

Millennial Gray:

A Critical Inquiry of Bland, Placeless Interiors in the 21st Century



Abstract

The Millennial Gray interior design style became a trending topic of discourse on social media in 2023. The term refers to benign, twenty-first century interiors which are designed with a lack of decoration and a neutral colour palette. The style contributes to an ambiguous, placeless aesthetic which also signifies gentrification and cultural erasure. It describes the flawed philosophy behind minimally designed interiors, and a worldwide distaste towards anonymous, bland design. Furthermore, the trend displays a bastardisation of several historic movements in interior design. Given the novelty of the design style, this dissertation researches and references Millennial Gray in the context of several other recent design movements. Interior design from the Modernist and Minimalist movements are considered, as well as interiors which exhibit the Japanese concept of Wabi-Sabi. Theoretical concepts regarding consumption, class and taste, colour theory, globalisation, and gentrification are also considered. A visual analysis of Millennial Gray interiors and their current applications is included. Finally, As Millennial Gray became a trending topic through social media, this dissertation contains a summative analysis of posts regarding Millennial Gray on social media platforms such as X, TikTok, and Pinterest.



A millennial gray interior. Photograph by Getty Images. Available at: <https://www.buzzfeed.com/tessafahey/millennial-home-trends-ay>

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Introduction

The Millennial Gray interior design style became a trending topic of discourse on social media in 2023; by December of 2023 the hashtag *#millennialgrey* revealed over 33 million videos on social media platform *TikTok*. The term refers to the benign, neutral interior design theme, akin to the displays at IKEA, which grew to popularity in the early twenty-first century (Press-Reynolds and Cheong, 2023). The ubiquitous design style is characterised by a minimal use of decoration, mass-produced big-box furniture, and most importantly, an aversion to colour (fig. 1). Millennial Gray is commonly found in newly constructed apartment complexes, hip cafés, offices, and short-stay rentals like *Airbnbs*. The recent discourse on *TikTok* surrounding Millennial Gray stirred conversations about how the style became so prolific so quickly and how it is perceived by those who live within these spaces.

Millennial Gray is a style which pulls references from pivotal movements in art, architecture, and design, including Modernism, the Minimalist art movement, as well as the Japanese concept of *wabi-sabi*. However, it merely parodies the visual aesthetic of these movements without considering their theoretical bases. Because of the chronic bastardization of other movements, Millennial Gray comes off as cheap and lacking in personality. The style is mainly applied in new-build projects, house flips, and *Airbnbs*, all of which are aimed at generating profit through sale or tenancy; because of this, the style feels impersonal and lacklustre. This created a divide between the designer, applier, or owner of the Millennial Gray space, and the actual users or inhabitants of the space.

The Millennial Gray design style, while ubiquitous in the twenty-first century, is a novel topic of discussion and discourse. There is little formal research or literature surrounding the topic due to its contemporary nature. In order to achieve a definition of Millennial Gray and place it accurately within history, this dissertation researches and references Millennial Gray in the context of several other recent design movements. In order to understand the interior design styles preceding Millennial Gray, this dissertation includes the history and evolution of Modernism, Minimalism, and the concept of *wabi-sabi*, which appear to have led to the style's development. Theoretical concepts regarding consumption, class and taste, colour theory, globalisation, and gentrification are also considered. Furthermore, this dissertation includes visual analysis of Millennial Gray interiors in order to describe the style, its visual traits, and most common applications, considering contemporary residential,

commercial, and hospitality settings. Finally, given the amount of social media discourse surrounding Millennial Gray, this dissertation will contain a summative analysis of posts regarding Millennial Gray on platforms such as *X*, *TikTok*, and *Pinterest*.



Figure 1: A living room decorated in the Millennial Gray Style

01: Modernism: Le Corbusier, International Style, and Aestheticization



Figure 2: The Bauhaus, Dessau, Germany.

The Millennial Gray style borrowed many of its visual characteristics from the Modernist Movement of the twentieth century: some shared traits included an embrace of a neutral colour palette, modern building materials, and a lack of decoration. Modernist architects sought to repair the damage of the first World War by bringing technology and a new building style into fashion. Modernists aspired to an idea of a pure and democratic interior, which was realised through International Style: a geographically-agnostic architectural style significant to societal advancement. More importantly, Modernists rejected any excess decoration and ornament in the interior, in favour of whitewashed walls, plain finishes, and machine-made furniture pieces. Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier (also known as Charles-Édouard Jeanneret), was highly influential in the development of standardised mass-housing developments, which became a worldwide standard for housing by the twenty-first century. As the Modernist movement aged into the twenty-first century, the founding democratic philosophical ideas of the movement, as well as the movement's founding architectural principles, became diluted; through this process Modernism became an aesthetic style completely removed from its theoretical basis. The Millennial Gray style is based on this aesthetic parody of Modernism.

The Modernist movement developed in two main phases (Woodham, 1997). The first phase was concerned with theoretical and philosophical developments in the late nineteenth century, and gained a footing in Germany after the first World War. In the wake of the war's chaos and destruction, society craved rationalism, order, and understanding. In response, the movement sought to instil a ". . .widespread feeling of hope and faith in the democratic ideal" (Sparke, 1990, p. 145) and align arts and culture with the industrial nature of the Machine Age.



Figure 3: An Interior designed by Adolf Loos, 12 Klatovská Street, Pilsen, Czech Republic.

This theoretical movement was led chiefly by Austrian architect Adolf Loos (1870-1933). His essay *Ornament and Crime* (1908) argues excess decoration and flourish in design as degenerate. Loos advocated for clean, well-made, simple design, which to him was beautiful in and of itself. He believed that a modern society is one that embraced simplicity and function over decoration. International Style, the second phase of the Modernist Movement which occurred between the late 1920's through the 1960's, brought the introduction of Modernism to art, design, and culture (Woodham, 1997). Le Corbusier's pioneering concepts for standardisation and ease of replication were integral to the movement. Modernists did away with ornament and decoration in favour of a purer interior, and

“the use of colour was often restrained, with an emphasis on white, off-white, grey, and black “. . .to highlight the manipulation of light and shade” (Woodham, 1997, p.35) The movement gained great popularity by the mid-twentieth century, with architects and designers in the United States and the rest of Europe embracing Modernist principles in their work. Fundamentals of the movement continued to influence architecture and design well into the twenty-first century, becoming a globally recognizable architectural style.



Figure 4: Marcel Breuer, one of the first students of the Bauhaus, seated in a Wassily chair, one of his most famous designs.

In 1919, the new Bauhaus (fig. 2) was founded in Weimar, Germany by Walter Gropius, and aimed to “teach the arts and crafts in tandem and to bridge the ever-widening gulf between art and industry” (Massey, 1990, p. 67). The Bauhaus’ teachings emphasised functionality of objects, machine manufacturing, and an aversion to decoration and ornament. One of the earliest students of the Bauhaus, Marcel Breuer, grew to completely embrace Modernism in his work. His Wassily Chair was designed with a leather seat and bent steel tubes, which could be machine manufactured and also exhibited a certain machine-age aesthetic (fig. 4).

Architect Le Corbusier was heavily influenced by the Bauhaus and contributed greatly to the Modernist movement through his ideas of simplification, standardisation, and mass-production within design. After the first World War, Le Corbusier realised that reconstruction “. . .would have to accord high priority to re-housing the population” (Frampton, 2001, p. 21), and considered ways in which construction could be standardised and made more economical. Le Corbusier developed type-form designs to introduce these concepts. Through years of research and development, Le Corbusier achieved what he considered to be the ultimate solution to several design problems. His *Dom-ino* type-form design

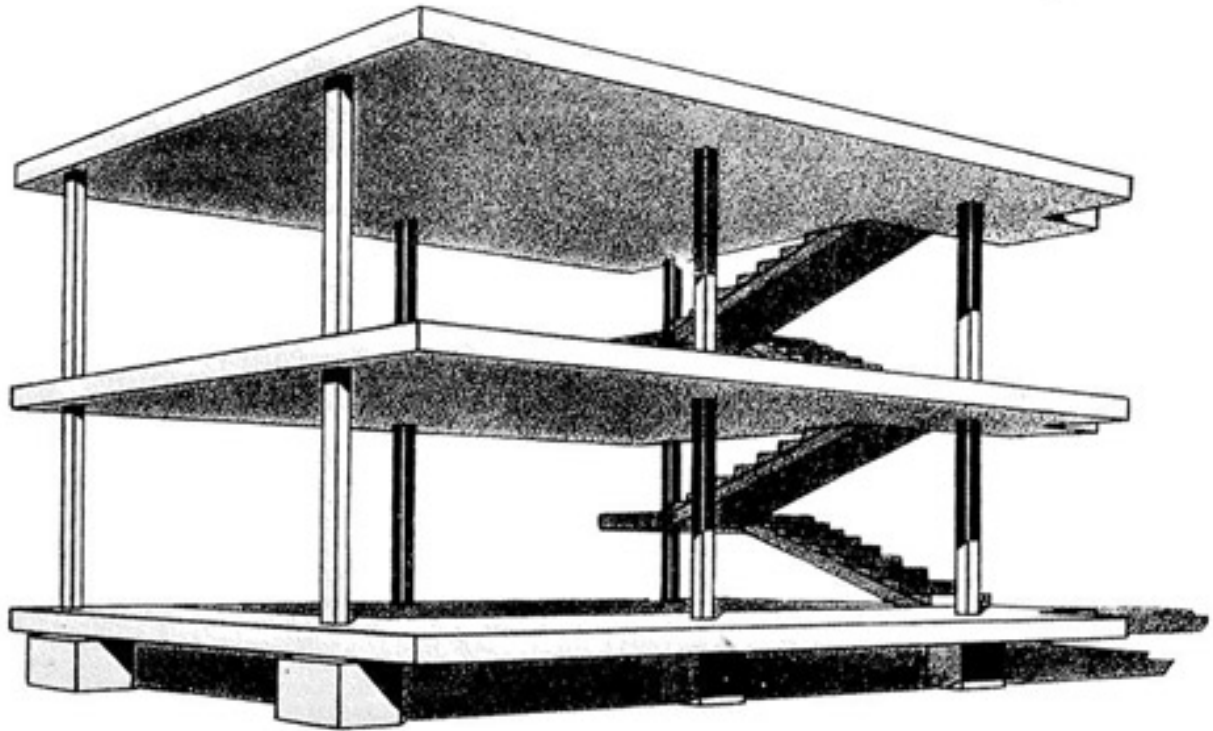


Figure 5: Le Corbusier's Dom-ino housing type-form.

for housing (fig. 5) represents his five essential points of Modern architecture; 1. *Pilotis* (columns), 2. *Toit jardin* (roof garden), 3. *Plan libre* (free plan), 4. *fenêtre en longueur* (horizontal windows), and 5. *façade libre* (open façade) (Frampton, 2001, p. 72). Beyond satisfying his five points of architecture, the type-form was simple, modular, and efficient to construct, which made it ideal for applying in post-war reconstruction projects. Le Corbusier's contribution to the Deutscher Werkbund housing-scheme expressed this acute Modernist design language (fig. 6).



Figure 6: Le Corbusier's design for Deutsche Werkbund housing scheme



Figure 7: Le Corbusier's Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau.

Le Corbusier showcased his designs through his publication *L'Esprit Nouveau*. Similarly to Loos' Ornament and Crime essay, Le Corbusier used this publication to express his repugnance towards colour and ornament:

Trash is always abundantly decorated; the luxury object is well made, neat, and clean, pure and healthy, and its bareness reveals the quality of its manufacture. It is to industry that we owe the reversal in this state of affairs: a cast iron stove overflowing with decoration costs less than a plain one; amidst the surging leaf patterns flaws in the casting cannot be seen" (Le Courbusier, 1925, p. 87)

The use of white in Modernist design aimed to emphasise the idea of progress in newly built architecture. "In addition to attributes like cleanliness, hygiene, clarity, and honesty, white connoted

newness and freshness” (Klinkhammer, 2004, p.432). Le Corbusier claimed excess colour to be kitsch and advocated for a total purification of the interior. “Every citizen is required to replace his hangings, his damasks, his wall-papers, his stencils, with a plain coat of white ripolin. His home is made clean. . . Then comes inner cleanness” (Le Corbusier, 1925, p. 188). Whites and neutrals were chiefly chosen to align with this purist rhetoric, but neutrals were also adopted by the Modernist movement simply “. . . as a matter of marketing and institutional indifference” (Fine, 2022). It is important to note that Le Corbusier’s rhetoric in support of whiteness was so strong that most failed to realise that his architecture was often coloured; built in the same year as his strongly anti-colour publication *The Decorative Art of Today*, his *Pavillon de l’Esprit Nouveau* features Modernist construction principles such as large flat planes, open space, and an abundance of natural light, yet is also decorated with a plethora of bright colours (Fig. 7). Despite Le Corbusier’s hypocrisy, this logic was adopted by most Modernists of the time, with the general aesthetic of Modern design characterised by bright, untarnished white surfaces.

In the words of Ludwig Mies Van Der Rohe, German Architect and director at the Bauhaus, industrialization in construction was “. . . not so much a question of rationalising existing working methods as of fundamentally remoulding the whole building trade” (Urban, 2012 p.11). Architects and designers began to consider standardisation and replication in their designs, which were necessary for efficiently rebuilding after the destruction and disorder of World War I. Modern design principles by Walter Gropius and his colleagues from the Bauhaus were applied to post-war mass-housing schemes. Prefab construction systems, standardised modules, and newly developed materials were all considered in these schemes to maximise the efficiency of



Figure 8: The exterior of Le Corbusier’s Unité d’Habitation in Marseille, France.

production, speed of construction, and the quantity of dwellings. Completed in 1952, Le Corbusier's *Unité d'Habitation* in Marseille, France serves as an example of how many post-war mass housing projects were imagined and built (fig. 8). Built to quickly and cheaply rehouse displaced civilians after World War II, the cast concrete structure hosts a staggering 1,300 dwellings, with sizes ranging from studio to family-size units (Interestingly, the project is decorated in an array of bright colours). This project by Le Corbusier, as well as other Modernist housing estates, were revered for their efficiency in construction and use of space. Similar developments appeared in urban areas across the world; ultimately “. . .modernist mass housing [became] the most widespread architectural scheme of the twentieth century” (Urban, 2012, p. 1).

As Modern design became popular in the twentieth century, the movement transformed into an aspirational visual aesthetic within design and architecture. During the 1990s and early 2000s, an influential, more minimal version of Modern design emerged and “. . .found its way into everything—hotels, cafés, restaurants, and other architecture. . .” (Manovich, 2017, p. 98). As Modernism disseminated, however, its founding philosophies became increasingly diluted. Design projects used Modernist visual cues to evoke a sense of Modernism within projects, without actually employing Modern building practices or theories. Specifically, this involved the application of a neutral colour palette, large windows, and modern building materials like steel. New Barn exhibits this movement towards a Modernist aesthetic wash. The Los Angeles, California house was first built in the 1980's and underwent complete renovation in 2014 to achieve a Modernist aesthetic. Though there are no photos of New Barn pre-renovation, figure 9 represents a Spanish-style California home which may have been designed in a similar style.

The newly renovated house exhibits decidedly modern visual elements (fig. 10), but doesn't exhibit the fundamental Modernist design principles such as a flat roof, a simple and rational floor plan, and a centred support structure; the home appears modern in its aesthetic but is constructed in a traditional American timber frame. The project represents the twenty-first century concept of pastiche Modernism, which is not based in the theories of the Modernist Movement. New Barn represents the Millennial Gray style as a trend towards a bastardization of Modernism, which diluted Modernism's founding design principles.



Figure 9: A Spanish-style villa in California (Zillow)



Figure 10: New Barn, Los Angeles, USA.

The Modernist movement was revered in the twenty-first century for its progress in design, construction, and aesthetics. However, the movement has its pitfalls; Modernism fails to address many of the aspirations its pioneers aimed for; Nikos Salingaros wrote that “. . .human development was not generated by buildings in the modernist style: [these] buildings are simply a toxic byproduct of industrially developed societies, just like pollution and the despoliation of the environment” (Salingaros, 2010, p.36). Though Modernism pioneered many construction methods and innovative design typologies, these techniques were merely used in projects to maximise efficiency, reduce cost, and emphasise aesthetics. Furthermore, as Modernism was reduced to an aesthetic wash, the style became even further removed from its theoretical basis. This trend towards a meaningless pastiche leads into the Millennial Gray style seen in the twenty-first century.

02: Minimalism: Kondo, the White Cube, and Inconspicuous Consumption



Figure 11: White Cube Gallery; Andre Emmerich Gallery, New York.

Millennial Gray style interiors are strongly rooted in the Minimalist art movement, as well as the Minimalist lifestyle movement. Similarly to Minimalism, Millennial Gray interiors embrace a neutral colour palette and a distinct lack of decoration. The Minimalist art movement of the 1960s and 1970s inspired a change in interior design which embraced the achievement of ultimate simplicity.

The galleries in which this art was exhibited further inspired an emphasis of whiteness and emptiness. In the 2010's the philosophy of Minimalism was transformed into a lifestyle and made massively popular by Japanese author Marie Kondo. Due to the style's visual palatability and inherent attractiveness, the Minimalist lifestyle quickly dominated social media. Influencers like Kim Kardashian applied Minimalism as a visual aesthetic to their online content, as well as their products, to continue marketing off the trend, rejecting the anti-consumer philosophies and fundamentals on which Minimalism was grounded. Coded luxury products, or high-end products which are subtly designed to appear pedestrian (Servian, 2022) from high-end fashion brands continued the minimal interior design trend.

Minimalism can be described by two distinct movements; the first of which being the Minimalist Art movement of the twentieth century, Responding to the energy and extroversion of the Abstract expressionist movement in the mid-twentieth century, Minimalists sought to convey similarly complex emotions and concepts in their work, but in the simplest forms possible. Carl Andre, commonly referred to as the leader of the Minimalist movement, rejected many of the conventions of art; he worked within the gallery instead of a studio, created sculptures out of plain raw materials, and simply exhibited his work on the gallery floor. Andre's 1975 installation *Uncarved Blocks* (fig. 12) is placed carefully in a bright, highly minimal white gallery in order to eliminate any possible external contexts from interacting with the artwork. Other Minimalist painters and sculptors adopted similarly unconventional methods of creating and exhibiting their work, all to achieve the absolute minimum. This concept refers to the White Cube gallery space (figure), a term popularised by art critic Brian O'Doherty; a completely empty, whitewashed room, usually square or rectangular, with pale wood or concrete floors and flat, diffused light emitted from the ceiling. The goal of the white cube was to remove any and all context surrounding the art, leaving it in a blank abyss; this often wasn't the result, however. As Brian O'Doherty writes in *Inside the White Cube* (1976), these gallery spaces themselves carried a feeling of exclusivity: "isolated in plots of space, what is on display looks a bit like valuable scarce



Figure 12: Carl Andre, *Uncarved Blocks*, Ace Gallery, Vancouver, 1975.

goods. Exclusive audience, rare objects difficult to comprehend - here we have social, financial, and intellectual snobbery." (O'Doherty, 1976, p. 76) Through the White Cube, minimalist art is elevated from an arrangement of simple, curated materials and is recontextualised into an eternal, valuable, precious work seemingly worthy of immense praise (O'Doherty, 1976). In Andre's example, the humility of the material and its arrangement are completely negated by its placement within a white cube gallery. As Minimalism transformed into an interior style, this phenomenon was extrapolated beyond galleries, and was applied in retail spaces and upscale residential design projects to conjure ideas of exclusivity and purity

The second Minimalist movement, inspired by Minimalist art and White Cube galleries, was the Minimalist lifestyle trend which appeared in the 2010s. During this time, Minimalism underwent a transformation from an art movement into a lifestyle, pioneered by Japanese author and cleaning guru Marie Kondo. Her book *The Life Changing Magic of Tidying Up* (2014), and equally popular Netflix program *Tidying Up* (2019), described her philosophy on living minimally and intentionally. Her Konmari method for decluttering involved taking each and every object you own, and individually considering if that object sparked joy; Kondo advised thanking, then thoughtfully disposing of whatever objects don't. The result was supposedly a home no longer plagued with excess clutter, with only the most important objects, whether useful or sentimental.

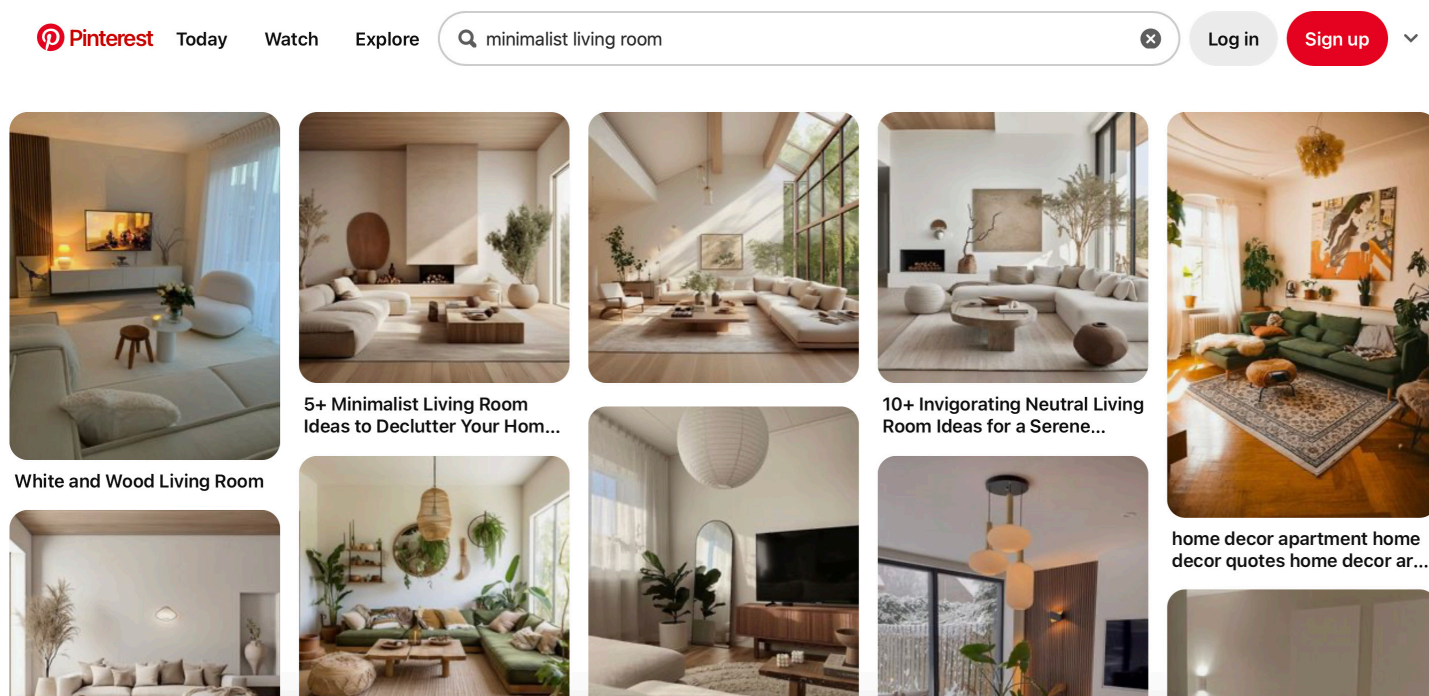


Figure 13: Search results for "minimalist living room" on image-sharing social media platform *Pinterest*.

Through this cleaning exercise Kondo offered a neat and clean solution “. . .as memorable as a brand slogan” (Chayka, 2020, p. 34) to the bleak, material-centric society many people struggled to cope with in a post-capitalist society. Kondo’s Konmari method resonated with many and became incredibly popular; nearly 6 million copies of *The Life Changing Magic of Tidying Up* were sold as of 2016. Adopters of the Konmari method commonly documented their results on social media platforms such as *Instagram* and *Pinterest*. Users shared the results of Konmari-ing their own spaces with images of their austere, sparsely decorated homes (fig. 13). The exercise guaranteed a tempting aesthetic reward upon completion, but didn’t necessarily address the greater stressors a person may have in their life, such as a demanding career or raising children. The problem with Kondo’s methodology lay in this aftermath; people turned to the Konmari method in hopes of achieving a greater degree of peace or intentionality in their lives through less consumption, but devotees were still left to deal with the realities of modern-day life (Chayka, 2020).

Despite Konmari’s questionable efficacy as a lifestyle cure-all, the minimalist aesthetic gained a trendy social media presence. As minimalism circulated platforms such as *Instagram* and *Pinterest*, its pleasing visuals gained much more attention than its actual theoretical basis. “The hashtag *#minimalism* pulls up more than seventeen million photos on *Instagram*; many of the top posts depict high-end interior spaces” (Tolentino, 2020). Minimalism became a trendy interior aesthetic which people aspired to, as opposed to a lifestyle based on conscious, minimal material consumption. A notable figure that embraced the aestheticization of Minimalism is American socialite and media personality Kim Kardashian. Kardashian was seen by many online as the ultimate trend-setter, with her opinions on taste and style quickly infiltrating popular culture. Her 2020 home tour produced by *Vogue* featured her gargantuan, austere, and monastic home renovated with then partner Kanye West and architect Axel Vervoort (figure). “Everything in my house is really minimal,” she explained during the home tour, “when I come home, I want it to be just really quiet and calming” (Kardashian, 2022).

Showcasing Vervoort’s signature design language and Kanye West’s kindred affinity to hyper-minimalism, the home was meticulously designed down to only its most basic forms. At first glance the home seemed barren and empty, but upon further inspection the resources and design expertise needed



Figure 14: Kim Kardashian's Living room designed by Axel Vervoort.



Figure 15: Kim Kardashian's kitchen.

to achieve this degree of Minimalism become apparent. Architectural elements such as the windows and the fireplace were intentionally designed to look completely seamless. Volumes were coated in a plain off-white plaster to complement the wide-plank, beige timber flooring.. Two authentic 1940's Jean Royere Polar Bear sofas, which have been priced well over half a million dollars at auction, (fig. 14) were situated in the living room. Custom wood cabinetry and an oversized gas range furnished the kitchen (fig. 15): not shown, a secondary kitchen, where Kardashian's private chefs prepared meals for the family of five. Because of this minimalist design, Kim's home functioned similarly to a White Cube gallery. The minimalist style ". . . has a way of homogenising homes and erasing traces of personality or quirkiness" (Chayka, 2020, p. 34), not unlike the ways in which White Cube galleries are deliberately designed to lack personality and context. In the same way that artworks within White Cube galleries are deified and worshipped, those who inhabit these minimally designed spaces become objects of worship. In the example of Kim Kardashian, this is a clever business move, as the White Cube acted as an ideal platform for her to advertise herself, and more importantly, her minimally-designed skincare (fig. 16) and clothing lines (fig. 17).



Figure 16: Products from Kardashian's skincare line SKKN.



Figure 17: Bodysuits from Kardashian's shapewear line skims.

As Minimalism continued to detach from its original anti-consumer rhetoric, many brands began to employ minimal branding to attract the growing group of these consumers. Writer Eliza Brooke coined the term Startup Minimalism to explain this trend towards white branding, sans-serif fonts, and friendly pastel colours during this period. Venture-based lifestyle brands such as Glossier, Outdoor Voices, Allbirds, and Everlane (figure) employed this style as it is “. . . accessible and action-oriented, like an app on your phone” (Lupton in Brooke, 2017). “The fact that many of these brands rely largely on internet sales, it works for them to have a brand so strongly identified with the language of user experience” (Vit, 2017, quoted in Brooke, 2017). American fashion brand Reformation embraced this language in order to reiterate ideas of their premium yet minimal, no-frills clothing designs. Their retail store front in Notting Hill, London was painted an austere, matte white, only broken by their discreet sans-serif logo. Original brickwork remained in the interior, though painted a clean white to align with their aesthetic. Flat white walls reached halfway up the original brickwork and were used as a backdrop for the merchandise (fig 18). Pale wood flooring and a minimal selection of furniture were the only moments of departure from white in the interior.



Figure 18: Interior of Reformation, Notting Hill.

Many minimalist brands employed nearly identical interior design to their sales floors; the only differentiators being the merchandise, which was often just as plain (fig. 19). These brands relied on a cult following of inconspicuous consumers; customers who are attracted to subtly-marked, high-end products, which go unrecognised by most observers but facilitate interaction with those who have the requisite cultural capital to decode the subtle signals (Berger and Ward, 2010) (Eckhardt et al., 2015). Brands like Reformation, Glossier, Allbirds, and Kim Kardashian's clothing and skincare brands, were able to brand minimally while maintaining a cult following of customers who were willing to pay a higher price for the minimal, coded products. "The veneer of minimalist style becomes like an organic food label, expensive green juices or complex skin treatments being sold as a 'no-makeup' look. It's just another class-dependent way of feeling better about yourself by buying a product, as Spartan as the product might be. It takes a lot of money to look this simple" (Chayka, 2020). The beginning of the 2020's saw a movement away from flashy wealth, towards a more quiet expression, writes author Amy Odell:

The pandemic and social justice movement that began this decade exacerbated many people's awareness of income inequality and the ways our economic system is stacked against so many, and though the mask mandates have fallen away, that realisation has not. For the first time in my life, a large segment of the population now views things like private jets as a scourge instead of a fantasy (Odell, 2023).

The minimalist art movement of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as the minimalist lifestyle movement of the 2010s, had a significant impact on the development of the Millennial Gray style. The concept of a pure, simple, minimal interior was extracted from Minimalist art and the concept of the White Cube gallery space. Marie Kondo's trendy minimalist lifestyle encouraged many to follow this template when decorating their interiors. As this trend became popular, the mindful, anti-consumer theoretical basis of Minimalism became lost, and Minimalism became a style synonymous with inconspicuous consumption. This quiet display of status is also exhibited within the Millennial Gray style.



Figure 19: Startup minimalist brand interiors (from top to bottom): All-birds, Columbus, OH, USA; Everlane, Brooklyn, NY, USA; & Glossier, New York, NY, USA.

03: Wabi-sabi: Imperfection, Patina, and Bloobloom

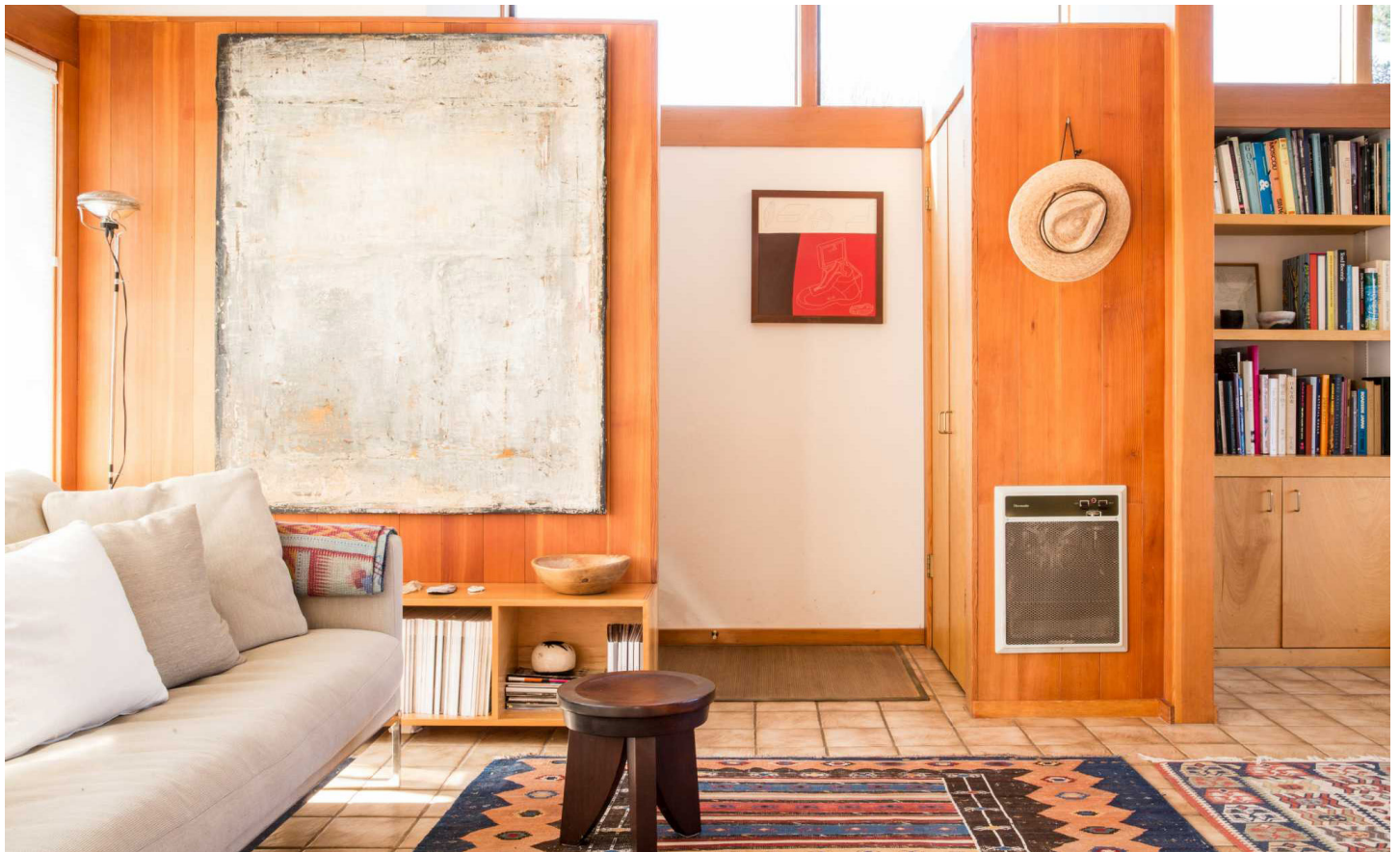


Figure 20: Author Leonard Koren's self-described *wabi-sabi* home.

The Japanese philosophy of *wabi-sabi*: “. . .the beauty of things imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete” (Koren, 1994, p. 7) was integral to the Minimalist movement, and was also later exhibited in the Millennial Gray design style. *Wabi-sabi* was less of a design trend or aesthetic, rather a philosophy which could be dated back to fifteenth century Japan. The concept was highly abstract, and was not a means of defining any specific visual cues (Koren, 1994, p. 8-9). *Wabi-sabi* influenced Minimalist art, and became popular in Western culture alongside this movement. Later, *wabi-sabi* came to influence Minimalist interiors in the 2010s. Into the 2020s, however, *wabi-sabi* was often mistakenly referred to as an interior design style; the term became synonymous with certain colours, materials, and even styles of furniture.

It is interesting to note that Modernism and *wabi-sabi* exhibited opposite qualities; an embrace of man-made materials in Modernism, versus embrace of the natural in *wabi-sabi*; purity made modernism's expression richer, where corrosion made *wabi-sabi*'s expression richer; Modernism expressed faith in progress, where *wabi-sabi* embraced stillness (Koren, 1994, pp. 26-28). Despite these great differences, Millennial Gray referenced elements of both of these movements solely for their aesthetics.

As the concept of *wabi-sabi* migrated into interior design in the twenty-first century, it manifested in wobbly, raw wood furniture, worn upholstery, and handmade objects which often displayed a patina. Employing a *wabi-sabi* mindset when decorating was an exercise in being more mindful of one's consumption habits, and respecting the sometimes complex nature of material objects. Author Leonard Koren's own *wabi-sabi* home (fig. 20) exhibited a careful, slow curation of objects found throughout his life; some old, some new.



Figure 21: Bloobloom eyewear store, Carnaby Street, London.

As *wabi-sabi* gained popularity, however, many disregarded its philosophical aspects and merely adopted it for its tempting visual aesthetic. Often possessions, clothing, and interiors were curated or designed to have certain specific visual indicators of *wabi-sabi* to satisfy the aesthetic, completely disregarding the core meanings of the term. Eyewear store Bloobloom located on a busy high street in London was purposefully designed with a certain Mediterranean, *wabi-sabi* style (fig. 21). The store's design employed exotic Mediterranean design themes such as uneven stucco walls, a tiled stone floor, and built-in raw timber shelving. Various antique stools and ceramic pieces are used as decoration. The brand's trial frames casually arranged on the shelves, with several conveniently located angular mirrors.

The design of the store comes off as feeling casual, imperfect, and natural; not fussy or ostentatious; an escape from a busy London high street, somewhat evocative of *wabi-sabi*. This design language, however, was ultimately used to attract inconspicuous consumers, who were more willing to pay the higher price tag for Bloobloom's coded luxury merchandise (their glasses cost around £100, not including prescription lenses or other add-ons, and Veuve Clicquot champagne is served to customers while browsing the frames). This pastiche application of the design style in a consumer setting undermines the theoretical basis of *wabi-sabi*. It detaches both philosophy and Japanese heritage from *wabi-sabi*, leaving the interior feeling somewhat evocative of the concept, but lacking in the true grounding elements. Millennial Gray interiors similarly bastardise *wabi-sabi* as a way of inconspicuously displaying social status for the brand or the inhabitants.

04: Millennial Gray: Airbnb, Airspace, and Global Homogeneity



Figure 22: A Millennial Gray interior.

The Millennial Gray design style reached extreme popularity in the twenty-first century. It can be seen in the house flipping trend in the 2010s, as well as in open-plan office designs, and Airbnb vacation rentals. These projects were all aimed at generating profit, so their design was aimed at appearing as freshly updated as possible while remaining cost efficient; neutral colours, laminate floors, and a lack of decoration were employed to achieve this goal (fig. 22). Resulting from this ubiquitous application, Millennial Gray became a banal style in interior design in the 2020s. The distinct difference between the designer, or applier, of Millennial Gray, and the users of the space, became apparent at this time. Millennial Gray generated intense online discourse in 2023 from renters, home buyers, and design fanatics alike, due to its seemingly ubiquitous presence in the landscape of interior design, and its associations with gentrification. People who found themselves inhabiting Millennial Gray interiors thought these spaces to feel placeless, uninspired, and dreary.

House flipping became a popular means of generating extra income in the 2000s and 2010s. House flipping “. . . is the purchase of an asset with the intent of quickly reselling the asset at a higher price. In the residential real estate market, flipping might entail purchasing a property at a discount, renovating

the house and then selling it at or near full market value” (Dempken, 2009). Flippers often “stripped down the quirks of a house built decades ago, replacing warm wood tones, funky wallpaper, and brick exteriors with nouveau-McMansion chic: shades of beige and gray, brushed silver fixtures, a ‘clean,’ monotonous look” (Way, 2023), all in an effort to make the finished product appear as new and updated as possible. In a 2015 house flip project by Tiana Griffis (fig. 23), original brickwork on the fireplace was replaced with white subway tiles, solid wood built-in cabinetry replaced with a modern white melamine alternative, and wood panelling replaced with a much more pedestrian shade of beige paint. When sold, its post-flip value generated a profit for Griffis.



Figure 23: Before and after photos of a house flip project.

House flips are often sold using online real estate platforms such as *Rightmove* (UK) or *Zillow* (USA), which function as a catalogue of available properties for sale or rent in a specific area, while delivering the information in a social-media-esque presentation. Similarly to *Pinterest* and *Instagram*, plain, bright, neutral interiors look best against the minimal web design of these online real estate marketplaces. Millennial Gray was the most accessible design theme to apply in these projects, and generated the best profits for the house flipper. Some home buyers appreciated the brand-newness, or blank canvas-ness, that a neutral colour palette in a newly renovated home offers. Olga Cotofana, the senior director of design at the real estate development company PMG stated that “. . . Gray flooring works well. . . Because it appeals to the masses and works well with a variety of interior design and architectural elements on trend currently” (Cotofana, 2023, quoted in Kodé, 2023).

The Millennial Gray style, while attractive to the house flippers, was undesirable to home buyers. X (previously titled Twitter) user Clhubes showed images of a standard new-renovation home (fig. 24) and claimed the look to be “. . .so boring and depressing” (Huber, 2022). The ubiquity of this design theme often left home buyers and renters discouraged when previewing properties, many of which all offered the same trite Millennial Gray theme.



Figure 24: Post on X by Lucy Huber in December of 2022 shows two images of newly renovated homes.



Figure 25: Open-plan office space in Apple's headquarters in Cupertino, California, USA.



Figure 26: Open-plan workspace in Google's Headquarters in Mountain View, California, USA.



Figure 27: Cubicle-based office design, which was common from the 1980s to 2000s

A similar example of the Millennial Gray style can be found in office designs of the 2010s. During this period, the landscape of the workplace was changing. Companies had to accommodate “. . .the information technologies of the Internet. . .and accompanying digital devices, which [made] remote and mobile working more feasible” (Myerson, Bichard, and Erlich, 2010, p.6). Following open-plan office concepts by Apple (fig. 25) and Google (fig. 26), new office designers emphasised co-working space, areas to socialise, and a bright and spacious atmosphere to contrast the dark cubicles of the previous century (fig. 27). The shift away from private space towards co-working areas was meant to encourage productivity and innovation, though employees often found the environment overly distracting (Morris, 2017).

Despite the mixed reviews of co-working space, California Bay-Area experiment WeWork attempted to take the co-working concept further. Like many services in the twenty-first century, WeWork functioned as a subscription plan, where an individual or company could gain access to a global network of co-working spaces in urban centres. WeWork’s offices were often located in hip neighbourhoods, and the offices themselves were often renovated warehouses or other derelict buildings. The offices featured vast open-plan rooms with large arrays of desks, without partitions (figure). The material palette was highly minimal: the only breaks from white, gray, and pale wood tones were the sparse indoor plants.



Figure 28: Interior of WeWork’s London branch. Several rows of open-plan working space fill the large room.

The hard concrete floors and vaulted ceiling lent no noise reduction, suggesting a particularly disruptive working environment (Oldman in Judith, 2020). Cafés offered free coffee, and bars offered a chance to network and socialise. Each WeWork location across the globe featured a nearly identical style, creating a sense of palatable ambiguity. Thomas Heathcote commented on WeWork's application of Millennial Gray style, stating that ". . . [their] global landscape of short-term let, coffee shop, bar and workplace [amalgamated] in an endless online panorama of inoffensive cliché" (Heathcote, 2020). People found working in wide-open spaces uncomfortable and disruptive (Judith, 2020) (Suining, 2008), and the bars and cafés within made the spaces function more like networking hubs than workplaces (Judith, 2020). These office spaces weren't catered to their users; instead they pandered to investors with an innovative, yet unstable, business model. This design shift in the workplace negatively impacted employee performance (Judith, 2020) and created a rift between the designers or property owners, and the employees using these workspaces.

Short-term vacation rental service Airbnb, popularised just after WeWork, offered an innovative alternative to traditional, expensive hotels in holiday destinations. Founded in San Francisco in 2008, the premise of the platform was to encourage travellers to live like locals, experiencing a destination more richly, through a local's abode. The app allowed travellers to browse a global network of rooms, apartments, and entire homes for rent, all listed by other users on the platform. Renters were able to travel more affordably, and hosts were able to generate a second income through an extra, unused room on their property. Airbnb emphasised the fact that their service was more affordable than hotels, and their rooms had a more distinct, local style. The platform gained immense popularity into the 2010's; in 2019, ". . . Airbnb's site lists more than six million rooms, flats and houses in more than 81,000 cities across the globe. On average, two million people rest their heads in an Airbnb property each night – half a billion since 2008" (Sherwood, 2019). Property owners began to see the financial opportunity in this short-term rental market. An owner's property, when listed on Airbnb, could generate a significantly higher profit than a longer-term lease period. Airbnb hosts optimised the design of their properties to attract and host as many renters as possible; thus, exacerbating the distinction between airbnb hosts' desires for profit, and the guest's desire for local authenticity. The design trend within the platform favoured minimally decorated properties, with plain furnishings, soft



Figure 29: Airbnb listings from various global destinations (From left to right): Boston, Cape Town, Istanbul, Las Vegas, London, and Milan.

or neutral colours, and inoffensive art. The style became nearly identical worldwide, perpetuating an idea of complete placelessness (fig. 29) . “The Airbnb experience is supposed to be about real people and authenticity, but so many of them were similar, whether in Brooklyn, Osaka, Rio de Janeiro, Seoul, or Santiago” (Schwulst in Chayka, 2016).

Kyle Chayka dubbed this phenomenon Airspace, where, similarly to Millennial Gray, social media and Silicon Valley platforms like Airbnb perpetuated an idea of global ambiguity and homogeneity through their design (Chayka, 2020). The phenomenon extended into airports, coffee shops, and offices worldwide, as Edwin Heathcote wrote:

They are designed to seduce with an idea of generic global familiarity. They represent a lifestyle that is metropolitan, chic, minimal and self-congratulatory. The irony is that in looking for a trip, a change of scenery, we have found anonymity repackaged as cool and now we aspire at home to the placelessness of a reimported global banality. Builders and developers now construct for Airbnb. There are whole blocks of generic apartments displacing smaller, quirkier and more interesting buildings in the dense complexity of neighbourhoods, with their social and commercial mix aimed at short-term renters and higher margins for investors. (Heathcote, 2020)

The plague of these placeless interiors proved harmful to the charm and quirks tourists expect when visiting a new city. Home flips, new office developments, and Airbnbs, all strategically placed in hip neighbourhoods to attract tourists, often raised rent prices and contributed heavily to the gentrification of urban neighbourhoods and the marginalisation of ethnic or indigenous groups in these cities. “Community leaders and residents view gentrification as a method for displacing the previous residents by shrinking the amount of affordable housing, changing the character of the neighbourhood, and forcing out people who can no longer afford to live there” (Lawrence, 2002). Often this negatively impacted under-represented and economically challenged ethnic and cultural groups. Harlem, a historically black neighbourhood in upper Manhattan, NYC, experienced severe gentrification into the 2010s (fig. 30). “When Harlem Park to Park was founded in 2009, eight out of its nine founding businesses were black-owned. In 2011, the organisation counted over 50 businesses, 80% of which were black-owned. Today, reflecting the shift in residents more broadly, with 104 businesses, 63% are black-owned” (Hackman, 2015). The application of the Millennial Gray style in these areas further contributed to the sterilisation of neighbourhoods experiencing gentrification.

The ubiquity of internet access and the consumption of mass media has brought the look of Millennial Gray interiors to the masses. “Those apartments, that style, that distinctive banality seeps into our consciousness and it becomes, paradoxically, aspirational” (Heathcote, 2020). House flipping, contemporary offices, and short term rentals like Airbnbs all exhibit the distinctly uninspired Millennial Gray style. They are designed in such a way that they feel familiar and inoffensive to everyone, so they can appeal to as many buyers or renters as possible. Yet as they are devoid of intrigue and distinctiveness, they offer no particular appeal (Lessons in Internet Culture, 2023). The Millennial Gray style created a divide between the owner, designer, or landlord, and the inevitable inhabitant of the space. House flipping projects wiped clean the historical quirks in favour of a more minimal, blank canvas interior. Similarly, the design of office interiors was inoffensive and bland to remain, ironically, as attractive to as many potential renters as possible. Short-term vacation rental service Airbnb created an aspiration towards bland, placeless interiors, which appealed to the most potential renters and generated the most revenue. The Millennial Gray style was copied and repeated on a global scale and was exhibited in much of the urban fabric of cities and vacation destinations. This theme of vapid,

bland interior design was used to maximise profit and appeal to a large pool of potential buyers or renters. This process was seen as undesirable and attractive to the inevitable buyers, or inhabitants, of these spaces, who found them cold, uncomfortable, and bland.

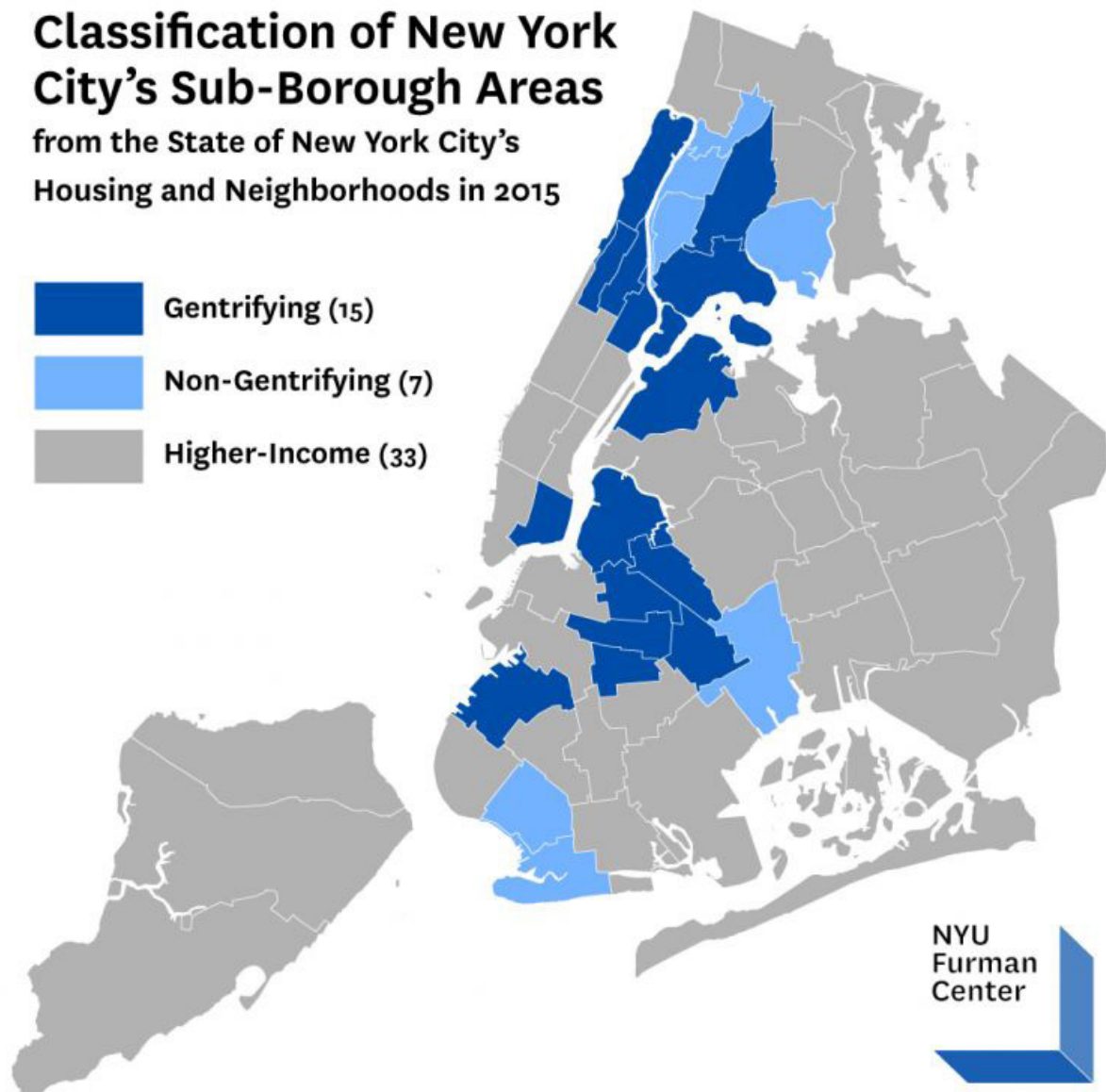


Figure 30: Map of New York City describing areas which have experienced gentrification from 1990 to 2015. "the report defines 'gentrifying' neighbourhoods as areas that were relatively low-income in 1990 (among the bottom 40% in the city), but then experienced higher than median neighbourhood rent growth in the following 20 years. Using these criteria, 15 of the city's 55 neighbourhoods are classified as 'gentrifying'" (NYU Furman Center).

Conclusion

The trend of bland design in the twenty-first century displays a bastardisation of several historic movements in interior design. The Modernist movement of the early twentieth century inspired designers to favour mass-production and neutral colours over the human touch, marketing it as an opportunity to realise a futuristic vision. Modernism ultimately became an aesthetic language, whose design traits were cherry-picked and applied to design projects in order to reduce cost or create a sense of novelty. The Millennial Gray style copied this concept of pastiche modernism. The Minimalist lifestyle movement of the 2010's inspired devotees to live with less and consume mindfully to achieve a happier life. The lifestyle later also became an aesthetic language which rejected the minimalist philosophy and encouraged inconspicuous consumption habits. The Japanese concept of *Wabi-sabi* was transformed from a philosophical principle to an interior design trend which embraced the impermanent nature of material objects, yet in certain instances was deliberately applied simply as an aesthetic wash. As Millennial Gray interiors became popular in the twenty-first century, a distinct separation occurred between the applier of Millennial Gray, and the inevitable inhabitant(s) of the space..

Several issues are at work here; the strong influence of social media, the global economy, and consumer culture have all exacerbated the desire to blindly follow stylistic trends without consideration to one's own lifestyle, taste, or cultural background. *Instagram's* influence on interior design and lifestyle trends created an aspiration towards minimal, plain design and inconspicuous consumption habits *en masse*. Airbnb, WeWork, and other Silicon Valley start-ups exhibit patterns of homogenization and conformity to a certain visual aesthetic at a global scale. The profitability of real estate renovation projects was exploited by investors, who applied the cheap, austere style without consideration of the inhabitants. The worldwide adoption of this visual style contributed to an ambiguous, placeless aesthetic which also signified gentrification and cultural erasure.

The Millennial Gray trend seen on social media in 2023 describes the flawed philosophy behind minimally designed interiors, and a worldwide distaste towards anonymous, bland design. The trend is expected to age poorly over the next decades, as many Millennial Gray projects use builder-grade materials and fixtures, and cheaply produced furniture (Way, 2023). The fervent online hate towards

Millennial Gray showed that in the years to come, interior design will return to embrace a wider spectrum of colours and textures. Furthermore, the social media discourse around Millennial Gray has reintroduced the importance of including the personal touch in the interior; these spaces have the potential to tell stories, express culture, and respect heritage. Inhabitants of Millennial Gray spaces are finding ways to reintroduce a more personal, human feel to these spaces. Ultimately, a movement away from bland, minimal design is to be expected as the interior design trend cycle progresses into the 2030s.

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