



Pawson House, Notting Hill, London.



JOHN PAWSON

Less Is More

BRITISH ARCHITECT John Pawson frees places and lives of the extraneous, opening up spaces and creating peaceful interiors that honor SIMPLICITY, RITUAL and COMFORT.

INTERVIEW
CHARLES SHAFAlEH

PHOTOGRAPHY
JEN CAREY

IN 1981, WITHOUT INVITATION, British architect John Pawson tore down the partition wall inside his girlfriend's Victorian apartment on Elvaston Place in South Kensington, London. He didn't stop there. Everything that could be pared down was removed or concealed as much as possible, from light switches to furniture. Replacing the couple's bed with a roll-up futon meant that even it was hidden during the day.

An extreme lesson about the importance of every detail, however small, this intervention marked the beginning of a five-decade career recently chronicled by Deyan Sudjic in *John Pawson: Making Life Simpler*. When designing monasteries, art galleries, Calvin Klein stores, tableware or the homes that dominate his practice, Pawson approaches projects with a consistent philosophy: "Reduce and reduce and reduce until you can't improve a design by further subtraction." Call it minimalist. Call it essentialist. Call it sparse. He doesn't care. Labels are for critics. What matters to him is simple and pragmatic: understanding the quality of a given space, so that he might provide pleasure and comfort to those who use it.

“I’d walk into buildings and be moved by them, and later I realized that was connected to architecture.”

CHARLES SHAFAYEH *Do you recall the first space that left a significant impression on you?*

JOHN PAWSON There isn’t one. But I am asked questions, and I go back to childhood to try to answer them. I realized that I’d walk into buildings and be moved by them, and later I realized that was connected to architecture. Where I didn’t have a feeling, it was just a building; it couldn’t be classed as architecture. I grew up in Halifax, in West Yorkshire. All the buildings there are made of York stone: the roofs, the floors, the walls. That sort of industrial architecture was impressive. But there were also the Methodist meeting houses – both sets of my grandparents were Methodist – and Fountains Abbey, a 12th-century Cistercian monastery where my parents would take me as a child. Much later, Bruce Chatwin recommended Le Thoronet in the south of France. That’s a perfect building. It’s probably the best building in the world, along with the pyramids and a few others. Donald Judd’s 100 mill aluminum boxes in Marfa, Texas, are literally contemporary pyramids.

C.S. *Do spaces attract you emotionally or intellectually?*

J.P. Oh, emotionally. I’m not an intellectual. You’re not supposed to protest too much, but I am a builder and an experimenter of space.

C.S. *That approach wasn’t shared by many of your peers at London’s Architectural Association in the late 1970s, when you were a student there.*

J.P. Can you imagine being there with Zaha Hadid, Nigel Coates, Bernard Tschumi and Rem Koolhaas, and trying to explain that you thought a white box was important? It wasn’t a white box, but they saw it as one. It was very difficult to show my work.

C.S. *White walls dominated your first independent design project, when even the possessions inside your girlfriend’s apartment on Elvaston Place seemed to vanish. Was it necessary to begin your career with such an extreme act, or was that inclination always present?*

J.P. It was pretty extreme, especially because we were only renting – and it wasn’t even me who was renting it! I had a little bit

of form in this, though, because I once had an apartment in Nagoya, Japan, which was graciously provided to me by the university because I was teaching English there. It was very upmarket – but it wasn’t white inside. One night, I suddenly had enough. I spent hours and hours painting everything white. I just kept going. But I wasn’t giving it time to dry, and I painted over very expensive fabrics. I don’t know what came over me. I was completely mad. So, I got a sticky, all-white apartment. The authorities found out and weren’t happy. Remarkably, they probably classed it as temporary insanity, and I kept my job and wasn’t thrown out of Japan. On Elvaston Place, I felt the same thing. There was a wall that was a partition. When you took it down, you saw the beauty of this 19th-century, first-floor piano nobile with 12-foot ceilings. It was worth it to me. But, of course, I made the interior beautiful, and we were thrown out because we increased the value.

C.S. *Removing walls is dramatic in the moment, and it also can create a sense of drama in the design as people move through the space.*

J.P. Against my wife Catherine’s wishes, I bought a disordered farmyard in the Cotswolds. It’s a huge agglomeration of farming buildings, with a variety of potential spaces and heights. The family from whom we bought it had nine children, and each had a separate room. Now we have only three bedrooms. We took away the partitions, walls and floors, so we have double-height rooms. We have low-ceiling rooms in the old farmhouse, and the barn is triple height. It gives you variety and excitement, expansion and contraction. It has an effect. You notice the reactions when people come for the first time.

C.S. *The home is a site for quotidian behavior. Not every architect gives the attention you do to the small rituals that guide our daily lives. To you, these aren’t trivial acts.*

J.P. At the Abbey of Our Lady Nový Dvůr in the Czech Republic, I had a choreographed plan of the monks’ every movement. For example, they go through the cloister to get their robes and then go to church, after which they come back through the



John Pawson, photographed in London, March 2023.



*Home Farm, Oxfordshire, England, 2019.
Photography by Gilbert McCarragher.*

“You don’t set out to say, ‘I am a minimalist.’ But if you are labeled with that, for a long time people think you hate anything maximal.”

cloister to take off their robes. With church eight times a day, that’s 16 times they go through the cloister. The monks probably wouldn’t understand you if you called brushing their teeth a ritual, but I’ve given them such a spectacular place to do it. For them, with their days so marked out, it’s very important. I’ve always thought: “You’ve got to shave. You’ve got to brush your teeth. You might as well make it as pleasant a ritual as possible.”

C.S. Such attention to the smallest details resonates with the Japanese philosophy dō (“the way”), which stresses the pursuit of perfection in any task.

J.P. When I was 18 and living near Newcastle, there was an advertisement in the Chester-le-Street newspaper that said, “Sixth Dan Japanese instructor available for karate lessons.” I thought I was in the middle of nowhere, trying to work for my father, and found this karate expert, with whom I became friends. That’s the reason I went to Japan later. When I first went to his lessons, we would change in a communal changing room. He did it in such a ritualistic way, and afterward, he folded everything very straight and beautifully. He was the real thing, one of the best in Japan – and he was in Chester-le-Street. But it was that folding...

C.S. Delicacy and the epic are not contradictory notions...

J.P. Definitely not. You don’t set out to say, “I am a minimalist.” But if you are labeled with that, for a long time people think you hate anything maximal – if that is the opposite. They would take my minimalism as a criticism of whatever they were doing. I’ve never understood that. They would say, “You’d hate my house.” But why? I would never say that to somebody about mine. I’m interested in producing something comfortable. For me, that’s often being visually comfortable. It doesn’t just have to be minimal. I don’t like to have stuff, but that’s personal. I’m freer without it. Of course, I’m happily married and have children, and they all have stuff. So, you have two choices: either you can shut up, or you can be obnoxious and risk a marriage. I do the work. I write about it. That’s enough. I’m not expecting other people to live like this.

C.S. When you deal with clients, however, how do you accommodate their desires alongside your predilections?

J.P. Obviously, it’s difficult to balance. Sometimes their contributions are a little too energetic; sometimes they don’t take enough interest, and you’re too much on your own. I have an idea about how I think they might want to live. [Laughs.] Sometimes I don’t hear from clients for 10 years. They come in, get excited, go silent, and then, 10 years later, we do it. They’ve had a lot of time to think about their dream house. I’m not there to draw that up. I’m there to give them a dream house – but maybe not the one they were thinking of.

Today, the clients are often younger than me. They listen a bit more. But I find that I listen a lot more, too. When I was younger, I didn’t listen at all. I try to explain to my office that it’s a good idea to listen. If you’re trying to get what you’re proposing all the time, there’s no chance to listen. What our clients say is actually quite interesting – on any subject, really, and especially about their house!

C.S. Have you had any horror stories akin to the catastrophic relationship between Mies van der Rohe and Edith Farnsworth?

J.P. Oh, my god! The great thing is that we got one of the best pieces of architecture in history from that mess. But I’ve been incredibly lucky. All my clients have been very talented and intelligent. It is sincere when I say I’ve learned more from them than they’ve learned from me.

C.S. Is dealing with yourself as a client easier or more challenging?

J.P. It’s a bit more difficult because there are fewer limits. You can go on longer; you can have infinite patience. But similarly, you have less criticism and input. I’m designing for the family. The requests are listened to and put into the pot – though they don’t always get cooked!

C.S. Ultimately, does the client or the design take precedence?

J.P. The design. You’re making architecture. It’s going to be around a lot longer than they are. 🍷