



**Scarce pleasures**  
A Japanese interior following  
the principles of kanso



# Clean up your act

We've reached an age of peak stuff, peak clutter, peak everything. If this strikes a chord, the new trend kanso, aka extreme Japanese minimalism, could be the perfect antidote.  
By Danielle Demetriou

**Right** Fumio Sasaki's one-room home in Kyoto is simplicity defined



CLUTTER. THE C-WORD of the domestic world is often annoyingly omnipresent, from chaotic cutlery drawers and too-full-to-close wardrobes to the pile of miscellaneous objects that accumulate by the front door. But there is a solution – and, perhaps unsurprisingly, it can be found in Japan, where a Zen-inspired interior-design philosophy is gathering pace: kanso, meaning simplicity.

It's one of the seven key principles of Zen (others include silence and austerity) and in a domestic context, loosely translates into a home that serenely swaps the superfluous and decorative for the essential and functional, bringing a deep peace of mind in the process.

Japan is, of course, no stranger to all things clean and tidy. The kanso trend comes hot on the orderly heels of Marie Kondo, the decluttering guru famed for her global plea to dump anything that doesn't spark joy. In turn, Fumio Sasaki – widely regarded as Japan's number-one expert on the subject, thanks to his bestselling book *Goodbye, Things: The New Japanese Minimalism* – describes kanso as an antidote to society's constant desire to consume.

'We're all prone to addiction, not only to substances like alcohol and drugs, but also to shopping,' he says. 'Shopping is stimulating and has a certain allure to it. The problem is that no matter how much we buy, we still want more. As we get caught up in this cycle, we end up working ourselves harder in order to make the money to buy more things.'

He explains how the concept of kanso in Japan goes far beyond interior



decor ideas. 'Aspects of Japanese culture that embody kanso include the tea ceremony, which takes place in a tiny, bare room that allows participants to focus on their state of mind, or short poetry like haiku and tanka. But the ethos of kanso has been pretty much forgotten in our day-to-day lives, even in Japan.'

In Sasaki's life, however, the concept is very much alive. 'You could say that my diet is very kanso – I eat the same simple things every day: brown rice, homemade pickles, miso soup, plus grilled fish or a little meat,' he says. 'It may seem meagre to some people, but

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I am quite content with it. It may feel good to be captivated by something extravagant or impressive, but it can also feel quite good to simplify, which allows us to appreciate the subtle movements of the mind.'

Sasaki describes his current one-room home in Kyoto, with its interconnected bedroom and dining room, as 'simple and modern'. The word 'tiny' also springs to mind: it measures a diminutive 30 sq m. Costing around £202 (30,000 yen) a month, it is the domestic equivalent of kanso.

Unlike the Tokyo apartment he once lived in – which was crammed full of piles of CDs and random ornamental

# The Cut // Home

**Right** By reducing the number of unnecessary objects in his new apartment, Sasaki has developed a healthier lifestyle

objects – his Kyoto space is minimal to the point of appearing, quite literally, empty. He believes that by simplifying the home, positive habits will naturally take root – from wanting to do sunrise yoga every day to enjoying previously disliked domestic chores.

‘I used to believe I was a person who was terrible at housekeeping,’ he says. ‘And yet, when I reduced the number of clothes and dishes I had, housekeeping became easy, and I started to enjoy it. I didn’t need to change; having fewer things in my environment was all it took. These kinds of small changes are so valuable, and helped me to develop the healthier lifestyle I’m living today.’

But before the intimidating leap from cluttered homeowner to enlightened chore-loving minimalist can be made, there is, of course, the tricky question of how exactly to get rid of all those items crammed into the cupboards. According to Sasaki there are three things to remember when throwing things away.

First, tell yourself that when you



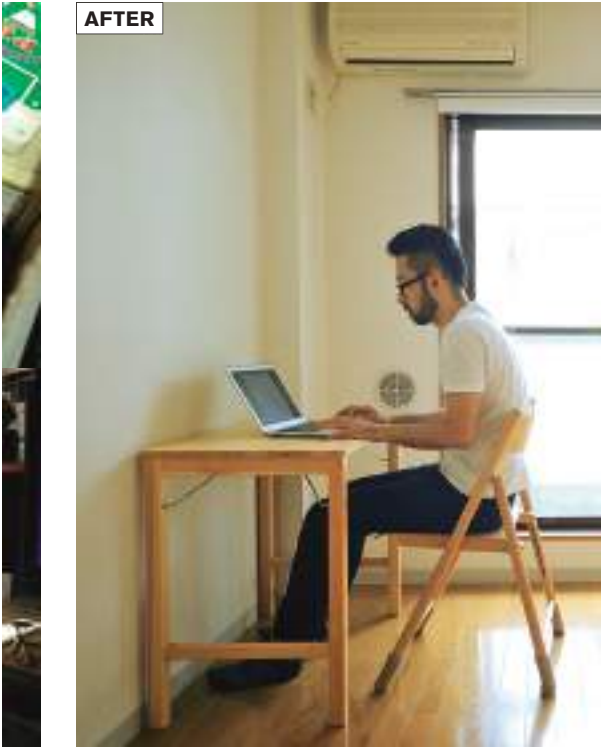
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throw something away, 'you gain more than you lose'. Secondly, focus on the present and let go of the idea of 'someday'. And finally, never forget that discarding memorabilia is not the same as discarding memories.

'What these tips have in common is the mental aspect,' says Sasaki. 'As you experience the benefits first-hand, you'll naturally buy fewer and fewer unnecessary things and will thereby be able to maintain a tidy living space.'

And best of all? Anyone who has undergone an overzealous clean-up – only for the clutter to insidiously build up again – can be reassured that it's still worth another shot. 'A minimal lifestyle isn't something one has to engage in for ever,' he says. 'But I think living simply for a while could help us get in touch with our true desires. How much do we really need in order to feel satisfied? What activity brings us the most joy? Allowing what's truly meaningful to be revealed as we shed all the excess – that to me is the essence of minimalism.' ♦

FUMIO SASAKI'S DECLUTTERING TIPS

Find a trigger

The reason it's hard to get started on decluttering is because even if we don't do it, we can still get by. Unless there's an urgent need, we tend to push it aside for 'someday'. Try creating a 'trigger' to tidy up, so that it becomes a habit: I designate the first of every month as the day I tidy up.

Start small

Tackle an area such as around the kitchen sink, then gradually move on to the hallway, and so on. That way, you can enjoy a sense of accomplishment each time. If you try to tackle the whole room at once, it could take for ever.

Reduce your tableware

It's difficult to halve the number of plates you own all at once, for example. So ask yourself two questions: do I use it? And do I like it? Only keep the things you both like and use. If you don't like it, throw it away; if you do like it but don't use it, give it away. As you repeat this a few times, you'll reduce the number of objects you have.

Give things away to ease guilt

Throwing away something that is usable can be guilt-inducing, but if you know someone else would use it, it's easier to let it go. Leaving a 'it's free' box in front of your house is one idea, or post the item on your social media account.



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