

The Quiet Art of Enough

Some cities stay with you not for what they showed you, but for how they changed the way you see. For writer Mark Bandte and Sydney interior designer Brett Mickan, a coincidental crossing of paths through Japan became something closer to a masterclass — in restraint, in craft, in the quiet philosophy that the thought behind an experience matters as much as the experience itself. Here, they compare notes on a country that doesn't overwhelm so much as refine.

There is a kind of travel that requires very little planning and a great deal of trust. In my twenties, I moved through cities on instinct; following a stranger's recommendation for a new location, turning down an unmarked alley...over-planning felt like failure of imagination and freedom.

Almost two decades later, I returned to Bangkok with a different kind of attention, but the city remained as intoxicating as I remembered; the food and smells still intense, the atmosphere still suspended between controlled chaos and unexpected stillness. But what struck me this time were the quieter details. The hospitality spaces that felt genuinely considered, the coffee served with the precision and creativity of a fine cocktail, the growing sense that someone had thought carefully about how an experience should feel. These were small whispers of something, which became a full conversation when, a week later I reached Japan.

By coincidence, esteemed Sydney interior designer Brett Mickan was moving through the country at exactly the same time. His reflections, when we later compared notes, mirrored my own almost entirely. "Japan felt more like learning how to notice. There's patience in everything — quiet, deliberate, precise. Detail isn't extra; it's a form of pride, even in the smallest acts. Japan doesn't overwhelm — it refines. It teaches you to see beauty in doing simple things, exceptionally well."

It is difficult to overstate how completely Japan dismantles the assumption that more is better. A ramen counter worn smooth by decades of hands. A ceramic bowl displayed with the reverence of sculpture. A narrow retail store devoted entirely to one idea, executed without apology or compromise. Nothing feels rushed. Nothing feels accidental, and even the smallest encounter carries the distinct impression that somebody truly cared about your experience.



"Thou shalt not decorate merely to follow a trend or fill a space."



For Brett, this philosophy translates directly into the homes he designs. His approach has always centred on creating a private world for each client. A space to retreat, to restore, to step away from the noise of everyday life. Japan, he says, simply confirmed what he already believed. “A single meaningful object can be enough. A clean, contemporary room with minimal decoration, anchored by one aged vintage chair that belonged to your great-grandfather — that carries immense emotional weight. It elevates the space, turning it into something more than well-designed. It becomes a deeply personal narrative, expressed with clarity and intention.”

Ritual, he observed, is inseparable from the Japanese interior. Dining is purposeful, carried out with precision and care. Even the daily act of folding laundry or reassembling elements within the home becomes a meaningful process rather than an inconvenience. “There is an absence of unnecessary embellishment,” Brett explained. “The focus is on function, craftsmanship, and thoughtful design. Qualities that ultimately create beauty in their own right.”

The architectural and cultural moments he encountered reinforced this at every turn. On the art island of Naoshima, the Benesse Art Site galleries drew him into what he described as a meditative state. Spaces where it became impossible to determine where architecture ended and curation began. At Azabudai Hills, Tokyo’s extraordinary urban village weaving together luxury retail, dining, art, and residence, he found himself moved by something almost absurdly precise: the way stone

flooring met the metal casings of an elevator. “Nothing feels like an afterthought,” he said. “Every element is clearly considered.” Then there was the Miho Museum: I. M. Pei’s remarkable structure approached through a concrete tunnel beneath a hillside, its entrance draped in cherry blossoms, and where the architecture itself felt like an equal to the antiquities housed within.

The retail spaces became one of the trip’s most persistent themes for us both. At its best, Japanese retail offers what Brett called a masterclass in restraint. Entrances are often discreet, partially obscured by fabric, reduced to a simple glass façade, free of signage. The focus is allowed to settle entirely on what matters. In the backstreets of Kyoto, he came across a menswear store set behind a modest paved courtyard, with the paving continuing seamlessly inside. Three shelves held a minimal edit of caps and shoes. A single rail carried a tightly curated selection of clothing. At the centre of the room, a large stone planter filled with greenery dominated the space. “It defied conventional retail logic entirely,” Brett said. “Yet it worked. The space felt considered, confident, and quietly exclusive — a place to discover rather than be sold to. There was no need to announce its quality. It was embedded in the experience itself.”



I kept returning to a question throughout the trip. Greater Tokyo’s population exceeds that of all of Australia. Does sheer scale create the freedom for that kind of confidence to serve one very specific idea to a very few specific people? Possibly. But Brett believes something more deeply cultural is also at work, and he sees important lessons in it for Australia, particularly as physical retail searches for its identity.

He pointed to Japan’s hidden jazz listening bars as a quietly radical model. Intimate rooms with exceptional sound, considered interiors, and carefully made cocktails, accessible only by prior booking, the location revealed only afterward, the entrance often unmarked. “It’s an extreme example,” he acknowledged, “but it captures something powerful. A sense of exclusivity, discovery, and belonging.” Over the next decade, he sees retail moving steadily in this direction: less transactional, more experiential, and built around atmosphere, storytelling, and the kind of connection that no online experience can replicate.

Japan sent Brett home with a reinforced conviction about craft and patience that he now sees, by contrast, as increasingly rare in Australia. What moved him most was the patience each craftsman brings. Not as a professional obligation, but as something closer to a personal



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philosophy. He came away with a principle sharpened to its clearest point: every element, every finish, every decision should carry a considered purpose. “Thou shalt not decorate merely to follow a trend or fill a space.”

I came home thinking less about any specific object I had encountered and more about the quality of attention behind all of them. Good design, Japan kept insisting, is rarely about more. It is about care. About patience. About creating a room, or a shelf, or any experience at all, in which the thought behind it is quietly, unmistakably felt. **ASS**

