalist design seems to become a growing trend in the automotive world with car designs including bigger and cleaner surfaces, but there is a divide in opinions about whether or not this is the way forwards. It is more difficult to achieve minimalist automotive designs than it is with architecture for example. To start with, the scale car designers are working with is much smaller than with buildings. And car exteriors require a certain amount of complexity with working around wheels and packaging the interior space.

The opportunity to use simple clean surfaces is limited by the nature of a car's layout and, with cars, the way they look is a major factor in terms of their success in production as it is such a large purchase. With architecture, there is a single client and their request for minimal design can be easily fulfilled. However, with car design, companies have to 'convince thousands of customers every month to make the second biggest investment of their lives' (Autocar, 2012). There has to be sense of what the majority are looking for and adjust the design from original intentions to fit this purpose.

The worry when applying minimalism design principles to car design is that it is easy to lose the character and soul that we have become so used to seeing in cars over recent decades and for what some people is exactly what makes a car special. It's as if it has a personality and becomes more than just a box of metal on wheels. People passionate about cars form special relationships with them.



Lucid Air (Martin, 2021)

For example, the lucid air pictured above is incredibly minimal. Features on the front end are limited to slight curvature around the base of the nose, small air intake slits in front of the wheels and a single headlight panel that runs the entire width of the car. Other than that, the appearance is sleek and simple. There are no unnecessary extra lines included and ,while there is nothing wrong with the design, it definitely follows function.

Another increasing trend in car design and the design world in general is the use of touchscreens in replace of traditional buttons and switches. ‘The click and twiddle of analogue buttons and knobs creates a tactile bond with the car’ (Mane, 2021) while a touchscreen simply can’t replicate the same effect. If implemented correctly with a user interface that is elegant and simple to use, there can be a far more effective way of interacting

with the car's functions. The ability to control a great range of different functions from a single display will be more convenient for many people, however there is also the understanding that it might just serve to make the process more complicated for other users. Yet again, there is divided opinion in what the future should look and feel like. As cars are designed with users in mind, it makes sense for the use of touchscreen displays to only get more popular as younger generations have become so connected to interacting with smart phones and other touchscreen technologies in recent year.

Minimalism and Zen Buddhism

There are strong connections between the principles of minimalism and zen principles. For example, the concept of mindfulness and focusing on the presence of the mind is an important aspect of a zen attitude to life. The principles cross over into minimalism in a very similar way in that the aim is to seek open space and remove unnecessary distraction to allow the mind to relax.



Japanese zen garden (Schreiber, 2019)

Another key principle is letting go of attachment and being at peace with the fact that nothing lasts forever. It is a zen Buddhist belief that being over attached will only cause us to suffer in the end, whether that is by losing people we love or possessions that are precious to us. We see this in the context of minimalism as a lifestyle with the idea of getting comfortable with reducing the amount of possessions and living with less. It differs slightly in the sense that, by going through this process of clearing out old unwanted possessions, we discover what we truly love and want to hold onto. But the process in general, you can argue, allows the opportunity to discover that, ultimately, it is not possessions that are important anyway; instead, it is the people in our lives and the memories that are most important in life.

In the world we live in today, there can be so much stress and chaos involved in daily working life that people lose touch with happiness and what makes them feel good. In the bigger picture, you can argue that we are constantly seeking out what makes us happy and sometimes when we do find what makes us happy, this soon fades away and we are left searching for something else to get that good feeling back.

It is common when we look for “more” happiness our minds simply assume that we need “more” things to make us feel this way. This can be more clothes, more friends, more money... the list can seem endless. We see this in relation to the design world too, with companies wanting to produce more goods with more technology to make more sales. It is too easy to get caught up in this trap.

The end result of having more, in a desperate attempt to gain happiness, almost always puts you back in the same mindset as you started or even more negative as you discover that your attempts to solve the problem have not worked so you get increasingly frustrated.

The zen approach states that ‘there's no need to search outside ourselves for the answers; we can find the answers in the same place that we found the questions’ (BBC - Religions -

Buddhism: Zen Buddhism, 2002). We can find true happiness and enlightenment on our own by taking time to refocus our minds on what matters to us.

Minimalist Lifestyle

The new minimalism emerging is not simply related to design but addresses the bigger picture of adopting a new lifestyle. The same principles apply as discussed in terms of design such as removing the unnecessary. However, the new minimalism takes this a step further as the reason behind removing possessions from your life that you no longer use and without distractions it gives us space to contemplate ‘what will enable you to live the best life possible.’

It suggests that, by having fewer possessions, we can care for the few remaining possessions ‘as if they had souls’ (Tolentino, 2020). Living this way, while some may view it as restrictive and mundane, might actually allow us to have stronger connections to the things we own and increase our appreciation for the things we have in life. For some people who try this new lifestyle, it can actually lead them to discover what they truly care about and are passionate about.



Minimalist interior (n.d.)

The new minimalism is not as much a new concept as you might think. Social scientists Duane Elgin and Arnold Mitchell picked up on occasional press articles around 1977 of people who were returning back to a simple way of life and predicted this would increase in popularity, they suggested that there was the potential for a widespread movement of the population back to this way of life. They named this movement ‘voluntary simplicity’ and suggested as many as a third of Americas population would have taken this up by 2000.

We also see the idea of simple living in religion with leaders encouraging their followers to lead a simple life. In many cases there is a spiritual inspiration for living in such a way.

Life for some people is already this way, but not by choice. For people living in poverty, a minimal life is the only option, however there is usually a strong desire to get out of this situation and live with more. Even people who have more already seem to continue to desire more, this applies to the super rich too. So, it is only a select few who ultimately end up desiring a minimal lifestyle. Why is this? What happens in a person’s life who already has everything they could possibly imagine for them to make this dramatic change to their lifestyle?

One major factor is sustainability. People are aware of the impact they are having on the world and want to make an effort to reduce this and live sustainably. A minimalist lifestyle can be beneficial for the planet in many ways, such as reducing overall consumption, waste and reducing pollution.

In addition to this, financial reasons play a part although this isn’t always by choice. People who lose their jobs are forced to live on a tighter budget for some time. And this experience could open their eyes to a new way of life that is still enjoyable. You can still have fun and find enjoyment while living with fewer material possessions.

Design reasons have been a great influence as minimalism has evolved over the years and has now become, for many people, just a vision of what modern design means in general. Even without labelling the aesthetic as minimal, we naturally view the style as modern and appealing.

In addition to this, technology advances mean there is no longer a need to have physical clutter of DVDs, CDs, paper and filing cabinets etc and instead this can be contained within a single device e.g. computer.

Health and wellbeing can also be positively impacted by a living a minimalist life. In a world of so much stress, people are living in minimalistic environments as an escape from the business and complexity of the world to put them in a peaceful place. 'Minimalism offers a life with less stress, less distraction, more freedom, and more time. All things that people today are desperately searching for more than ever.' (Becker, n.d.)

Travel

Minimalism, as well as inspiring simplistic living, has inspired subculture in areas such as travel and fashion. Minimalist travel is all about only packing the essentials you need for your trip. It is essentially fitting your entire life into a backpack and setting off and exploring the world. This style of travelling has grown in popularity and is considered a real and down to earth way of travelling. The sense of adventure you can get from travelling this way is much greater than a week away staying in a hotel.

There is an emphasis on 'efficiency, quality and simplicity' (How to Embrace Minimalist Travel with a Nomadic Lifestyle, n.d.) as opposed to luxury and appearance which many regard as what makes a holiday good. This highlights the difference between mainstream

culture and those who embrace a different kind of living due to its numerous benefits, not only for their own life but also sustainability reasons.

Fashion

Sustainable fashion is also closely linked with minimalism. fashion is a great contributor to the problem of materialism and consumerism which goes against the whole concept of minimalism.

Minimalist fashion is about decluttering your wardrobe and being selective about what clothes you have, the most valued personally and what brings you the most joy. It is easy to buy more clothes than you need and be careless when shopping, for example buying clothes that you might like in the moment and then wear them once and realise that its not quite your style and it just adds to the wardrobe collection of things that never get used. There is pressure in fashion to keep up with weekly trends which, from a sustainability perspective, is destructive. The minimalist subculture of sustainable fashion encourages thoughtful purchasing taking into consideration the long term. Asking yourself questions such as “will I still want to wear this next year?” and “is this quality durable to last a long time?” By making an informed decision, and changing to a minimal approach to fashion, people can help reduce the sustainability issues that have come from the industry such as water pollution and use of fossil-fuel based materials. Furthermore, the personal benefits of having clothes that you love and are more special to you, not to mention the financial benefit of saving money which could be more useful for other things in life.

Maximalism

With minimalism considered by many as a beautiful style of design, there are many artists and designers that think the opposite. Instead, they embrace maximalist style that is designed purposefully to be a loud and bold design style. Maximalism promotes ‘repetition, patterns, bold palettes, intricate graphic details and one-of-a-kind possessions’ (Sullivan, 2021) to make the most of the available space you have.



Maximalism interior design (Dmarge, n.d.)

It should be made clear that this design style should not be considered as a mess and no thought has gone into the way things look. The designs are still with intention, and there is an underlying theme as opposed to a random collection of objects that don't seem to have any relation to one another.

Ultimately it comes down to personal preference when deciding what design style is most suited to you. For some, maximalism allows them to express their taste and in many ways, we can argue that it is easier to make this style unique and more personal than minimalism. The principles of minimalism offer little wriggle room for people to express themselves fully, whereas maximalism can include all sorts of different patterns, colours, and textures.

Many argue that the maximalism is the most honest expression of people's design styles as 'people are not just one thing; they are complicated and complex and multifaceted' (Sullivan, 2021). This statement suggests that the natural way of expressing our taste and style is through maximalism and may also imply that those who choose minimalism are perhaps not being true to themselves about the kind of style they like.

Minimalism's growth in popularity, especially lately, has perhaps caused some people to simply follow the trend when they may not fully appreciate or understand why they like this style of design.

There comes a point where minimalism is so popular and trendy that it is often all we see. We are not exposed to as many other styles and therefore could limit people's creativity, this could just lead to people designing everything with a minimalist style and not exploring new ways of thinking.

I believe that the biggest part to take away from my research into minimalism and maximalism that, while there are many positives and negatives to both, opinion will forever be divided. What is elegant and stylish to one may just be uninteresting and cold to another. Therefore, it is impossible to make a conclusion that one is better than the other from this research. What can be said, however, is that the foundations and growth of minimalism over the years is something special and fascinating to see; that something that changed the design world many years ago has grown ever more popular since then and remains a great inspiration to new designers today. It is also fascinating to see the overlap between minimalism in design movements as well as in terms of a lifestyle with an increasing number of people in the modern world converting to this way of living and enjoying the various benefits that it has to offer.

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